Exploring Home-School Partnership through Epstein's Framework:

A comparative case study of two post-primary schools.

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Declaration

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Abstract

Historically the role of parents in the Irish education system has not been part of a planned programme of partnership but the result of unlinked government policies and initiatives which involved parents in school life. The concept of partnership with parents has changed in Ireland and there is greater understanding of the benefits it provides to students. Partnership is now recognised as a key aspect of school planning and self-evaluation in post-primary schools. The aim of this research is to investigate partnership with parents at post-primary level and to explore the occurrence of partnership and the extent to which it is planned by schools with the purpose of improving student outcomes. Epstein's partnership framework was utilised as an indicator for evaluating partnership activities occurring in the participating schools.

The research approach taken was an evaluation of partnership with parents in two schools with contrasting settings. A case study approach was taken combining quantitative and qualitative methods to develop an understanding of social construction related to partnership with parents. The case study schools reflected a similarity as regards parents' perception of partnership. Findings indicate that despite a majority of parents' desire to be involved in their child's post-primary school, this was not a reality. Parents and teachers demonstrated a lack of a common understanding of what partnership is, and limited evidence of partnership was displayed in the schools despite a commitment to partnership by management in both schools. In order to develop partnership, the case study schools need to explicitly inform parents about partnership with the school: how parent participation affects student success and the variety of partnership opportunities available to parents. Utilising Epstein's partnership framework would be a support; as this research indicates, it has a useful application in the Irish context.

Findings suggest that if these post-primary schools are to fulfil their obligation as outlined in LAOS (2016a), SSE (2016c) and be prepared for the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019, they must develop a planned and coordinated approach to partnership with parents. Recommendations provided build on current activities within the schools which are linked to partnership with parents. Utilising Epstein's partnership framework as a continuum would allow the schools to engage in focused planning for increased opportunities for partnership with parents which are linked to student outcomes.

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List of Abbreviations

ACCS: The Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools

AGM: Annual General Meeting

AP1/2:   Assistant Principal 1/2

APP: Action Plan for Partnership

ASTI: The Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland

ATP: Action Team for Partnership

BoM: Board of Management

CAO: Central Applications Office

CEIST :   Catholic Education: An Irish Schools Trust

COMPASS: Co-operation of Minority Religion and Protestant Parent Associations (Post-Primary)

CPD: Continuous Professional Development

CSO: Central Statistics Office

CSSPA: Congress of Catholic Secondary Schools Parent Association

DCU: Dublin City University

DEIS: Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools

DES: Department of Education and Skills

EPSEN: Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004

ERC: Educational Research Centre

ESRI: Economic and Social Research Institute

ET: Educate Together Schools

ETBI: Education and Training Boards Ireland

ETBsNPA: Education and Training Board Schools National Parents Association

HEAR: Higher Education Access Route

HSCL: Home School Community Liaison

IEP: Individual Education Plan

INTO: Irish National Teachers Organisation

IVEA: The Irish Vocational Education Association

JCSP: Junior Certificate Schools Programme

JCT: Junior Cycle for Teachers

JMB: The Joint Managerial Board

LAOS: Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary
Schools

NAPD: The National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals

NCCA :   National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NCLB: No Child Left Behind Act

NCSE: National Council for Special Education

NEWB: National Education Welfare Board

NNPS: National Network of Partnership Schools

NPC: National Parents Council

NPCp: National Parents Council primary

NPCpp: National Parents Council post-primary

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PACCS   Parents Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools

PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment

HP: Haase-Pratschke

PPEF: Post-Primary Education Forum

PTM: Parent Teacher Meeting

SCP: School Completion Programme

SEN: Special Educational Needs

SIP: School Improvement Plan

SPHE: Social Personal and Health Education

SPSS: Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

SSE: School Self-Evaluation (DES)

TALIS: Teaching and Learning International Survey

TCD: Trinity College Dublin

TUI: The Teachers Union of Ireland

TY: Transition Year

USA: United States of America

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Chapter 1 Introduction to Research and Rationale

1.1 Introduction

This chapter tells the story of how I arrived at the decision to undertake this research and lays out the reasons why I think it is important. I am a post-primary teacher and my experience of interactions with parents contributed significantly to my understanding of partnership. As well as providing the personal context that led to my research, I explain my views on the importance of partnership with parents and why this partnership is essential in post-primary education. After giving a synopsis of the nature and purpose of my research, I outline the research questions and the theoretical framework which underpin the study.

1.2 Background to the Research

When I started teaching, my work involved extensive communication with parents as I found myself supporting students who were finding the post-primary curriculum difficult. This role progressed to leading a special education unit in a post-primary school with DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools) designation, where students had multiple needs which the standard curriculum was not addressing. I developed a strong rapport with parents as we designed a programme for students based on those special educational needs (SEN). This involved adapting a curriculum to accommodate students with varying abilities and allowing for differentiation. In 1996 the Department of Education and Skills (DES) introduced the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) as an intervention within the Junior Certificate to support students who found it difficult to engage with the curriculum and were likely to leave school early. The JCSP was not an alternative to the Junior Certificate but rather a student-focused intervention intended to make the curriculum accessible and relevant to students. I attended initial training and subsequently acted as JCSP coordinator in my school. As we introduced the JCSP, we consulted with parents and focused primarily on cross-curricular work, basic skills development (literacy and numeracy) and social and personal development. During this process, the support and advice of parents proved essential to developing a curriculum that met students' needs and enhanced their learning outcomes.

In my 25 years of experience in teaching, I have found that a positive rapport and partnership with parents has made my job easier and ensured improved educational

outcomes for my students. Among these positive outcomes have been better attendance, a curriculum more relevant to student needs, greater differentiation in classwork and homework, improved academic results and enhanced retention and progression of students. In the 1990s, parents of Irish post-primary students were generally "left at the gate" (Coolahan, 1988 & 2002, O'Buachalla, 1988), so my view would have been considered unusual. In general, interaction with parents at post-primary level was not a common occurrence, in my experience it occurred when there was an issue. Parents were less involved in the post-primary school in comparison to their level of involvement at primary level.

Over time, as indicated in the literature review in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, views on partnership changed in Ireland. When I became Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) coordinator in 2013, I realised that the potential benefits of including parents in the educational process of post-primary schools did not have to be a radical redesign of how things were done but instead an opening of communication between school and home. My role as HSCL coordinator focused on supporting student attendance. School attendance was an issue for a number of students, but one group of students in particular had recurring unexplained absences and lateness. Following a lengthy process of speaking to students when they did come to school and calling to parent homes, it emerged that these students were young carers. They were involved in supporting the family in "loco parentis". They were bringing younger siblings to school, supporting sibling homework, shopping and cooking for the family and trying to attend school themselves. The school developed support for these students, connected them to external agencies and put in place strategies to enable these students to continue their own post-primary education. Having the time to follow up with these students and their families enabled the school to develop new strategies to promote school attendance and retention. What happened in this case highlighted to me how connections with home gives valuable information and how school supports can be focused on specific areas to improve student outcomes.

Sharing information with parents is a fairly simple concept, but parents at post-primary level are frequently in the dark about what is happening in the classroom and the wider school community. This can be a result of a myriad of reasons, including a natural distancing of parents from school at post-primary level. When students start post-primary education, parents are less likely to drop and collect their child from school. Parents do

not get to know the 10 or 12 subject teachers in the same way they knew the primary school teacher. Other reasons include reduced conversations between parents and teenagers and increasingly busy schools where time to meet parents is limited. The structures of Irish post-primary schools do not allow time for subject teachers to liaise with parents. Schools have become very busy outside the classroom, with increased demands on teachers and school management. The seemingly simple process of ensuring parents have all the information they need may have slipped down schools priority list, or the kind of information parents need may have changed. A tradition of post-primary schools having limited engagement with parents may also have affected two-way conversations.

A question I asked myself was whether we, as educators, assume that parents know how post-primary schools operate? I wondered if I was providing enough information to parents or assuming that parents knew all they needed to. With such questions in mind, I became very interested in frameworks for partnership with parents. I was always of the belief that partnership with parents was more than parents just attending school events. As a teacher, I had experienced at first hand the value of parental insight. These observations in conjunction with what I was learning from journal articles read for my master's degree in special education led me to alternative approaches to partnership with parents. This was my starting point for this research study. I wanted to examine extant partnership frameworks, to understand the theory and concepts underlying them, and to evaluate if the theory and concepts were applicable in an Irish context. The research of Sawyer (2015), You and Richman (2014), Byrne and Smyth (2010) and Mc Namara et al. (2000) indicates that parents who are involved in their child's education increase the beneficial outcomes for their child. In other words, their child experiences enhanced school success. Therefore, more specifically, I wanted to examine if I, as a member of school leadership, could make use of a framework to improve my school's partnership with parents and improve educational outcomes for our students.

1.3 Nature and Purpose of Research

This section will discuss in more detail the research questions driving this work, and the aim and the objectives of my research. The subject of my research project was parental involvement in post-primary schools with a specific focus on partnership between the

school and parents. For the purpose of this research the term parent or parents will refer to a parent, carer or guardian of a child. Parents' understanding and experience of partnership with their child's post-primary school was the core research area. I understand that parents' own experiences affect how they relate to and with schools. I was mindful of how complex parents' views are and acutely aware of how my personal beliefs, ethics and bias could influence the interpretation of this research. The accurate representation of the "voice" of others was a key component of this research and is discussed in Chapter 4.

Partnership in a school context can vary in occurrence, depth and purpose (Hornby, 2011; Epstein, 2016; DES, 2006a; Tusla, 2018). My research investigated partnership with parents in two post-primary schools in order to establish and gain insight into parents' and teachers' perceptions of this partnership and how parents feel about opportunities to be involved in school activities. I have also considered the role of a principal or deputy principal in facilitating partnership with parents. The area of partnership with parents has been of interest to me for many years, and I wanted this research to inform current practices in my school and help move towards a more planned process of partnership with parents to benefit student learning outcomes in the school. Currently, all post-primary schools must use the LAOS framework (Looking at Our School (LAOS) 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools) in all aspects of school planning and connect this planning to student outcomes. LAOS provides a coherent set of standards for two key areas of work in schools: teaching and learning, and leadership and management. The LAOS framework is designed to help schools identify their strengths and areas for development and enable schools to take ownership of their own development and improvement (DES, 2016a). Within the Leadership and Management dimension of LAOS, the domain Leading School Development instructs schools to "build and maintain relationships with parents, with other schools and the wider community" (DES, 2016a, p 7). It follows that this domain is of particular relevance to schools which wish to develop increased partnership with parents as part of their School Improvement Plan (SIP). This critical area in post-primary education planning also contributed to the way I considered and connected partnership in the participating schools to a parental involvement framework.

1.4 Significance of Research

> Research is the search for 'understanding' or for 'knowing' with the aim of contributing to the body of knowledge or a theory in the domain of the research. Other broad aims could be to provide insights and contributions for improving practice, and to inform decision making and policy development in the domain of education. (Plomp & Nieveen, 2013, p. 13)

My reasons for undertaking this research were based on my concept of what a post-primary school could be. I have been fortunate to work in a variety of post-primary settings and have progressed through a variety of roles: subject teacher, form teacher, special needs coordinator, programme coordinator, HSCL coordinator and deputy principal. In each of my roles I had contact with parents; however, unlike many teachers this contact was significant and contributed to my daily work. From my first day in the classroom, I taught students with special needs and challenging behaviour. Parents were a key point of contact for me, and over the years I found this two-way communication was always to the benefit of the student. I was aware of Circular M27/91: Parents as Partners (DES, 1991), but nothing specific was required of post-primary schools or teachers to develop partnership with parents. The circular focused exclusively on the formation of a parent association as the key way to positively pursue partnership with parents. In contrast, the equivalent primary Circular 24/91 required primary schools to establish a school plan for productive parental involvement. The schools in which I worked adopted a variety of approaches to communicating with parents. A natural progression for me was to take on the role of HSCL coordinator whose main responsibility was to support parents. The role of a HSCL coordinator is described in detail in Chapter 3. While working as a HSCL coordinator, I became increasingly intrigued by the concept of partnership with parents. Dr. Concepta Conaty was the founder of the HSCL scheme, and her ideas on parents as partners in education and on supporting their involvement in school formed the basis of the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for HSCL coordinators (DES, 2006a). This CPD was provided by the DES and Tusla and was appealing to me as it supported practices in the area of partnership with parents:

> The oft-repeated dictum that parents are the prime educators has a serious meaning and cannot remain a catch-cry or mere aspirational

statement. Education is not something centred in the home or the school, but rather is to be seen as an ellipse, in which there are two foci, the home and school. (DES, 2006a, p. 5)

I attended valuable training courses as a HSCL coordinator which focused on combining the supports available in school with needs expressed by parents and students in order to enhance attendance and promote retention in school. I began to investigate ways of promoting partnership with parents in my own school. This, combined with my knowledge of the work being undertaken by Joyce Epstein (2006, 2007, 2009, 2010b & 2016) in the USA around partnership with parents, drove a quest to determine if policy and practice from the USA could be applicable to an Irish setting.

1.5 Aims and Objectives of the Research

Partnership between school and home is often recognised as invaluable and necessary (Dixon, 1992), but much of the research (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Hornby, 2011; Epstein, 1986, 2010b, 2016) is focused on primary schools and parents of students with SEN rather than mainstream post-primary schools. The overall aim of this research was to investigate partnership with parents in a post-primary context to establish whether partnership occurred at all and, if it did occur, the extent to which it is planned with the purpose of improving student learning outcomes.

This led to five key research questions. The first two questions consider partnership with parents in a general Irish context, while the remaining three deal with the specificity of how partnership arises in the case study schools.

1. What are the extant conceptual models of partnership in post-primary education?

2. What is the role of partnership with parents in the context of Irish post-primary education?

3. With reference to Epstein's partnership framework, how does partnership with parents occur in the context of two urban Irish post-primary schools?

4. Why does partnership with parents occur, is it effective and is there any correlation with Epstein's framework?

5. How are senior management involved in partnership between schools and parents?

Each question was designed to critically consider different aspects of home-school relationships. As such, the purpose of question 1 was to provide insight into partnership in post-primary education policy and within the post-primary schools participating in the research. Research in the schools enabled me to ascertain what, if any, models of partnership were reflected in current practice in the schools.

Question 2 examined how partnership and its role are defined in relation to post-primary schools in Ireland and examined what was happening in the participating schools as regards partnership with parents.

Question 3 examined the partnership activities of two schools based on the six key indicators of partnership as defined by Epstein (2009).

Question 4 examined the purpose for this partnership in relation to the six indicators of partnership as defined by Epstein (2009).

Question 5 examined how senior management (principal or deputy principal) was involved in partnership with parents and what can be learnt from current practice. This was of particular interest to me as a member of senior management myself.

These questions were selected to elicit the views of parents and teachers in relation to what partnership is, if it was happening, how it was promoted and how it was valued. The above research questions were central to this study, informed the methodologies used and yielded insight into parents' opinions, experiences and views on the area of partnership with post-primary schools. Gaining insight into post-primary parents' thinking in relation to partnership provided answers to the research questions and also helped me in my daily work at school. In particular, the application of Epstein's framework for partnership provided me with a conceptual lens to examine particular aspects of school life with a view to gaining insight into this topic while using a theoretical model developed by Epstein and the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University. This I consider in more detail in Chapter 3 where I offer a rationale for the use of Epstein's framework.

1.6   Thesis Structure and Design

This thesis is divided into ten chapters; each chapter critically describes aspects of the research journey from the initial research idea to final recommendations to support partnership in Irish post-primary schools.

- Chapter 1 introduces the rationale for engaging in the research and the key area of focus.

- Chapter 2 is the first phase of the literature review situating the research in the Irish context of partnership with parents. It defines partnership for the purpose of this research, summarises how partnership with parents is currently represented in Irish post-primary schools and describes the benefits of partnership with parents

- Chapter 3 is the second phase of the literature review which considers models of parental involvement and frames the research in the context of Epstein's model of partnership with parents.

- Chapter 4 discusses the philosophical assumptions that support this research and details the research approach taken and the instrumentation used in data generation which include questionnaires, interviews, observation and secondary data.

- Chapter 5 describes the observational phase of the research and summarises the documentation provided by the case study schools. It provides an insight into the context and school settings.

- Chapter 6 summarises the analysis of the data generated by using parent and teacher questionnaires.

- Chapter 7 summarises the analysis of the data generated using parent interviews.

- Chapter 8 summarises the analysis of the data generated using teacher interviews.

- Chapter 9 provides an in-depth discussion of the findings of the research related to the research questions and Epstein's framework.

- Chapter 10 reiterates the context of my research and makes recommendations for the case study schools if they wish to engage in purposeful partnership with parents.

1.7 The Theoretical Framework

My work as a Home Economics teacher and HSCL coordinator highlighted the need for this research. I knew that research on partnership with parents in post-primary schools was mainly limited to the context of students with SEN. Even within DEIS schools, partnership with parents was not a major area of research, with retentions and progression the key areas of interest, as indicated by Ryan (1994), Ryan (1999), Archer and Shortt (2003) , Weir and Archer (2011) and Weir et al. (2018). DEIS and HSCL research did not examine the structures of partnership with parents. Ryan (1994 and 1999) found that the main way parents were involved in schools was attending courses or activities related to parenting and children's education.

Every parent I have met during my teaching career, no matter their personal situation, wanted their child to do well in school and life. As a practitioner I wanted to know how I could make parents feel more connected to their child's post-primary school and help them support their child's education, not just offer opportunities to attend courses in the school. This was of particular interest to me as I now work in a non-DEIS school, and activities with parents are limited due to the fact that non-DEIS schools do not receive funding from the State for supporting partnership with parents. I was interested in ways to support partnership which could be enacted locally in a school without DEIS funding and which I as part of senior management could introduce in my own school.

The next step for me was to find a theoretical framework which would support my research. My inclination was simply to focus on the research approach and instrumentation for data generation, but I found I needed to understand philosophical paradigms and theories and how they impact research. Reading in this area led me to agree "that a researcher's philosophical orientation has implications for every decision made in the research process" (Mertens, 2015, p. 7). I realised that when conducting research, I needed to understand how I make assumptions and understand knowledge. Shadish (1998) commented that "what assumptions we make when we construct knowledge, about the nature of many fundamental concepts that we use in our work like

causation, generalization and truth are the key fundamental differences" (p. 3). Therefore, I considered prevailing paradigms and their associated philosophical assumptions. My way of looking at the world is quite practical and straightforward. I tend to get on with things and make a way, it must be the Home Economics teacher training! I struggled with finding a paradigm that I could relate to. I needed a framework for thinking about the interrelationships of constructs that reflected my life view, thinking processes and what I had experienced in my career to date. I wanted a way to understand participants' construct of their experiences. Having examined a range of philosophical assumptions, I found that constructivism best reflected my positionality and was the best fit for this research project.

1.8 Context of Research

The location of the study was in North County Dublin within two specific, nearby suburbs. They were chosen based on their participation and non-participation in the HSCL scheme, their general geographical area and their willingness to be involved in the study. I decided on this geographical location because it is similar to my own work area. All 11 post- primary schools within this geographical area were approached with a request to become involved in this research. Following a lengthy discussion process with school management, two schools agreed to be involved in the study. This led to research being designed as a comparative case study of two schools, one with the HSCL scheme and one without such a scheme.

In order to further contextualise the schools, I applied the Pobal Haase-Pratschke (Pobal HP) Deprivation Index. This is an Irish social gradient metric, which scores each small area in terms of affluence or disadvantage. Information such as employment, age profile and educational attainment, from Ireland's census is used to calculate this score. The scores range from roughly -40 (most disadvantaged) to +40 (most affluent). Social class background has a considerable impact in many areas of life, including educational achievements, health, housing, crime and economic status. Furthermore, social class is relatively stable over time and constitutes a key factor in the intergenerational transmission of economic, cultural and social assets. "Pobal HP Deprivation Index" (2020) states that areas with a weak social class profile tend to have higher unemployment rates; are more vulnerable to the effects of economic restructuring and recession; and are more likely to experience low pay, poor working conditions and poor housing and social

environments. The Pobal HP Deprivation Index uses five key indicators to measure social class composition: the percentage of population with a primary school education only (negative association); the percentage of population with a third level education (positive association); the percentage of households headed by professionals or managerial and technical employees (positive association); the percentage of households headed by semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers (negative association); and the mean number of persons per room (negative association). Examination of Pobal HP figures from the 2016 census indicate that factors such as lone parent ratio, proportion with primary education only and proportion with third level education are in sharp contrast between the catchment areas of both schools. These figures provide some insight into the possible circumstances of students and their families within the participating schools.

Table 1.1 *Pobal HP Deprivation Index Figures 2016*

	School A Catchment Area	**School B Catchment Area**
Deprivation Score	-13.85 disadvantaged	11.37 affluent
% Lone parent ratio	31.1 – 53.25	8.22 – 14.94
% Proportion with primary education only	19.22 – 31.43	5.18 – 14.54
% Proportion with third level education	6.39 – 17.52	40.33 – 60.21

Pobal HP Deprivation Index 2016

School A is a voluntary post-primary school in an urban area. It has approximately 400 pupils. It is one of 185 post-primary schools designated as a DEIS school. DEIS is an Action Plan for Educational Inclusion. It was launched in May 2005 as a policy instrument to address educational disadvantage. DEIS focuses on prioritising the educational needs of children from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through post-primary education. School A benefits in a number of ways by being designated DEIS. The school has a HSCL coordinator and School Completion Officer, and it receives extra per-capita funding from the DES. Other supports include:

- DEIS grant paid based on level of disadvantage and enrolment

- Access to school meals programme

- Access to literacy/numeracy support such as Reading Recovery, Maths Recovery, First Steps, Ready Set Go Maths

- Access to planning supports

- Access to a range of professional development supports

- Additional funding under School Book Grant Scheme

The DES indicates that the retention rates of pupils in post-primary DEIS Schools is 82.7% compared with a national average of 90%. Research shows that student performance in DEIS schools continues to be lower than the national average, indicating that continued supports are required to maintain and build on the gains made (DES, 2017a; Smyth et al., 2015). The progression rate of School A to third level was 41% in 2018, 47% in 2019 and 42% in 2020. The Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas describes the geographical area of School A as marginally below average, and the catchment area of the school includes a number of areas described as disadvantaged in the HP Pobal index. School B is also a voluntary post-primary school in an urban area, but it does not have DEIS status and does not benefit from the HSCL Scheme or the associated School Completion Programme (SCP). It has approximately 600 pupils, representing over 22 nationalities. It is situated in an area which is recognised as affluent according to the Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas. The school's main catchment areas are also recognised as affluent. The rate of progression to third level was 92% in 2018, 91% in 2019 and 100% in 2020.

The research questions were relevant to both school contexts. Moreover, the difference in the geographical areas and designation of the schools offered diverse settings which could be compared and contrasted. Considering the research questions in two schools allowed me to investigate partnership in contrasting settings, with parents in different circumstances. As the purpose of the research was also to inform my own practice, it was of benefit that the case study schools have a similar intake to my own school.

1.9 Scope of the study

This research was limited by the very nature of the design and methodologies applied. The case study is bounded and constructed by data generated for two post-primary schools in a specific geographical area in North County Dublin. As a researcher,

I wanted the schools to be similar to my own school so that the findings could be extrapolated and useful for my own work. I did consider a larger scale study with more schools, but this was not possible due to time constraints and the reluctance of schools to become involved. Epstein's framework provided a way of examining partnership in a critical manner and establishing whether specific partnership actions in a school contribute to a culture of partnership among parents and teachers within a school. As a practitioner and a deputy principal, I was eager to assess what partnership actions are of the most benefit to both parents and schools and to utilise this information to make my own school more open about our practices and decisions. To date I have benefited greatly from the findings of this research; in particular, the effect of Covid-19 on our school community has led to a need for greater collaboration with parents. Utilising aspects of Epstein's framework and the concluding recommendations of this study have enabled me to devise supports for our student and parent community, which are proving effective and contributing to enhanced work practices in our school by management and in developing a culture of partnership with parents.

During the fieldwork, I had a dual role of researcher and interviewer. This was difficult as I had to remain neutral, refraining from reacting to statements that I felt strongly about and trying to limit any bias I had. As we await the new Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019, there is much debate about parents' participation in post-primary schools. The bill is currently at stage 8 of an 11-stage process in Dáil Eireann. I believe this research study to be of value, not only to me in my role as deputy principal, but as a contribution to knowledge on partnership with parents at post-primary level in Ireland. Other educators who are interested in promoting partnership with parents beyond the directive of Circular M27/91 (1991) and who wish to be prepared for the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019 may consider my research findings and recommendations useful.

1.10   Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the reasons underpinning this research and how I have drawn on my own personal experience in post-primary education. I considered the values of the educational philosophy that I adhere to and how this would fit within a theoretical framework. I defined the research questions which were addressed during this study. The research approach and methodologies were illustrated by the research aim

and objectives and are representative of the type of study needed to gain a better understanding of how partnership is represented in post-primary schools. These are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. The research framework supported the research design and enabled me to answer the research questions and allowed me to ascertain if the data and information generated indicated partnership in line with Epstein's framework. The following chapter will introduce my literature review and situate my research in the Irish context of partnership with parents.

Chapter 2 Literature Review Part 1: Partnership in Irish Education

2.1 Introduction

In this literature review, I situate the research in relation to the history of educational partnership with parents and current developments pertaining to partnership with parents in Ireland. The overall aim of this research has been to evaluate partnership with parents in the post-primary context to establish if partnership, as described by Epstein's framework, is evident; and if any partnership does occur, the extent to which it is planned for the purpose of improving student outcomes. My research primarily focused on how and why partnership occurred, who was leading this partnership and what was the purpose of the partnership. This research also sought to utilise a specific conceptual model of partnership to consider if partnership was evident in the participating Irish post-primary schools.

The literature review is divided into three main sections. Firstly, this chapter will identify a definition of partnership with parents which will be used in terms of this research. Secondly, it will examine the historical background to partnership and Irish government legislation and policy in relation to partnership with parents. Finally, I will discuss the benefits of partnership with parents. Chapter 3 will then consider a number of models of partnership and their relevance to this research. Table 2.1 provides a summary of content discussed in this literature chapter.

Table 2.1   *Summary of Literature Reviewed in Chapter 2*

Literature Area	Content Summary/Overview	Evidenced in
Defining Partnership	Partnership is described as stated governmental policy to be pursued, but no definition of partnership given.	Circular M27/91: Parents in Partners in Education
	HSCL definition of partnership with parents recognises that a partnership may not necessarily be equally divided but has a shared common goal.	DES, 2006a
	Epstein's framework of partnership provides a wider understanding of what partnership is, based on six indicators.	Epstein, 2013
Parents in Irish Education: 1831-1990	Although parents are described as valued partners in education, it is difficult to measure if	Constitution, 1937. Education Act, 1998. EPSEN Act, 2004.

Literature Area	Content Summary/Overview	Evidenced in
	parents are recognised as partners in post-primary education.	
Parents in Irish Education: Reports & Policies 1990 onwards	Numerous reports recognise the value of partnership with parents; however, no formal guidelines or standards of best practice have been provided to post-primary schools.	DES Green Paper, 1992; DES White Paper, 1995; Education Act, 1998; EPSEN Act, 2004; Education Bill, 2019.
Recent Developments in Irish Education pertaining to parents	OECD reports indicate that parents are the primary educator and there is a shared responsibility between Irish schools and parents. Irish research indicates that this shared responsibility is limited and planned professional practice is essential for schools to developing partnership with parents.	OECD, 1997. Quarterly National Household Survey, 2012; Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2003; Byrne & Smyth,, 2010.
Parent Support Agencies	There are four national associations which represent parents. No figures regarding post-primary school membership of these associations are available.	NPCpp, 2019.
Value of partnership with parents	Partnership with parents enhances a child's school behaviour, attendance and achievement levels and overall success in school. Two-way communication is key to connecting parents to their child's school and promoting partnership. Partnership with parents needs intentional planning and developing activities for parents which make them feel included and valued.	Sawyer, 2105; Epstein, 2016. Olmstead, 2013; Hornby, 2010; Ferlazzo, 2011; Broderick & Mastrilli, 1997. deFur, 2012; Epstein, 2009; Hornby, 2011; You & Richman, 2014.

2.2 Defining Partnership in the Context of this Research

The terms parental involvement, partnership with parents and participation of parents have been used in an interchangeable manner in literature which can cause a lack of clarity. Parental involvement usually refers to parents' involvement in a variety of school activities, while partnership is used to reflect a deeper involvement where parents participate in decisions and offer opinions on school issues. Lysaght (1993) states that some definitions of partnership impart "the notion of parity between partners" (p. 196) while others favour one partner more.

As research by La Bahn (1995), Epstein (2005b) and Sawyer (2015) indicates, partnership with the specific purpose of increasing student learning and attainment is more successful. My intention was to use a definition of partnership for this research which not only reflected a deeper involvement of parents but linked to students' outcomes. Therefore, several definitions of partnership with parents or parental involvement have been considered for this research.

In an Irish context, Circular M27/91: Parents as Partners in Education describes partnership with parents in post-primary schools as a stated government policy in Ireland and also states that schools must "ensure that partnership for parents is positively pursued" (DES, 1991, p. 1). However, the circular does not define partnership or indicate what activities should be promoted by school management to achieve this partnership. In the HSCL Handbook, From Vision to Best Practice (DES, 2006a), the emerging concept of partnership is considered and the notion of equal partnership discussed. Partnership is described as implying 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" (DES, 2006a, p. 18). Working towards partnership is acknowledged as the sharing of power and vulnerability, and the "salient characteristics of partnership are a shared sense of purpose, goal definition, communication, structures that are human and caring, task orientation, solidarity, joint accountability empowerment and transformation" (DES, 2006a, p. 18). This definition of partnership recognises that a partnership may not necessarily be equally divided but has a shared purpose or common goal. Importantly, the purpose of the HSCL scheme states that development of partnership with parents is connected to enhancing student learning opportunities, as discussed in Section 2.8.

In the USA, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) defines parental involvement as the "participation of parents in regular, two-way and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities" (NCLB, 2001). Parents are described as

> having an integral role in assisting their child's learning; encouraged to be actively involved in their child's education at school; are full partners in their child's education and are included, as appropriate, in decision making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child. (NCLB, 2001)

While the term partnership is not used or defined within NCLB, the definition of parental involvement clearly states that parents are partners in their child's education. The NCLB definition of parental involvement recognises the value of partnership and reflects a purposeful nature that is clearly linked to student learning.

Epstein describes the "then concept" (Epstein, 2013, p. 1) of parental involvement as partnership which was incidental or even accidental and contrasts it to the "now concept" (Epstein, 2013, p. 1) of school, family and community partnership which has a theoretical framework which is goal orientated and part of school planning. The "then concept" refers to the past understanding of partnership with parents, whereas the "now concept" refers to the current, expanded view of partnership with parents (Epstein, 2013). Epstein's framework provides a new wider definition of partnership based upon six partnership indicators which are indicative of partnership practices:

> The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families. If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and development. Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students. (Epstein, 1995, p.81)

Considering a definition of partnership for this research not only involved examining existing definitions but reflecting on my own understanding of partnership as described in Chapter 1. My 25 years of experience have led me to the personal conclusion that parents' involvement in their child's education matters. We work better as a team coming together for the common goal of student progress. When we communicate clearly, everyone knows what is going on and no one is making assumptions. We may not agree on certain things, but we have a common interest in the success of the student. My observations are based on daily contact with parents for over 25 years, from getting it wrong and having to consult with parents which I should have done in the first place, from learning from my mistakes and listening to what parents can tell me about helping their child.

Reflection upon definitions of parental involvement and my own experiences enabled me to derive a starting definition of partnership for my research. For this research I will define the term partnership with parents or partnership as: a relationship based upon a shared common goal of education for the student, where schools and parents recognise each other's opinions and perspectives and consider them when developing policy or making decisions. Partnership is when schools are responsive to the concerns and needs of parents and involve them as active community members.

2.3 Parents in Irish Education: Irish Historical Background from 1831 to 1990

The extent of parent involvement has fluctuated in the history of Irish education. Prior to the establishment of formal primary education in 1831, parental involvement was a prominent feature of Irish education which could be traced back to the hedge schools where parents took an active role in their child's education (Coolahan, 1988 in INTO 1997).

> Visitors to Ireland and observers of the social scene marvelled at the evidence of such keen interest in education exhibited by indigent Irish parents and contrasted it with the apathy and lack of interest in schooling found among the common poor in other European countries of the time. (Coolahan, 1988 in INTO 1997, p. 1)

In 1831, as a result of political, economic, social and religious factors, a national education system was established in Ireland (Walsh, 2016). Parental involvement in education was greatly reduced by the authority of the Church and State, due to the establishment of this formal education system. Both Church and State were in a strong position "to establish control over the emerging system" (INTO, 1997, p1). This was a change in the Irish tradition of families supporting the work of schools, in favour of a more centralised policy in schools (Walsh, 2016). The recognised involvement of parents in education appeared to be undervalued and set aside as the formal education system was established by Church and State. Following the introduction of this new formal education, the Church and State effectively barred the rights of parents as primary educators. "Parents were removed from centre stage to outside the school gates, a place where they remained until the recent past" (Coolahan, 1988, p. 37). Church and State became the key decision makers in relation to education, and parents had no say or

opportunities to contribute opinions (O'Buachalla, 1988). This suggests a lack of recognition of the contribution parents had made to education and a lack of long-term vision for developing partnership with parents in education in Ireland at that time. From 1831 onward, Church and State were involved in difficult negotiations regarding the control of education, yet parents' involvement in education was not a major concern (Parke, 2010). School governing bodies are described as having reflected the attitude that parents were not welcome in the management of schools and could not contribute to decision making, planning or policy development in their children's schools (Walsh, 2016).

In 1922 Minister for Education Eoin McNeill recognised that the right of education belonged to parents: "we must be extremely careful in anything that we lay down as general principle that we do not say or appear to say that the control of education belongs as by right to the State" (Dáil Debate, 1922 in INTO, 1997, p. 3). Despite this, little involvement of parents was evident between 1831 and 1934 when the Central Council of the Catholic Managers' Association adopted recommendations which included: "that no lay committee of any kind should be associated with the manager in school management" (INTO, 1997, p. 3). This step deliberately and decisively excluded parents from decision-making processes in schools and was in direct conflict with the statements made by McNeill. During a Dáil Debate in 1935 on teaching through the medium of Irish, Minister for Education Thomas Derrig stated that parents as a body could not decide on educational matters (Derrig, 1935). A disparity between State comments and governmental policy is reflected in these actions.

These statements at national level reflected a lack of understanding of how parents can support the education of their children and their wish to be involved in decisions pertinent to their child's education. It also overlooked the recorded involvement of parents in schools prior to 1831 and the subsequent benefits that came with it (Coolahan, 1988). This is an indication of the division of power between State, Church, schools and parents. As Church and State took over national education, parents were reduced to a superficial role without any real power to contribute to educational development or change in schools. Despite this lack of formal recognition of parents' role in education at school level, in July 1937 the Irish Constitution recognised that the family was the primary educator and articulated the "inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social

education of their children" (Constitution, 1937, p. 162). This conflict between the newly established constitutional rights of parents and practice in schools on the one hand, and state policy on the other, meant that parents were not able to be involved in their child's school. The DES and school management, which did not include parents, were making decisions which affected students without consulting parents.

In the early 1960s the involvement of the Church in Irish education was seen by the State as representative of parents' views, but in reality parents had no say in the education of their child and this representative view was what the Church envisaged (INTO, 1997). Attitudes began to change during the late 1960s, and in 1969, a bishops' pastoral letter, authorised by the Catholic Church, publicly recognised parents' right to be consulted about the education of their children (INTO, 1997, p. 4). This was followed by the publication of Ár nDaltaí Uile (All Our Children) in 1969 which was seen as another step forward in Irish education. The key purpose of this document was for parents to understand the education system; however, it was not for parents to influence it (Griffin, 1991). This was a lost opportunity. While increasing parent knowledge of the education system is admirable, this document did not allude to the critical support which parents provide and the contribution this made to students' success in school. Nor did it consider the benefits of partnership between parents and schools. Educational change continued to be very slow; it was not until 1975 that parents became representatives on boards of management (BoMs) at primary level, and no such requirement was made of post-primary schools. This new participation on BoMs was a move towards partnership with parents, albeit with two specific parents from a larger parent population. While progress in policy was acknowledged, parental involvement was not part of a planned and coordinated programme at governmental level but rather a number of unlinked actions, which involved parents in school life.

The patronage of the majority of schools in Ireland was mainly faith-based in the early 1970s with the first Educate Together (ET) School established in 1978 purported to be the beginning of a different form of school management in Ireland, where parents and teachers worked together in an open and inclusive manner. "Educate Together-History" (2019) described themselves as agents of change where all partners in Irish education worked together in a collaborative way. However, today approximately 95% of schools continue to have denominational patronage, with 90% of those being Catholic. Currently there are 95 ET primary schools and 19 post-primary schools in Ireland. Educational

change continued to be slow until 1985, when Minister for Education Gemma Hussey established the National Parents' Council (NPC). This was the first step towards involving parents in the formation of educational policy and was a formal recognition of the potential for parents to be partners in education. It was a clear step away from the rhetoric of Derrig (1935) which devalued parents' contribution in educational decision making and towards the rights laid down in the Constitution. Partnership between parents and schools began to develop in education in the following years as the DES Circular 7/88: Discipline in National Schools clearly indicated that parents should be involved in the development of any school code of behaviour. This circular focused on consultation with parents regarding the development of a code of behaviour and outlined that parents should be given opportunities to contribute to school policy on behaviour. It also referred to fostering cooperation and understanding between schools and parents, and that parents' cooperation with school behaviour policies be secured. This was indeed an advance in terms of including parents in educational decision making, but it was only in relation to behaviour policies. By limiting parents' contribution, the DES appeared to be focused on gaining parents' "full co-operation with regard to the effective implementation of the policy" (DES, 1988) rather than on authentic cooperation and discussion between schools and parents at policy level. Though this circular was welcomed in educational circles as an advance in partnership with parents, it was limited and made no recommendations as to how this consultation process with parents could occur and did not allow for partnership in other areas such as curriculum, assessment or student welfare. It seems that the circular was more specifically about having parents comply with codes of behaviour rather than building any collaborative or active partnership with parents.

2.4 Parents in Irish Education: Reports and Policies from 1990 onwards

As outlined in Section 2.3, parents were not included in the educational process in Ireland. However, despite this absence of partnership with parents in Irish education, the possible benefits of partnership were vocalised within educational reports and DES documents. In this section I will discuss relevant reports and policies since 1990, paying particular attention to the EPSEN Act (2004) and the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill (2019). Between 1990 and 2016, DES circulars and policies contributed to the discussion on partnership with parents in Irish education. Reports based on reviews of primary education and special education needs enriched the discourse on the value of partnership

with parents, while government policy continued to allude to the benefits of such partnership. This section will articulate the key findings of reports such as the Report of the Primary Review Body (1990), the Report of the Special Education Review Committee and the National Education Convention Report. It will also reference two key circulars issued by the DES pertaining to partnership with parents. I will conclude with a critical analysis of the Education Act (1998).

The concept of partnership was referenced within the DES Report of the Primary Review Body (1990). This report acknowledged the valuable educational benefits of parental involvement and called for a more detailed analysis of how the structured involvement of parents supports the school curriculum. The following year, in 1991, the Programme for Economic and Social Progress and Circular M27/91 recognised that parental involvement in educational strategy was essential to good policy and practice. "Positive parental interest is crucial to a child's educational attainment. It must, therefore, be an essential strategy of educational policy and practice to promote parental involvement in the education of their children" (DES, 1991, p. 35). The government laid down in written policy its commitment to partnership with parents within this document. The public recognition of the valuable contribution which parents can make to education was welcomed, but the DES circulars issued to primary and post-primary schools did not reflect a strategic approach to promoting or supporting partnership with parents. Yet again this was an example of DES rhetoric on partnership with parents rather than a planned approach. This highlighted a need to move away from acknowledging and agreeing with current research and literature on partnership to an era of decisive actions and support for partnership with parents which would benefit both students and schools. Despite the introduction of the National Parents Council Primary (NPCp) and the National Parents Council Post-primary (NPCpp) in 1985, the DES was aware that some post-primary schools in 1991 had no parent associations. In 1991, Circular M27/91 Parents as Partners in Education was issued to post-primary schools. It clearly stated the government position on partnership with parents: "this circular is concerned with ensuring that partnership for parents is positively pursued at a local level by each post-primary school" (DES, 1991, p. 1). It also emphasised the importance of school family relationships and that parents "should be given as much information as possible on all aspects of the child's progress and development" (DES, 1991, p.1). This circular was focused on the setting up of parent associations. While its counterpart for primary

schools, Circular 24/91: Parents as Partners in Education (DES, 1991) included directives on school-family relationships and developing partnership with parents, no such directives were included in the post-primary circular. The content of these circulars is a clear indication that the inclusion of parents in school was only a priority at primary level, with the value of partnership at post-primary level left unacknowledged.

The following year, the Green Paper Education for a Changing World (DES, 1992) highlighted the benefits of partnership for all children. "The development of effective links between school and home enhances children's participation in education and also helps parents and children to develop more positive attitudes towards education and the school" (DES, 1992, p. 46). In this report the DES promoted home-school links as an important feature of all schools and stated that such links should be considered "as a normal part of the school's effective operation" (DES, 1992, p. 46). No clarification followed this sweeping statement, and no change was initiated at school level. Another DES governmental document, the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993b), focused on students with SEN, suggested that schools should involve parents actively in decision-making roles in relation to their child and stated that communication with parents should be improved and regular. In the same year the National Education Convention Report (1993a) played an important role in recognising the need for an overall policy approach and framework for Irish education. It included representatives from 42 groups ranging from educational bodies, social partners and the DES, who engaged in discussion of key aspects of educational policy (DES, 1993a). The report reiterated the recognition of parents' contribution to the education of their children. The report also recognised the new concept of parents as partners in education. Parental rights were recognised as having a priority in the Constitution, and these rights were given "fresh articulation" with provision being made for parents to play a more central role in educational debate and policy development (DES, 1993a). This report also acknowledged the changing demographic of parents and their expression of interest in their child's education. The report indicated that parents are "more conscious of the constitutional prerogatives of parents than formerly, the older model of patron 'acting on behalf of' such people is coming under challenge" (DES, 1993a, p25). This reignited the concept of parents as partners in education, and the White Paper "Charting Our Educational Future" (1995) was subsequently published. It acknowledged the unique experience parents bring to education. It recognised their deep understanding of their

children's needs and interests, alongside an intimate knowledge of their child. This White Paper enumerated parents' rights and responsibilities in education. Included in these rights were the right to participate in their child's education; the right to be consulted and informed on educational systems in school and on a regional and national level; and the right to be an active participant in their child's school. Parental responsibilities were outlined as providing a nurturing learning environment for their child and supporting and cooperating with the school as a partner in education (DES, 1995, p. 11). This recognition of rights and responsibilities of parents in education was seen as an advancement by educationalists. However, the findings of the report were once again merely recommendations and did not provide a method of implementation.

Recognition of rights is an important aspect of the concept of partnership with parents, but recognition is of questionable value without actions or directives that schools must implement. The governmental approach to partnership could be described as half-hearted. A move from discussion and recognition of the value of partnership to policy implementation for partnership between schools and parents is required. Over the following years, the notion of parents as partners in education was frequently spoken of as the new Education Act (1998) made it through the consultation process and scrutiny of the Seanad and the Dáil. While parental contribution to schools was acknowledged as important and contributed to public statements and reports in Ireland, no real action was taken in the majority of post-primary schools. The DES did not issue any circular pertaining to partnership with parents beyond the establishment of a parent association at post-primary level. There was a distinct lack of planning for partnership by schools; no guidance from the DES was issued, and there was no coherent policy development as regards involving parents in school life at post-primary level. The rhetoric of parents as partners continued but without any action.

In December 1998, the Education Act was signed into law in Ireland. This was a landmark event in Irish Education as it provided a statutory framework for Irish education. It detailed the objectives and principles for Irish education while giving statutory rights to parents regarding their child's education. The preamble to this Act also referred to provision for students with SEN. The Education Act (1998) also set out requirements that all post-primary schools operate under a BoM. Part V1 of the Education Act directs schools to establish parent associations which will promote the interests of the students in cooperation with the board. The Education Act also directs

schools to "adopt a programme of activities which will promote the involvement of parents" (DES, 1998, p. 26). This was a step closer to partnership with parents, as two parents were to be elected as members of the BoM of post-primary schools. This was an opportunity for these parents to articulate their opinions on education at the management level of a school. Notwithstanding, the representativeness of parents on a BoM cannot be assumed to typify the opinion of the school's parent association or indeed the general parent body. Parent members of a BoM do not have to be members of the school's parent association, and they represent their own personal views rather than parents' views more generally at board level. At the same time, the stipulation to establish parent associations also provided scope for a wider group of parents to become involved in their child's school. These two particular requirements of the Education Act (1998) show an acknowledgement of the value of parents' contribution to education. Nonetheless, it could be argued that the DES took the easier route of articulating parent rights to membership of BoM and parent associations but did not address the more difficult area of involving parents in a programme of activities linked to partnership. In reality, no guidance was given to schools on these measures and therefore parent experience was dependent on interpretation by school management on how this should be enacted. Therefore, the programme of activities (fundraising, volunteering to serve tea/coffee at events) developed by many schools had no connection to the overall aim of partnership, which was to improve student outcomes. When one considers the findings and recommendations of the Green and White papers which preceded the Education Act, a clear articulation of partnership with parents could have been included.

2.4.1 The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004

The EPSEN Act specifically refers to children with SEN; however, this Act is also relevant to all children in school. Many of the statements in relation to parents and their rights are equally applicable to all parents, as research in the area of partnership with parents recognises the benefits of partnership to all children. Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools (2017) which were issued to post-primary schools, stated that:

> good parental engagement is a critical factor in enhancing outcomes for students
> with special educational needs. Parental engagement is enhanced when parents
> are consulted in relation to their children's needs and strengths, on the supports

and strategies being developed to support their children, and when they are involved in regular reviews of progress. (DES, 2017b p. 29)

Recognition of the educational value of parental support to students' education is clearly articulated in these guidelines. The DES is distinctly advocating a process of partnership with parents where parents' opinions are sought and educational reviews include parents. If such a process is encouraged for parents of students with special needs, one could extrapolate that all students, regardless of needs, would benefit from consultation with their parents. These guidelines also outline the value of good communication between the school and parents. Appendix 7 of the DES Guidelines (2017b) lists key questions schools can use to reflect upon and review their existing practice in relation to promoting parental engagement among parents of students with additional needs. Four of the questions can be applied to all post-primary schools, not just the special education sector or to parents of students with special needs:

- To what extent is regular communication facilitated with parents {who have a child with a special educational need}?

- What barriers might prevent parents from being fully involved in supporting their child in school? What may be helpful in overcoming these barriers?

- Do we provide opportunities for parents to learn more about {special} education {issues through contact with other agencies and services}?

- How can we support staff members in engaging effectively with parents?

(DES, 2017b, p. 49)

Though the EPSEN Act (2004) and Post-Primary Guidelines (DES, 2017b) specifically relate to students with SEN and their parents, they are of relevance to this research as they indicate a move in government policy towards including partnership with parents in the education process and offer suggestions on practical ways to support partnership development in the post-primary context for parents. The key questions identified by the DES in promoting parental engagement with parents of students with special needs are equally applicable to all parents and tie in with the spirit of parental engagement recommended in the aforementioned reports and circulars. This narrow focus on engagement with a specific group of parents could be widened to include the broader

parent population within a school. As limited research is available on partnership with parents at post-primary level in Ireland, EPSEN recommendations have offered an insight into a partnership process which could be applicable to all parents in post-primary schools.

2.4.2 The Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019

The Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019 was initially published as the General Scheme of Education (Parent and Student Charter) Bill by the then Minister of Education Richard Bruton in December 2016. This was a draft of a new law which fulfils commitments made in the Action Plan for Education (2016-2019) to provide improved information and complaint procedures for parents, while strengthening the role of parents and students in education. This Bill set out "the principles that will guide how schools engage with parents and students, to require each School to have a Student and Parent Charter" (DES, 2016d, p. 3). This proposed new Bill will require every school to consult with parents and students and publish and operate a Student and Parent Charter (DES, 2016d). Key aspects of the new charter which schools will have to address include:

- Consult students and parents regularly in relation to school costs and work to avoid costs acting as a barrier.

- Invite feedback from students and parents.

- Provide a fair and accessible mechanism for resolving complaints, including mediation. The use of formal grievance and complaint processes should be a last response, except in the most serious of cases.

- Provide better information about School Management, School Policies including on admission and information on extracurricular activities and school performance.

- Acknowledge gaps, deficiencies or room for improvement.

(DES, 2016d)

The key concepts included in the Bill relate to schools' requirement to provide information to parents and to publish a Charter in accordance with national guidelines to be made available by the minister. While the Education Act (1998) makes some

provisions for relationships between schools and parents, no cohesive strategy exists which schools can adopt (DES, 2016f). According to the government, the new legislative approach of the Student and Parent Charter "could foster a culture of change in schools in terms of student and parent engagement" (DES, 2016e, p. 4). The DES, (2016f) identifies the impact of four major effects of the Charter in these terms:

- The Charter should lead to increased levels of engagement between schools and parents and students.

- Parents and students have clarity from national guidelines on what to expect from their school.

- Under law, it will now be a function of a school to promote the involvement of parents and students in the education provided to students.

- The requirement of a student council will be amended under law to promote the interests of the students of the school, having regard to the characteristic spirit and policies of the school.

Government documents describe the Charter as similar to a "customer service charter" where the experience of parents and students is to be improved. All schools will be required to develop a Charter which will clearly articulate how they will engage with parents and students, and schools will also be obliged to promote parental involvement and partnership. According to the DES, this new Charter will define the guiding principle of school engagement with parents as well as students. The DES indicates that this Charter could lead to the development of a clear process of partnership with parents in Irish schools for the first time. However, some educational partners have concerns with specific aspects of the Charter. The Report on Scrutiny of the Education (Amendment) Bill 2015 and the General Scheme of Education (Parent and Student Charter) Bill 2016 consisted of submissions from relevant partners in education expressing their reaction to the Charter. The Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) registered concern with the focus on the complaints procedure aspect of the Bill with the current complaints procedure which post-primary schools implement ignored. The TUI also referred to balancing the rights of students and parents with concomitant responsibilities. The Joint Managerial Body (JMB) refers to the possibility of this Charter leading to an adversarial culture in the partnership between schools and families, and found that current policies and procedures which address aspects of this Bill were ignored. The JMB also indicated that there was a

lack of identification of responsibilities associated with the charter, i.e., responsibilities of parents.

As a school leader this Charter offers me the possibility of a coherent strategic approach to partnership with parents. However, the focus on complaints procedures could overshadow the possibilities for engagement with parents on school issues. I can visualise this Charter in its current form becoming a bureaucratic procedure to comply with rather than an opportunity to include parents in partnership activities. Within the Charter there is a distinct lack of recognition of the current engagement between schools and parents, and in my opinion, as the TUI suggested, the Charter should reflect a balance between the rights and responsibilities of parents. There is a high degree of focus on the rights of parents and students but little recognition that with rights come responsibilities and that schools make decisions based on the needs of many while parents are focused on the needs of their child. As this Charter is to develop a common culture of partnership in schools it is also ironic that schools will be asked to use guidelines to develop their own school Charter which begs the question how useful 700 different post-primary schools' charters will be?

Minister for Education Joe Mc Hugh published the new Education Bill in September 2019 (DES, 2019) following consultation with the NPCp, the NPCpp and the Irish Second-level Students Union. The Bill was initiated in the Seanad and completed all stages of the Seanad by the end of December 2019. This Bill is currently in the 3rd stage at Dáil Eireann before it can be signed into law. The Education Bill (2019), while offering the possibility of enhancing transparency of schools and supporting engagement with parents, does not address a number of issues which have come to light during this research. All responsibilities in relation to the Charter fall on the school to provide information, engage and consult with parents and students. Both national and international research has shown that parental engagement in partnership activities is low in post-primary schools, yet this Charter does not assign any responsibilities to parents or address the known lack of parental engagement at post-primary level.

2.5 Recent Developments in Irish Education pertaining to Parents

In this section I will review pertinent educational research conducted both within and outside Ireland, including studies by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI),

the National Quarterly Survey and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This recent research provides additional insight into partnership with parents in post-primary education.

2.5.1 ESRI Longitudinal Study 2010

The ESRI published Behind the Scenes?: A Study of Parental Involvement in Post-Primary Education in Ireland in 2010. The study which was funded by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the DES. It followed a cohort of young people in 12 case study schools over the course of a six-year period (2001-2007), following the cohort from first through sixth year of post-primary schooling. The schools were a mix of urban, rural, large and small, and they represented a variety of socio-economic locations. The research consisted of surveys, interviews and focus groups with parents and students. This was the first systematic study of parental perceptions of the Irish educational system. As described by the authors Byrne and Smyth, it "provides unique insights into parents' involvement in their children's education and the information flow between school and home. This study highlights important issues for policy, suggesting ways to support the parental role and thus enhance student choices and outcomes" (Byrne & Smyth, 2010, p. xiv).

Byrne and Smyth posited that little was known about how actively involved parents were in post-primary education. Their research was to address this lack of knowledge and investigate the roles of parents in post-primary education. Their findings covered a wide range of areas, including information flow from school to home and vice versa, whole school commitment to communication with parents, the importance of a positive behaviour policy and the importance of academic and career advice. Byrne and Smyth posit that these areas support parents in advising their child on educational decisions. The report reiterated conclusions found in other international studies that parental involvement in post-primary education has a positive effect on student outcomes (Sawyer, 2015; You & Richman, 2014; Mc Namara, 2000). The research carried out by Byrne and Smyth found that "the extent to which parents are involved in their child's education is positively associated with student achievement in the Irish context" (Byrne & Smyth, 2010, p. 183).

As noted above, the study investigated levels of parental satisfaction with the kind of information they received from the school. Findings indicated significant differences in the kind of contact schools had with parents across the case study schools. It also found that, according to students involved in the study, "parents are a very significant source of help and advice as they move through the school system" (Byrne & Smyth, 2010, p. 194). Byrne and Smyth found a high level of parental involvement in supporting and advising their children during their post-primary education. This support included asking about homework and about what is going on in school, discussing subject choice and opportunities with their children and attending formal events in the school such as subject talks and information or career evenings. The study indicates that parents received insufficient information from schools. Furthermore, the research findings suggest that information should be targeted and varied to improve provision of information. Recommendations of the study include the development of "a clearly defined school policy or plan for productive and effective parental involvement" (Byrne & Smyth, 2010, p. 200). The authors make a distinction between formal and informal involvement with the school. Formal involvement indicated a role in the parent association or BoM, while informal involvement referred to the activities parents engage in to support schoolwork and school decisions, e.g. monitoring homework, ensuring attendance at school, and offering their child advice on school decisions. Findings indicated that formal involvement was more evident among highly educated parents, whereas less educated parents were not as frequently involved.

Byrne and Smyth (2010) also indicated that middle-class parents have greater familiarity with and insider knowledge of the school system and are therefore more confident in dealing with the school. Parent teacher meetings (PTMs) were recognised as the most significant contact that all parents had with the school. School reports were viewed in a more positive light by parents with lower levels of education, while parents with more education expressed a requirement for greater information via reports. All parents demonstrated a high level of educational aspirations for their children; however, parents with a higher level of education had increased aspirations. A key finding of this research was that despite parents having a high level of informal involvement with the school, this did "not appear to translate into significant levels of formal involvement in school life" (Byrne & Smyth, 2010, p. 199). Moreover, where there was engagement in formal school activities, that was usually middle class who were highly educated. This research

provided insight into aspects of partnership with parents in Irish post-primary schools and recommended that the role of parents must be supported in a manner which maximises outcomes for students.

2.5.2 Quarterly National Household Survey 2012

In 2012, the Irish Central Statistics Office (CSO) carried out the Quarterly National Household Survey in which a specific module examined parental involvement. The resulting statistics were released in 2014. Of 12,131 parents, only 11% of post-primary parents surveyed indicated some involvement in the parent association or school council of their child's school. Only 3% indicated involvement in the school BoM.

Table 2.2   *Percentage of school children whose parents are involved in school activities classified by type of activity*

School level	School Council Parent Association	Board of Management	School Sports involvement	Other	Sample size
Primary school	15%	4%	33%	43%	7,673
Secondary school	11%	3%	20%	34%	4,458

(CSO, 2012)

This indicates that 14 years after the enactment of the Education Act (1998), the goal of having parents become partners in education has not been fully realised, and this brings into question the methods used by the DES and schools to encourage partnership as well as the desire of parents to be involved in schools. The OECD (2006, 2013b & 2020) argue reduced percentages may not necessarily reflect a lack of parental interest, as a number of factors may influence involvement. These factors include economic pressures, childcare issues and personal educational experience. It has been argued by the OECD that economic pressure places time restrictions on parents and can limit attendance and participation in school events, as can childcare concerns. Prior negative experience of school can also contribute to lack of confidence in dealing with school personnel (Wanat, 1992; LaBahn, 1995).

The figures provided by the CSO are particularly important in light of two key documents; Circular M27/91: Parents as Partners in Education and School Self

Evaluation (SSE) Guidelines (DES, 2016c). These documents indicate a move towards parent partnership in school policy and planning; in particular, the SSE guidelines include the government's aspiration for partnership with parents in the reflective process for self-evaluation by stating that the SSE guidelines are for "school communities including students and parents, to enable their fullest participation in school self-evaluation processes" (DES, 2016c, p. 7). Yet these CSO figures show that relying on parent associations as a means of building partnership may not be effective. Research by the OECD (2006) and Byrne and Smyth (2010) indicate that parental participation is usually limited to the same small number of parents being involved in a multitude of different ways and is therefore not representative of the general parent population. Having a parent association is not necessarily indicative of widespread partnership within a school. The Quarterly National Household Survey demonstrates that only a small proportion of parents participate at this level in schools. It is therefore essential for school leadership who wish to engage in authentic school planning and self-evaluation to develop strategies which target all parents so as to reflect an accurate appraisal of current practices within the school. Post-primary schools in Ireland have a choice about how to build partnership with parents, but currently no methods or structures are in place within schools to examine if and how this partnership occurs or its level of effectiveness.

2.5.3 Other Irish Research

Brian Mac Giolla Phádraig acknowledges that the Irish government has pledged a spirit of partnership with parents and that the revised primary curriculum of 1999 "emphasizes partnership in education as one of fourteen key issues in primary education" (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2003, p. 112). He observes that the extent to which parents are involved as partners in curriculum decisions in Ireland is limited. The study he conducted investigated "the nature of parental involvement in decisions affecting children's education that pertains in their school" (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2003, p. 113). Research was carried out in 44 primary schools, with 734 parents and 225 teachers via questionnaires. Based on this research, Mac Giolla Phádraig expressed the view that teachers make decisions on curriculum without parental input, unless a child is experiencing a specific area of difficulty, in which case parents would be consulted. Mac Giolla Phádraig's research also indicated that there is "a sizeable proportion of parents who are currently excluded from decisions regarding their children's school curriculum"

(Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2003, p. 117). He stated that parents are consulted but that this is not partnership as they were not involved in the decision-making process, and he recommended that schools pay particular attention to the methods they employ to involve parents in decision making in order to "fully realise the spirit of official policy to involve parents as partners in their children's education" (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2003, p. 118). This research also examined the extent to which parents wanted to be involved in school planning and the extent to which teachers wanted parents to be involved. Findings indicated that parents and teachers showed a marked preference for consultation on aspects of school policy and curriculum rather than active involvement in the development of policies or curriculum (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2003, p. 43). In contrast, areas such as codes of behaviour and special programmes were identified by both parents and teachers as preferred areas for partnership in decision making. Mac Giolla Phádraig argues that despite the governmental focus on policy for partnership between schools and parents, a paradigm shift is needed "for both teachers and parents, which entails teachers recognizing that parents have legitimate interests in their children's schools, and parents recognizing that they have a role to play, however expert and knowledgeable teachers are" Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2003, p. 45-46). He noted that this would be a significant change in how teachers view parents and also in how parents view their contribution to education and would positively contribute to the development of partnership with a school.

In 2004, Kellaghan, McGee, Millar and Perkins published Views of the Irish on Education: 2004 Survey. This national survey offered people an opportunity to contribute their views on education in Ireland and developments for the future. Public and special interest groups were involved in meetings, and a representative sample of 1,511 people were interviewed. Among the issues participants were asked about were the goals of education, conditions in schools, information available about schools, teachers and teaching, curricula and examinations, education and the community, management of schools, improving education, and funding and evaluation of education. When participants were asked about the distribution of power in the Irish education system, over half indicated that parents have reduced influence on what happens in schools. These respondents expressed the view that parents should have an increased role on what happens in schools. "Support was in evidence for parents and students having a greater say in the education system" (Kellaghan et al., 2004, p. 1). These

findings demonstrate a belief that parents should have an input into educational decisions, but this survey did not clarify what form this input should take. Nevertheless, the survey provided an insight into public perception of parental involvement in decision making within schools. It highlighted the continuing desire for parents to be involved with their children's schools.

2.5.4 OECD Research

OECD studies are informative about international approaches to partnership with parents. In 1997 the OECD's Centre for Educational Research conducted research on developing partnership between parents and schools called Parents as Partners in Schooling. Ireland was one of nine countries involved in this research, and findings indicated that within Ireland parents are identified as the primary educator of children and that there is a shared responsibility between schools and parents (OECD, 1997). This research refers to the Constitution (1937) but does not explain how this shared responsibility is enacted in Irish education. It could be argued that this OECD report considered governmental documents which refer to partnership but did not examine what was happening at local level in schools. Irish governmental documents pertaining to education refer to a shared responsibility between school and parents but in reality this is limited as indicated by the Quarterly National Household Survey (2012) and Mac Giolla Phádraig (2003).

Communication between parents and the school was highlighted as a key component of partnership, with most countries ensuring that schools "maintain a flow of information towards home" (OECD, 1997, p.197). This report also identified that within Ireland at that time there was resistance to partnership initiatives from teacher unions and the Church. The report states that "many teachers are concerned that education is deprofessionalised and that their careers are subject to the whims of parents" (OECD, 1997, p.197). A key finding of this report was that more affluent parents become involved in partnerships with schools, while less affluent parents do not, thus highlighting an inequality of representation.

In the OECD's Schooling of Tomorrow Series (2006), a report on Parent and Community "Voice" in schools considered the concept of parent voice and the extent to which parents are regarded as partners in schools. OECD findings indicate that there is a "wide

variation between countries in the extent to which decision making has become a local matter" (OECD, 2006, p. 84). Findings indicated that parents are not always aware of ways to participate in school decisions and that frequently lifestyles may mitigate against participation, while some parents may not be interested in being involved in decision making. "Low parental involvement reinforces negative views from the education side that parents and the community should have only a very limited say in what goes on inside schools" (OECD, 2006, p. 97). While acknowledging that further research is needed in this area, it recommends ensuring that all parents are aware of ways to participate in decision making, finding different ways to consult with parents, making consultation real and not just cosmetic, and being aware that those who do participate do not represent the whole parent body. This report highlights the importance of communication with parents and the trust that can be build. Schools which consider these factors are "more likely to find themselves with greater influence through partnership rather than be overtaken by voices and choice which discard the views of professionals" (OECD, 2006, p. 99).

OECD (2010) Highlights from Education at a Glance re-examined if parents in OECD countries have a say in schooling. This research examined the extent to which parents can determine change in schools. Findings specific to Ireland indicated that Irish parents could become involved in school governance via parent associations and national parent representative groups. Parents can also have specific complaints or appeals dealt with by complaints mechanisms. OECD (2013b) PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) Results 2012 investigated the proportion of parents who participated in school activities in the previous academic year. Principals in 34 OECD countries and 30 OECD partner countries were asked to define the number of parents who participated in specific activities. Table 2.2 shows the average percentage of parents who participated in the listed school activity. These results indicate that parents interact with schools regarding concerns about their child more frequently when initiated by the child's teacher. Self-initiated interaction is less frequent. The percentage of parents involved in parent associations and school government is relatively low, not just within Ireland but across OECD countries and partners.

Table 2.3   *Parent participation in school activities*

School Activity	% OECD Average	% Ireland Average
Discussed their child's progress on the initiative of the teacher	47	28
Discussed their child's progress on their own initiative	38	15
Discussed their child's behaviour on the initiative of the teacher	27	24
Discussed their child's behaviour on their own initiative	23	11
Participated in local school government	11	11
Assisted in fundraising	10	3
Assisted in extra-curricular activities	8	8
Assisted teachers	5	5
Volunteered for physical activities around the school	4	5
Acted as a guest speaker	2	6

(OECD, 2013b)

Principals were also asked to indicate pressure from parents in relation to academic standards. The study revealed that one in three students in Ireland are in schools where principals indicated that they "are pressured by many parents to set very high academic standards and achieve them" (OECD, 2013b, p. 143). Another finding indicated that there is a significantly high correlation between parents' participation in different school activities. Parents who are involved in one activity have a proportionately higher involvement in other activities. A significant finding was that "the level of parents' involvement in school activities seems not to be related to the degree of involvement in discussing their child's behaviour and/or progress with a teacher" (OECD, 2013b, p. 143).

The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), a 2018 survey, again examined parental involvement in school activities. TALIS is an international series of

surveys primarily focused on providing schools with an opportunity to give their perspective on specific issues. The research helps countries identify other countries experiencing similar challenges and offers an aid to policy development. The survey asked school principals to indicate their perception of parents' involvement in the school. Research results indicated that principals confirmed that parents are concerned about the achievement of their child but have less involvement in school activities (OECD, 2020). Data available from recent PISA results (OECD, 2018) show that only 17% of parents participated in local BoM and that 12% volunteered for additional activities in the schools. These figures show the small proportion of parents across OECD countries which participate at school level (OECD, 2020). This indicates that there has been little change in the engagement of parents in school activities in the intervening years. While Ireland did not participate in this particular survey, based on previous figures, it is reasonable to argue that this international trend would also be reflected in Ireland.

2.6 Concluding Thoughts on the Context of Parents in Irish Education

Although the Constitution (1937), Education Act (1998) and EPSEN Act (2004) allude to the value of parents in education, it is difficult to measure if parents are being recognised as partners in education at post-primary school level. Numerous reports since the 1990s recognise the value of partnership with parents (DES Green Paper, 1992; DES White Paper, 1995; Education Act, 1998; EPSEN, 2004; Education Bill, 2019). However, no formal guidelines or standards of best practice have been provided to post-primary schools on how to promote this desired partnership with parents. Lack of governmental directives on developing partnership for post-primary schools has led to a situation where schools do so on an individual ad hoc basis. Thus, parents across post-primary education do not receive a standardised approach to partnership with parents and students; some experience opportunities for partnership while others do not. The lack of current Irish research at post-primary level highlights the need for both research and guidance in this area. OECD reports and findings offer an insight into levels of partnerships in other countries while also providing insight into actions which can promote partnership with parents. School leaders are aware of the benefits of partnership with parents as it is a topic frequently discussed at local and national level via DES reviews and reports, such as the DES Action Plan for Education (2016-2019) and School

Inspection Reports. However, teachers may not have a similar awareness of the benefits of partnership with parents and therefore underestimate its importance. Broderick and Mastrilli (1997) explain that many post-primary teachers do not consider communication or partnership with parents important to student academic success. Lazar and Slostad (1999) reiterate this, indicating that teachers are unprepared about how to invite parents into partnership. "Teachers' fears and apprehensions about parental involvement stem from a fundamental flaw in teacher education. Teachers have not been provided with adequate educational support to invite and maintain partnership with parents" (p. 207).

DES circulars promoted a focus on partnership with parents at primary level with little recognition given to the complexity of developing partnership at post primary level. Primary schools have more opportunities to build partnership with parents due to the young age of the students and the frequency with which parents are at the school. In contrast at post-primary level, students are older, travelling to and from school independently and have upwards of ten teachers. The structures of post-primary education reduce the opportunities for parents and teachers to communicate and engage with each other. Schools vary greatly in their activities with and for parents and have no obligation to fulfil any particular requirements in regard to the concept of parents as partners. If the Irish government is truly committed to the concept of partnership with parents in education, as some of the policies indicate, it is necessary to move forward from the prolonged conversation to an era of action where opportunities and possibilities of partnership are promoted, reviewed and evaluated and specific guidelines are provided to post-primary schools. The new Education Bill (2019), when enacted, will provide schools with guidelines on how they should interact with parents and promote partnership. However, the focus on a complaints procedure rather than actions which can develop and encourage partnership, along with the requirement for every school to design its own charter suggests that yet again rhetoric around partnership has not led to sufficient clarity about how parents can have a successful partnership with post-primary schools. Introduction of the Charter will also require sufficient resources and support to facilitate schools' development of a targeted, appropriate and meaningful approach to partnership with parents which is beneficial to the students. Post-primary schools need clear principles which can guide practice, improve consistency in standards of communication and enhance parental opportunities for participation in partnership. The setting of a national standard for parental engagement at post-primary level could

enhance the educational experience of both students and their parents, so long as adequate consultation occurs with education partners prior to its enactment and the necessary resources are made available to schools.

2.7 Brief Commentary on Parent Support Agencies in Ireland

Over the last 30 years in Ireland there has been development in the area of organisations to promote and support parental involvement in the educational process in post-primary schools. The number of parent associations at post-primary level has increased, although the exact numbers are not public knowledge and not available under freedom of information. The National Parent Council Post-primary (NPCpp) provides a national conduit for parents to express and progress their concerns and visions of education (NPCpp, 2019). There are currently four National Associations which represent parents who choose to educate their children in a specified type of post-primary school:

- CSSPA: Catholic Secondary Schools Parent Associations

- ETBsNPA: Education and Training Board Schools National Parents Association

- COMPASS: Co-operation of Minority Religion and Protestant Parent Associations (Post-Primary).

- PACCS: Parents Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools.

Local parent associations can be affiliated with a central organisation which represents schools with similar educational visions. Each of these organisations is in turn represented on the NPCpp which is active in advocating the voice of parents in post-primary education. It is the individual parent association's decision whether to be affiliated with their central organisation and the NPCpp and to participate at national level in the conversation on education. There is no negative implications for a school's parent association for not affiliating with the NPCpp. Lack of affiliation does not limit the work they can do in a school. However, it could be argued that they are missing an opportunity to have their voice on school issues represented are national level. These agencies purport that schools also have a responsibility to offer genuine opportunities for parents to become involved in school life beyond fundraising. However, the onus is on parents to take the opportunity to participate in their child's school and become involved in schools

via the various activities possible. The NPCpp participate in the Post-Primary Education Forum (PPEF) which is an umbrella group representing school leaders, parents, trade unions and management bodies in Irish post-primary education. "A 2020 Vision for Education" articulates the aims of PPEF and lays out a shared view for the direction of Irish education.

In 2019 The NPCp and NCCA completed a literature review on parental involvement and partnership in primary education in order to examine the features of good partnership. The aim was to provide direction on how schools and parents can work in partnership. The review acknowledged that the type of parental involvement most effective in Irish primary education is not yet clear (O' Toole et al., 2019). It also recognised that partnership is not an easy process, that schools must be proactive and focus on building relationships. Following this, Partnership Schools Ireland was set up and three primary schools began to implement partnership teams in order to promote partnership and support enhanced student outcomes. Post-primary schools are not involved in this scheme.

It is difficult to ascertain the representativeness of the above support agencies. Initially I was reassured by the number of agencies which parents could connect with in support of expressing their views and opinions. However, data related to membership and affiliation is not freely available and lacks transparency. Therefore, I considered if the presence of these support agencies was indeed representative of parent views or just a reflection of limited views, similar to OECD finding in relation to parents who participate in schools. Possibly there could be a correlation between the lack of participation in local parent associations and a lack of participation at national level via agencies such as NPCpp.

2.8 Value of Partnership with Parents

In this section I will briefly discuss the rationale for partnership with parents and current views on developing this partnership. Partnership with parents and parental involvement in school has been of international interest since the 1970s, when teachers and educational researchers acknowledged the benefits of such partnership to students with SEN. These benefits included improved attendance, improved behaviour and increased achievement levels (duFur, 2012; Hornby, 2011). Though articles pertaining to partnership with

parents are frequently directed at the primary and special needs sectors, they also have relevance to post-primary schools. Irish education in the 1970s echoed a similar recognition of the value of parents, with a broadening focus which included recognition of parents' contribution to schools with parents represented on primary school BoMs and the establishment of ET schools.

Sawyer (2015) states that "parental involvement in a child's education is critical for fostering success in school" (p. 172). Epstein also confirms this belief based on evidence from over 25 years of research in schools across the USA:

> No topic about school improvement has created more rhetoric than parental involvement. Everyone says that it is important. In study after study, teachers, parents, administrators, and even students from elementary through high school say that parental involvement benefits students, improves schools, assists teachers and strengthens families. (Epstein, 2016, p. 3)

The value of parental involvement is supported by international research carried out by Hornby (2000), Epstein (2005, 2010b, 2015) and the OECD (1997, 2006, 2010, 2013a), as described. Educational researchers in the area of partnership have indicated that parental involvement increases the effectiveness of education. Studies carried out by Sussell et al. (1996), Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), Chavkin (1993), Epstein (2006a), Epstein et al. (2007) and Epstein and Hutchins (2013) reinforce the belief that parent teacher partnerships are beneficial to both the student and the teacher. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler argued that the benefits of partnership with parents include enhanced positive attitudes to school on the part of students and teachers, improved academic success of students and increased teacher support (1997). A collaborative working relationship between teachers and parents is acknowledged as a key factor in the provision of education (Christenson & Close Conoley, 1992). Tully (1999), Lysaght (1993) and Bleach (2010) suggest that parents and teachers must be partners in more than name to ensure the success of education. Two-way communication is also described as a key factor in enabling parents to support their child. "Communication involves both the giving of information and receiving feedback, it is not finished when the information is just given" (deFur, 2012, p. 63). Olmstead (2013) conducted a study on whether technology facilitated better communication between parents and teachers. This research included surveys and interviews and presents a strong case for keeping parents informed

and using current technologies to do so. Olmstead states that the study revealed schools who embrace current and emerging technologies are better able to keep "parents connected to their child's school" (Olmstead, 2013, p 37).

Mary Sawyer (2015) describes the value of partnership with parents in her article Connecting with Families to Facilitate and Enhance Involvement. She describes the benefits to students with special needs when their parents are involved in school. She too recognises the decline in parent participation with schools but also recognises that the lack of cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity among teachers can hinder communication between schools and parents. "This diversity requires that educators learn to reach out in ways that support a variety of backgrounds and encourage family involvement that is purposeful and respected" (Sawyer, 2015, p. 173). To reach all parents, she suggests that schools must be creative and inclusive in their partnership activities.

Gary Hornby has carried out extensive research into parental involvement with parents. In a particularly interesting study conducted in New Zealand in 2010, he examined which activities related to partnership with parents were used by schools and considered weaknesses in provision for partnership (Hornby & Witte, 2010). The use of partnership activities such as policy formation, collaborating with teachers, enhanced sharing of information and communication, parent education and involving diverse parents were described as effective means to strengthen partnership. Hornby is an advocate of the value of partnership with parents and of how students benefit from this process. Therefore, the study was focused on how schools developed partnership with parents. The study involved 21 secondary schools in both rural and urban areas. School principals were interviewed about partnership with parents in their schools. Findings indicated that "a wide diversity of practice" was found (Hornby & Lafaele, 2010, p504). He noted that one school had a written policy on involving parents in school but that generally there was an ad hoc approach to partnership. Hornby expressed the view that the approach taken to partnership was directly related to the views of the school principal. Another useful observation was that teachers had limited training as regards working with parents. Hornby's key finding here was that "the key to effective parental involvement is probably the willingness of school principals and teachers to do everything they can to actively engage the parents of all students in their children's

education" (Hornby & Lafaele, 2010, p506). This research highlighted the need for strong leadership in planning for partnership.

Todd and Higgins (1998) describe how teachers may erect barriers to partnership as a way of defending their professionalism. Todd and Higgins refer to the division of power between parents and school, with the school as a hierarchical system where teachers blame parents and parents blame teachers for perceived deficits. "Parents and professionals occupy different positions in relation to children" (Todd & Higgins, 1998, p. 228). They found that while parents have a more vested interest than the teacher in their child, the teacher has more control and power over educational decisions. The authors cite flexibility as an essential ingredient for developing partnership, and they encourage teachers to take a less "fixed" view, be less defensive and promote better home school partnerships.

Lazar and Slostad (1999), in their article How to Overcome Obstacles to Parent-Teacher Partnerships, describe such partnership as bringing "a community of adults together to work towards a common goal - helping students succeed" (p. 206). Lazard and Slostad found that student achievement is maximized when schools make partnership with parents a reality. They focus on the perception of teachers that students from poor or minority backgrounds are doing poorly in school because their parents do not do enough to support them. This kind of assumption, they suggest, reflects an opinion that parents from such backgrounds do not value education. The authors refute this assumption and state that evidence indicates that "parents by and large, care very much about the educational needs of their children" (Lazar & Slostad, 1999, p. 207). Rather, it is lack of awareness of the value of partnership with parents and the absence of teacher training in the area that is a problem. Teachers do not have adequate knowledge or skills for developing partnership with parents. It is also acknowledged that partnership in post-primary schools is more difficult to achieve. The distance between home and school becomes more pronounced when students move to post-primary education, parents become less familiar with the curriculum and they do not believe that they can help their child. Sharon deFur has also observed that partnership with parents at post-primary level has received "diminished attention". She suggests that this is due to the focus on developing independent young adults; however, she proposes that "families continue to influence and support their children". Though deFur's focus is mainly on students with

special needs, her suggestions that proactive communication and developing a shared purpose contribute to a positive partnership experience are applicable to all students.

LaBahn argues that the key to successful partnership with parents is "for the principal of the school to be totally committed" (1995, p1). He contends that the goal of partnership with parents is improved student achievement, while recognising that as students get older parents do not become as involved in schools. LaBahn attributes much of this to a school's lack of understanding of non-traditional families. He suggests that lack of education, negative school experiences, embarrassment, and lack of time and resources can make parents feel that they are unwelcome or unimportant. However, LaBahn suggested that support, encouragement and enhanced communication can help parents to feel more connected to a school. Lazar and Slostad (1999) point out that parents are very invested in their child's education and find that there is an increase in academic success when parents are involved in the child's school.

International and Irish research, and Irish policy documents recognise that partnership is of benefit to children's learning and success within school, even if they may not always agree on how to achieve this. It is argued by researchers that a student's progress will be enhanced if parents are consulted in the educational process, especially students with SEN. Parents' knowledge and understanding of their own children are recognised as beneficial to schools. As outlined above, research has demonstrated that parents are critical to children's achievements during the school years, as positive parental attitudes and support affects student success in school. Partnership has been shown to increase positive attitudes towards school and teacher (Sussell et al., 1996; Hornby & Whitte 2010; Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Epstein, 2015). Student behaviour and attitude can improve, as can performance and the school climate due to enhanced partnership activities. Indicators suggest that teacher morale is also enhanced and parental satisfaction is increased when there is effective partnership. School morale, attitudes and educational provision all improve (Sussell et al., 1996). Based on this evidence, a school's partnership with parents can lead to enhanced academic performance and improved communication between parents and children. Disruptive behaviour and poor attendance can be reduced, and the possibility of further education is increased. Parents are described by HSCL coordinators as feeling a sense of accomplishment and having increased expectations for their children due to their participation in organised school

courses and events (HSCL, 2018). "Participation by parents will lead to quality assurance in the education system" (Tully, 1999, p. 91).

Partnership between parents and teachers presupposes a sense of mutual respect and a willingness to learn from each other underpinned by an appreciation of each other's expertise (Armstrong, 1995). However, this may not be reflective of the reality in schools, where parents are often seen as separate to the school (Todd & Higgins, 1998). Larry Ferlazzo (2011) argues that if schools want to engage parents they must lead with their ears, by listening to what parents think about, their dreams and worries. He recommends engaging in conversation with parents; by highlighting that family's narrative, it allows a school to show they understand and value the family which defines the student. Caring interactions with families support the school in its endeavour to provide for the student and helps to build a relationship with parents. This correlates with Epstein's framework for partnership and the six indicators which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Post-primary schools tend to be systems of routine. Most teachers are involved in class teaching, and their interaction with parents is often limited. Exceptions tend to be schools with HSCL coordinators, who work with targeted parents on a daily basis. However, partnership can be seen as very one sided, with the school as the primary partner, as described by Todd and Higgins. Roles may also be misaligned, parents and teachers often seeing themselves as separate groups with different purposes rather than cooperating groups with a common purpose (Broderick & Mastrilli, 1997). When students attend school, teachers are "in loco parentis"; this means that the degree of care and supervision exercised by teachers and schools is the same level of care which a careful parent would exercise for the protection of his/her own children. This suggests a commonality between the roles of parents and teachers. However, frequently parents are only contacted by schools on occasions of disharmony or transition. In my own experience, it is valuable to contact parents before a situation becomes critical, to inform them of issues at the onset. It is imperative to keep parents informed about what is happening regarding their child at regular intervals and regarding key changes in education. It is essential that a school provide current up-to-date information to parents, and schools need to be reactive and responsive to changing or new situations; for example, during Covid-19 there has been an increased need for more communication with parents to ensure everyone in the school community is aware of procedures and feels supported and safe.

The Irish education system has traditionally seen particular parental attitudes as a problem adversely affecting a school's ability to educate their children properly (Hughes et al., 1994; Todd & Higgins, 1998). As a consequence of this belief, teachers may feel that they are continuously fighting against the adverse effects of some students' home environment. Schools viewed parents as having too little or too much interest in their child's progress. Interested parents were often labelled pushy, and disinterested parents were labelled as lazy or uncooperative. Mc Conkey (1985) argues that partnership cannot occur where one partner makes all the decisions. Exclusion of parents from the education process suggests that schools alone can provide all educational requirements. This is not the case; it is widely acknowledged that parents make a valuable contribution to their child's education and greatly enhance achievement and potential (Campbell et al., 2016; Epstein et al., 2007b). Fortunately, a positive shift in attitudes has recognised that all parents have valuable insight, which can enhance the education process (Epstein, 2016; Hornby & Lafaele, 2010; deFur, 2012; You & Richman, 2014).

As alluded to by Hornby (2011) and La Bahn (1995), Epstein (2009, 2016) suggests that all partnership between schools and parents should be purposeful and goal orientated. DeFur, expands this view stating that "in true partnership, each partner has both choice and voice" (2012, p. 64). The attributes of a successful partnership between parents and school are many and varied depending on the individual school, but a planned approach augments the process. Hornby and Witte (2010) found that there was a lack of written policies pertaining to parental involvement, limited strategies to involve diverse parents and a lack of training on parental involvement for teachers. Subsequently, deFur clearly stated that "partnerships require intentional development" (2012, p58). It is evident that planning by leadership for partnership is of great value and can augment the development of appropriate strategies to encourage partnership with parents. As noted by Hornby (2011, p.2) "it is important to not only focus on such activities as fundraising and parent association, but to emphasize other aspects that are part of a true partnership between schools and parents, such as productive parent-teacher meetings and effective two-way communication". When schools engage in planning for partnership with parents, they must consider the activities they prioritise and how these activities support parents with a view to enhancing student outcomes. Making activities relevant and of value to parents will maximise the possibility of engagement. Lazar and Slostad suggest that as well as planning, additional training for teachers in the area of partnership is of benefit and that

enhanced communication by teachers with parents contributes to positive relationship that can serve as a foundation for genuine partnership. This is difficult to implement at post-primary level given that each student has up to 12 different teachers and conversely each teacher has a large number of students.

When considering partnership at post-primary level it is vital to acknowledge that minimal parental involvement is an international phenomenon. "At second level the possibilities of parental involvement are many but seldom realised" (Andrews, 1999, p. 95). OECD investigations on partnership with parents reflect that this is a trend in many countries, with parental involvement declining over time. The OECD report on Parent and Community Voice in School (2006a) considers whether the failure to involve parents in decisions, beyond the practical ones, is a contributing factor that has reinforced parents' negative views on education, thus further reducing involvement. Concluding comments in the report refer to the issue of "cosmetic partnership", which occurs because it has to, in comparison to genuine partnership. "It is about whether the dynamics of education systems are essentially closed and self-determined or instead open to external influence" (OECD, 2006, p. 99). The question then is, are schools themselves creating environments where parents do not become involved in partnership activities because they do not perceive any value in them? Legislative changes such as the Education Act (1998) and DES circulars M27/91 and 24/91 Parents as Partners in Education have recognised the need for more partnership with parents in post-primary schools. However, partnership practices within schools remain diverse and rarely link to goals within the school plan. The new Education Bill (2019) will formally recognise partnership and require post-primary schools in Ireland to engage in specific actions to develop partnership with parents, but this Bill does not address the nonengagement of post-primary parents.

It is evident that progress has been made in the area of partnership in Irish education. Parents are no longer excluded or isolated from their child's education but can be involved at local and national levels. The Education Act, government policy, parent associations and the NPCpp have offered parents the opportunity to become more familiar and involved in education and be part of the decision-making process alongside teachers. At post-primary level it is currently the school's decision as to how partnership with parents will be pursued. Therefore, schools who wish to experience the benefits of partnership must begin to include partnership as part of school planning.

2.9 Chapter Conclusion

Historically, the role of parents in the Irish education system has been uncoordinated and undervalued. The involvement of parents has not been part of a planned and coordinated programme but the result of a number of government policies and unlinked initiatives which involved parents in school life. Pritchard (1981) stated that within Ireland there were no formal structures to enable parental involvement in education. The possibilities of a successful parent teacher partnership were ignored in the past and now schools are attempting to initiate change and formalise partnership, as it is now recognised as a key aspect of the education process. DEIS schools and HSCL schemes are an example of how we can begin to include parents in school life. Byrne and Smyth (2010) provided valuable insight into partnership with parents in an Irish context. However, it is now ten years later, and little has changed for Irish post-primary schools in regard to partnership with parents. The rhetoric on partnership continues and the areas indicated by Byrne and Smyth as key to partnership with parents are still in development at policy level. Schools are currently individually responsible for deciding on what constitutes good communication with parents and how to engage in partnership with parents.

The literature indicates that the development of planned professional practice in relation to partnership with parents is the key to enhancing educational partnership between parents and teachers. Planned development of partnership would allow parents to have realistic expectations of schools and offer positive opportunities for parental involvement and participation in schools (INTO, 1997; PPEF, 2013). The OECD (2006) report indicated that a reduction in parent participation could be due to the closed dynamics of education systems which do not incorporate parental opinions. As mentioned earlier, deFur (2012) argues that parents need "voice and choice." Post-primary schools need to hear the voice of parents and respond to their ideas and concerns. You and Richman sum up the need for cooperation between schools and parents succinctly: "it's about building a culture at every school where parents and family members feel welcomed, respected and appreciated – a culture where information is freely shared and input is sought and genuinely considered" (2014, p. 13).

The concept of parents having representation on managerial bodies of schools was a growing concept in the 1970s and 1980s. Today parents are becoming active in education through a variety of organisations and associations. The new Education Bill will enshrine

parental rights as regards their role in schools and set out guiding principles for schools in relation to how they engage with parents. It is evident from an examination of the Irish setting that the concept of partnership with parents has changed in Ireland and become a positive aspiration. A greater understanding now exists of the benefits such a partnership provides to both students and schools. There have been advances in educational research and writings, as described, and the introduction of pertinent legislation has also increased the profile of effective partnership between parents and school. It is evident that opinion has evolved to recognise the contribution parents make to education at both primary and post-primary level.

As part of my research, I decided to utilise a specific framework as an indicator of partnership and a tool for evaluating partnership activities, if any, occurring in the participating schools. This allowed me to gather information in a systematic way to establish what actions were being taken to promote partnership within the case study schools and the response to them.   Possible frameworks are now discussed in Chapter 3, with particular focus on the chosen framework.

Chapter 3 Literature Review Part 2. Models of Parental Involvement

3.1   Introduction to Models of Parental Involvement

An extensive amount of research, literature and discussion has taken place, both nationally and internationally, on what parental involvement and partnership with parents is and the variety of methods for promoting school relationships with parents. Research in the area of models of parental involvement with parents has been led by Cunningham and Davis (1985), Hornby (1989, 2011), Swap (1993), Conaty (2002) and Epstein (1986, 2016), and will be discussed in this chapter. Findings from their research show that schools have many opportunities to involve parents in a variety of ways. As my research is focused on developing partnership with parents, I considered the prevailing models of parental involvement in order to select one which would complement my research and act as a framework for my research methodology. This chapter will detail my chosen model, Epstein's framework for partnership and my reasons for choosing it. Table 3.1 provides a summary of content discussed in this literature chapter.

Table 3.1   *Summary of Literature Reviewed in Chapter 3*

Literature Area	Content Summary/Overview	Evidenced in
Models of parental involvement	There are six models of parental involvement. The partnership model of parental involvement is the most relevant to this research.	Hornby, 2011; Swap, 1993; Cunningham & Davis, 1985;
Hornby's Partnership Model	Hornby's model of partnership was developed in primary and special needs settings. It places onus on teachers to develop partnership without explaining how post-primary teachers can implement the model, considering the number of students they teach.	Hornby, 1989, 2000,2011.
Epstein's Partnership Model	Epstein's model of partnership connects partnership with parents to planning for student outcomes. It provides a framework for developing partnership based on planning and six indicators of partnership.	Epstein, 1986, 1993, 2009, 2013
HSCL Partnership Model	DEIS schools in Ireland have a HSCL programme which promotes partnership with parents. A designated teacher is appointed as HSCL co-ordinator.	DES, 2006
In-depth view of Epstein's Framework for partnership	Epstein's partnership framework was chosen as the theoretical framework and structure for this research due to its flexible consideration of types of partnership activities.	Epstein, 1986, 1993, 2009, 2013.

Literature Area	Content Summary/Overview	Evidenced in
	Epstein's spheres of influence are equally applicable in a post-primary setting as primary. Students are at the centre of Epstein's framework and the six indicators offer parents a wider range of opportunities to engage in partnership with post-primary schools.	Epstein & Associates, 2009; 2018.

3.2   Models of Parental Involvement with Parents

Six models of parental involvement have been identified as the most frequently occurring in incidences of school involvement with parents (Hornby, 2011). These are the protective model, the expert model, the curriculum enriched model, the transmission model, the consumer model and the partnership model.

1. The Protective Model, as described by Swap (1993), aims to segregate the roles and functions of schools and parents and thus avoid any fracas. This is not a suitable model for consideration in this research as within this model, partnership with parents is not a priority and is seen as unnecessary.

2.   The Expert Model, as the name suggests, places teachers as the experts on the students and does not place value on parents' input or opinions on their child's education. The role of parents is reduced to that of receiver of information without recognising how much parents know about their own child. This model can result in parents having little confidence in their own ability to support their child's education, and in teachers as experts missing out on valuable sources of information (Cunningham & Davis, 1985).

3. The Transmission Model focuses on parents as a support to the targets set by the school. Parents are utilised as a resource; they are provided with some of the teacher's expertise in order to participate in a specific programme, e.g. paired reading, maths eyes etc. The teacher remains the expert, but parents are trained in a specific skill which the teacher deems necessary (Swap, 1993). This model affords parents some consideration but does not allow for parents to have any role other than as a "resource" who has been provided with a specific skill to support their child.

4. **The Curriculum Enriched Model** considers parents' contribution very valuable in designing what is taught in a school. This model incorporates parents' views, culture and expertise into the design of curricula. This model can be considered threatening by teachers and schools due to the amount of control which parents have over what is taught (Swap, 1993).

5. **The Consumer Model,** as described by Cunningham and Davis (1985), regards parents as consumers of education. Schools act as the professional, informing parents and providing information and choices. The parents make consumer decisions which the schools then defer to. This model does not take into consideration the value of the professional opinion and guidance which educators can offer. It is similar to the expert model but with parents now as the expert making all decisions.

6. **The Partnership Model** is described by Hornby (2011) and Hornby and Blackwell (2018). Hornby describes it as "the most appropriate model for relationships between professionals working in education and parents" (Hornby, 2011, p. 29). Teachers are considered expert professionals in education and parents are the experts on their child. The sharing of expertise and information becomes a partnership between schools and parents. Both teachers and parents bring different qualities and strengths to this partnership which are of benefit to the students.

Considering the six models of parental involvement, the partnership model is the only model which genuinely reflects my experience of education, students and parents. The literature indicates that there are many examples of partnership models; those of particular interest are the Hornby, Epstein and the HSCL models, as they are highly regarded in the literature and currently utilised in schools. These three models are of particular interest to me as a researcher, as the HSCL model is situated in Ireland, Epstein's framework is highly regarded in the USA and I am familiar with Garry Hornby's model as I began my teaching career supporting students with SEN. Hornby was a frequent reference in my initial teacher education and in postgraduate courses and continuous professional development during the 1990s. Over the course of this chapter, these three models of partnership will be considered and one specific model chosen to act as a framework for structuring this research. The chosen framework will then be discussed in greater depth.

3.3 Partnership Model 1: Garry Hornby's Model of Parental Involvement

Hornby contends that each of the six key models (the protective, expert, transmission, curriculum enriched, consumer and partnership models) as described above can occur in schools at various times. The transmission model is recognised as essential to many parental involvement projects (e.g. paired maths or paired reading home/school schemes), and the expert model is recognisable in situations where recommendations of a course of action are required. However, he indicates that the partnership model is the most appropriate for positive relationships between home and school (Hornby, 2011).

Hornby's theoretical model of effective parental involvement drew from existing models of parental involvement and was devised for teachers of students with SEN. Hornby states that his theoretical model for partnership was developed "by combining and adapting existing models and by gaining feedback from numerous groups of parents, teachers and other professionals who work in schools" (Hornby, 2011, p. 32). Hornby states that he adapted models by Kroth (1985), Lombana (1983) and Wolfendale (1992) to develop what he considered to be a comprehensive model. Kroth's model focused on philosophy, competencies and skills for teachers in order to develop communication with parents. Lombana maintained that a lack of structured planning for parental involvement was a major hindrance to the process. Hornby developed a theoretical model which provided "teachers with a framework on which to base overall plans for the participation of parents" (1989, p. 161). The model builds upon the premise that parents and teachers have a shared responsibility (Wolfendale, 1992) while acknowledging the challenges and struggles parents can face (Bastiani, 1989). Hornby has used this model for the past 28 years in his work in teacher education and as a psychologist. However, Hornby does not explain what adaptations were made to make the model applicable to all parents. Hornby maintains that "the model proposed addresses parents' needs and their potential contribution and suggests competencies needed by teachers to ensure successful implementation" (Hornby, 2011, p. 42). Hornby's model is shown in Figure 3.1. It consists of two pyramids which:

> demonstrate visually the different levels of need and strengths of parents. The
> model suggests while all parents will have some needs and some strengths which
> can be drawn upon, professionals will need to spend more time and expertise on

those few parents who have intense need for guidance or who will make extensive contribution. (Hornby, 1989, p. 161)

Figure 3.1: Hornby's Model of parental involvement

PARENT TIME

PARENTAL CONTRIBUTIONS

PARENT EXPERTISE

SOME

POLICY
E.g. PTA members, school governors, parent support / advocacy groups

MANY

RESOURCE
E.g. classroom aides, fundraising, supporting other parents

MOST

COLLABORATION
E.g. home-school reading, maths & behaviour programs

ALL

INFORMATION
E.g. children's strengths, weaknesses, likes, dislikes, medical details

ALL

COMMUNICATION
E.g. handbooks, newsletters, telephone contacts, homework diaries

MOST

LIAISON
E.g. home visits, parent-teacher meetings

MANY

EDUCATION
E.g. parent workshops

SOME

SUPPORT
E.g. counselling, support groups

TEACHER EXPERTISE

TEACHER TIME

PARENTAL NEEDS

Adapted from Hornby, 2000, p. 23.

This visual representation of needs shows the different levels of time and experience required by both teachers and parents to engage successfully in partnership. This could be described as a continuum, with all parents having some needs, while some parents have many needs (Hornby, 2011). Hornby states that each of the contributions which parents can make have a positive effect on the school community and enhance parental involvement. Enabling parents to contribute in these ways allows the parent teacher partnership to flourish (Hornby, 1989). Hornby argues that schools and teachers should be aware of the valuable contribution parents can make and facilitate this contribution as effectively as possible by offering opportunities for parents to be involved in their child's school and thus develop a real partnership.

Hornby's model conveys that schools should address the needs of the parents and make every effort to alleviate concerns in these areas. Good communication systems and support strategies are identified as helping to address the needs experienced by parents and to deal effectively with them. Research by Christenson and Close Conoley (1992), Hornby (2011) and Epstein (2016) has indicated that good communication is key to successful partnership with parents, and the focus on communication in this model reflects good practice. Each component of the model suggests that a variety of skills and knowledge is required by teachers in order to effectively participate in partnership with parents. However, teachers are given responsibility for developing these skills in order to fulfil their side of the partnership process (Hornby, 2000). Hornby originally described this model as "a model for parent participation in special education" (Hornby, 1989, p. 161). In 2011, "it was subsequently realised that with slight adaptations, it was equally applicable to all parents and teachers" (Hornby, 2011, p. 32). What these slight adaptations are is not articulated in the literature. There is a substantial difference between post-primary schools and primary or indeed special education schools, but this is not referred to within the model. However, the value of this model is recognisable in the detailed consideration given to communication and support of parents.

3.3.1 Concluding Thoughts on Hornby's Model

In my opinion, this model of partnership with parents places the onus on schools and teachers without resources. It also does not account for the quantity of students a teacher has at post-primary level in comparison to a teacher in primary or special education. In reality, it is unlikely that post-primary teachers in Ireland would have had significant teacher training in the area of partnership with parents and would require substantial CPD to be able to implement such a model. CPD alone would not equip teachers and school management with the skills and resources necessary. CPD does not address issues such as time, teaching allocations, how collaboration would occur or how home visits would be facilitated within non-DEIS schools. The application of this model to all parents in a school community seems very ambitious and more manageable at primary level rather than post-primary.

This model appears to focus on communication methods and parents as resources. It does not specify goals for partnership; instead, it refers to many methods of supporting and communicating with parents. As research has shown that partnership with specific

purpose is more successful, it is notable that Hornby does not refer to this gap in his model. While improved communication to address the needs of parents is worthwhile, current research by Todd and Higgins (1998), Epstein and Associates (2009) and the OECD Report (2006) indicate that student outcomes should be the main focus of partnership activities. When parental activities are linked with student goals, the results (attendance, achievement, progression) for students are significantly improved. Hornby's model focuses mainly on parents, as one would expect in a partnership model for schools and parents; however, the link to student outcome or school goals is not clearly presented. Hornby's model offers a very clear way of developing better communication with parents, and it also provides a very useful Parent Involvement Interview Schedule (Appendix 1) which can be used to assess a school's current position as regards partnership with parents (Hornby, 2011).

This model certainly has merit inasmuch as it articulates so many of the actions recommended to schools in the literature, and I have strongly considered it as a framework for my research. However, improving students' outcomes is the basic work of a post-primary school. I believe that students should be at the centre of teaching and learning activities; everything we do in school should be for the benefit of the pupils; therefore, this model has a missing component for me. It does not include how the partnership is for the benefit of the student, and it does not refer to any pre-planning of partnership related to student outcomes. Hornby's model suggests that teachers have a close collaboration with parents which does not acknowledge the challenges post-primary teachers would face with this model. This model appears more suitable for primary level, where the class teacher has regular contact with parents and where parent associations and parent groups are involved in school life. The model does not acknowledge the difficulties which can occur at post-primary level. No recognition is given to the international phenomenon of reduced parental involvement at post-primary level or how to address it.

3.4. Partnership Model 2: Joyce Epstein's Framework for Partnership

Joyce L. Epstein is the director of the Centre on School, Family and Community Partnership and the NNPS (National Network of Partnership Schools) in Johns Hopkins University, USA. Epstein has been involved in research and theory development in the area of partnership with parents for over 30 years. From 1980 to 1981, Epstein carried

out an investigation into how schools and teachers involved parents, how students understood and reacted to partnership with their families and teachers, and how student achievement was affected by this partnership. This study examined the teaching practices and professional attitudes of 3,700 teachers and 1,269 parents in over 600 schools in 16 districts of Maryland. School principals were also surveyed on parent involvement programmes. Epstein states that results of this research indicated that educators had a positive view to partnership with parents, recognising that "home could be an important contributor towards achieving goals" (Epstein, 2016, p. 99). According to 84% of teachers surveyed during this research, the level of support at home increases if parents spend time in school.

According to Epstein, this initial study indicated that existing theories on partnership, such as the separation theory (protective model) on school and family connections, did not address what was happening in schools. Further research was conducted in 1987 in more elementary and middle schools. This second phase of research was a collaboration with Baltimore City Public Schools and examined "how involvement changed across grades, by teachers of different subjects, for parents from various racial and cultural groups, and in schools that are guided to systematically organize their programs of partnership with families and communities" (Epstein, 2016, p. 91). This research examined the theory of overlapping spheres of influence and considered the main types of parental involvement in schools. The study involved 171 teachers in eight inner-city schools over three years. When they examined attitudes and goals of parents and teachers, "more similarities exist than many realize" (Epstein, 2016, p. 148). Epstein suggests that this indication of shared goals offers an opportunity to build and develop school family partnership. This research continued in 1991 in high schools, and argued that connecting partnership with parents to student goals benefits all partnership activities, emphasising the "important role students play in school, family and community partnership" (Epstein, 2016, p. 91). The transferability of these research findings must be considered in an Irish context. Baltimore, Maryland, is a multicultural area, and a variety of socio-economic groups attend within its school districts. Though Irish schools are experiencing increased cultural diversity and there is representation from a variety of socio-economic groups in many schools, it is difficult to ascertain the value of Epstein's framework at post-primary level. There is little research available which could shed light on the appropriateness of Epstein's framework in an Irish context. However, the large

numbers of schools, parents and teachers involved in the research in the USA suggests that findings could be applicable to other countries, and possibly to Irish schools with their current diversity.

Epstein describes how these initial research inquiries led to further research and development of theories and a model of partnership which now have practical application in many schools in the USA. The membership of NNPS varies each year. Since its establishment in 1996, about 5,000 schools have had membership of the programme and participated in partnership activities and development programmes. NNPS partners with 15 school districts, five states, and 33 organizations/universities (NNPS, 2020). Epstein's model of partnership purports to enable school leaders to develop goal-oriented programmes of family involvement and community connections. Schools in the USA can access additional funding if they have a commitment to partnership with parents which meet NCLB requirements for parent involvement. Epstein and the NNPS are involved in planning, supporting and researching partnership with parents at a national level in the USA. Recognition of this programme for partnership at state level nationally and internationally, adds weight to the academic discussion of the value of this model of partnership in Irish schools. Epstein's model is based upon the results of 30 years of research in elementary, middle and high schools in the USA. The model is supported by a framework to help school management design purposeful comprehensive programmes of partnership with parents (Epstein, 2006, 2007). Epstein and Sheldon (2006) identify six principles to facilitate the organisation of effective partnership programmes (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 **Epstein's** *Principles of Improved Partnership*

Principles	
Principle 1	School, family and community partnership is a better term than parental involvement.
Principle 2	School, family and community partnership is a multidimensional concept.
Principle 3	A program of school, family and community partnership is an essential component of school and classroom organisation.
Principle 4	Programs of school, family and community partnership must focus on student learning and development.
Principle 5	Programs of school, family and community partnership require multilevel leadership.

Principles	
Principle 6	All programs of school, family and community partnership are about equity.

Adapted from Epstein and Associates, (2009)

Table 3.1 above displays the basic principles which Epstein and Sheldon (2006, 2019) have developed as central to effective partnership in schools. Each of these principles outlines a key requirement for successful partnership with parents as presented within this framework. These six principles represent a change in how partnership is perceived; they offer a wider understanding of what partnership is and how it should be developed in schools. They move partnership from fundraising and support of school activities to planned actions. These principles broaden the concept of partnership to include others in the community who share responsibility for student learning and can generate a culture of partnership which is goal orientated. Epstein highlights how partnership linked to the goals of student learning and development is another essential ingredient for successful partnership within this model. Another key element of this framework is that partnership is to be regularly reviewed and evaluated and new plans for engaging more parents put into operation. "These and other changes are needed to turn activities that were accidental and peripheral to school improvement into well-planned and intentional programs that are central to school improvement and that contribute to student success" (Epstein & Associates, 2009, p. 2).

Epstein contends that changing the language, from involvement to partnership, conveys a sense of responsibility to all partners and recognises that schools and families are working together for the benefit of students. Epstein suggests that viewing partnership as an essential aspect of school organisation and linking it to student outcomes ensure that partnership is an integral aspect of school planning. This aspect of the framework is very pertinent to the Irish context, as school planning is a key component of curricular planning and the school self-evaluation process. Alongside the six principles, Epstein's framework incorporates six types of involvement, a widening of what is considered being involved in school.

Becker and Epstein (1982), Epstein (1986) and Dauber and Epstein (1993) have found that schools which embrace the aforementioned principles and develop the six types of involvement see a positive impact on student performance and learning. Epstein's research describes these principles (Table 3.1) and types of involvement (Table 3.2) as

the cornerstones of polices, programmes and practices in schools wishing to develop partnership (Epstein, 2013).

Table 3.2   *Epstein's Framework of 6 Types of Involvement*

Types of Involvement		
Type 1	**Parenting**	Assist families with parenting skills and setting home conditions to support children as students. Also, assist schools to better understand families.
Type 2	**Communicating**	Conduct effective communications from school to home and from home to school about school programmes and student progress.
Type 3	**Volunteering**	Organise volunteering and audiences to support the school and students. Provide volunteers with opportunities in various locations and at various times.
Type 4	**Learning at home**	Involve families with their children's homework and other curriculum related activities and decisions.
Type 5	**Decision Making**	Include families as participants in school decisions and develop parent leaders and representatives.
Type 6	**Collaborating with the Community**	Coordinate resources and services from the community for families, students and the school and provide services to the community.

Adapted from Epstein 2009

3.4.1 Concluding Thoughts on Epstein's Framework

This model of partnership is of great interest. The connection drawn between partnership with parents and student outcomes gives the actions of parents and schools a common purpose. It provides schools with clear intentions regarding how they include parents in the school; it also enables parents to understand the impact of their partnership with the school on their own child. How effective the process is in an Irish context remains to be seen. Epstein's partnership framework is based around purposeful plans with targets, which extends from the school and family to include the community. Epstein describes how schools must initially set their goals for students and have clearly defined reasons for partnership with parents. Only then can schools identify the practices within the framework which will support the achievement of these goals. This would be a change of practice for Irish post-primary schools where parents generally do some fundraising and help out at events.

It is apparent that some of Epstein's types of involvement come more naturally in a primary school setting than a post-primary one. As discussed in Chapter 2, an internationally recognised trend for parents to have reduced contact with post-primary schools makes the possibility of volunteering and decision making more difficult (OECD, 2006, 2013a). Irish schools with HSCL coordinators can design and deliver specific programmes to encourage parents to become involved, but other schools do not have this facility and would be relying on teachers, year heads and principals to drive these forms of partnership. The educational structures in the USA are significantly different to Ireland but many aspects of Epstein's model have merit. One worrying aspect of Epstein's research, however, is the lack of acknowledgement of any parents who failed to be positively affected by the partnership programmes in the research schools. Also, many of the research articles are 10 to 20 years old and newer evidence is limited to small school-based research by NNPS partners. More recent research would add greater context given how the world and education have changed in the last 20 years. Another weakness is that no reference is made to any other models of partnership and their possible application; other frameworks are not considered or discussed as feasible alternatives to this approach. In the aforementioned research, details are limited and give no insight into the research approach and methodologies used. Despite these limitations, it must be acknowledged that Epstein has become a renowned expert on partnership internationally. Her framework has been used in thousands of schools in the USA. Many of Epstein's structures and activities for building a partnership framework have application to an Irish context, and the underlying connection to student outcomes ties in well with current Irish educational policy. All of these factors make this model of partnership worth considering as a research framework.

3.5 Partnership Model 3: HSCL (Home School Community Liaison) Model Irish DEIS Schools

Following a 1984 review of The Disadvantaged Area Scheme, the DES established the HSCL Scheme. The vision of the HSCL scheme is developing partnership.

> The underlying policy of the HSCL scheme is one that seeks to promote partnership between parents and teachers. The purpose of this partnership is to enhance pupils' learning opportunities and to promote their retention in the

education system. In addition, the HSCL Scheme places great emphasis on collaboration with the local community. (DES, 2006a, p8).

The HSCL scheme is managed and coordinated by a national leadership team within the Senior Management Team of the Educational Welfare Services of TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency. The HSCL scheme was a significant aspect of the DEIS action plan for inclusion. The central focus of DEIS is to combat educational disadvantage by a series of strategies and interventions. Educational disadvantage is defined in the Education Act 1998 as "the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools" (DES, 1998, p. 32). Supports for DEIS designated schools include the HSCL scheme, the SCP, additional funding, reduced pupil teacher ratio, literacy and numeracy supports, school planning supports, transfer programmes from primary to secondary school, and enhanced access to third level via HEAR (Higher Education Access Route).

The work of HSCL coordinators focuses on improving student attendance, educational progression, retention and attainment via interaction with parents. While HSCL coordinators implement some school wide programmes, they generally work with targeted parents whose children require additional supports. Both in and out of school activities and initiatives are developed at local level to support parents in improving the educational opportunities of their children. As of 2021, this policy tool for inclusion is still in operation, with 400 HSCL coordinators working in 528 urban primary and post-primary schools across Ireland (Tusla, 2019; DES, 2019, HSCL, 2021). The HSCL coordinators are teachers from the DEIS schools and are regarded as agents of change in schools. They work alongside SCP coordinators and Education Welfare Officers. Schools involved in the HSCL scheme must emphasise and support parental involvement in their three-year DEIS plan, an obligatory planning requirement for all DEIS schools. This is done by designing and implementing various initiatives and interventions which promote parental involvement in education, improved literacy and numeracy support and the positive engagement of parents in schools. HSCL coordinators also play a critical role in supporting the development, implementation, evaluation and review of the school's DEIS Action Plan, particularly through parental participation in education and relevant initiatives and interventions. An essential aspect of the DEIS planning process is "the involvement of students, parents, local communities and agencies operating at local level" (Tusla, 2019, p. 11). Each school is required to have

an Action Plan which outlines the planned improvements in attendance, retention, transitions, literacy, numeracy, partnership with parents and others, wellbeing, and examination attainment. In conjunction with the DEIS Action Plan, the HSCL coordinator must have an annual plan which reflects the school's priority areas, as required by DEIS. The planning documents include:

- HSCL Annual Planning Blank Logic Model (Appendix 2)
- HSCL Monthly Record Sheet (Appendix 3)
- HSCL Weekly Planning and Reporting template (Appendix 4)

These documents reflect the commitment to partnership with parents, record the actions the school has engaged in with parents and inform the review and assessment process of HSCL targets each year.

A number of reviews of DEIS and the HSCL scheme have been carried out by the Educational Research Centre (ERC), including Ryan (1994, 1999), Archer and Shortt (2003) and Weir and Archer (2011) and Weir et al. (2018). Ryan (1999) found that the HSCL scheme had a number of positive effects, including improvements in behaviour, school attendance, scholastic achievement and positive attitudes to teachers and school. Ryan (1994, 1999) also demonstrated the positive effects of the HSCL scheme by illustrating that the main way parents were involved in schools was attending courses or activities related to parenting and children's education. Weir et al. (2018) noted that home visits were an essential component of the scheme, allowing for "contact with parents who otherwise have little or no contact with the school" (p. 12). Weir et al. (2018) also demonstrated an increased positive attitude of teachers towards parents due to the HSCL scheme. Home visitation to parents is seen as central to the role of a HSCL coordinator, with 33% of their work time spent on home visitation. The scheme is targeted at marginalised families and includes courses for parents which are designed to aid parents in supporting their child's learning (DES, 2006a). Targets are set with parents which relate to improving the educational outcomes for students in the schools. This model is not without its challenges; the HSCL review by Weir et al. (2018) indicates that the international trend of reduced parental involvement at post-primary level is evident in Irish DEIS post-primary schools, with HSCL coordinators at primary level having a higher percentage of parent participants than their counterpart in post-primary. Figures also indicate that parent participation in policy development at both primary and post-primary level has fallen.

Table 3.3: *Percentages of HSCL Coordinators who indicated parents' involvement in school policies*

Policies	Percentages in 2000-2001	Percentages in 2016-2017
Anti-bullying	72.0	35.2
Enrolment	67.8	18.1
Behaviour/discipline	64.2	37.1
School Uniform	58.0	36.4

Weir et al., 2018

Both the ERC and Department Inspectorate Reports corroborated that HSCL schools are very conscious of the importance of positive school-parental linkages. At post-primary level, the Department's Inspectorate Evaluation Report on DEIS observes the "positive engagement by schools, in implementing interventions to improve partnership with parents and the community" (TUSLA, 2019, p. 5). This indicates that Dr Concepta Conaty's statement on the advantageous possibilities of the HSCL scheme could with continued work become a reality: "when teachers and parents come into a full appreciation of the limits and possibilities of one another's role, the ensuing mutual understanding and trust could lead to massive growth in Irish education" (DES, 2006a, p. 5).

3.5.1 Concluding Thoughts on the HSCL Scheme

The HSCL scheme is the only DES sanctioned partnership with parents programme run by post-primary schools in Ireland. Since its introduction in 1990 the programme has been reviewed, and results show the benefits experienced by marginalised students whose parents and school are part of the scheme. In my research, I have considered the HSCL approach as a partnership model. I have also contemplated whether the HSCL scheme has a wider application for partnership with parents beyond DEIS schools. On examination of the vision of HSCL and recent reviews, it is clearly a scheme which seeks to promote partnership between school, teachers and parents. This partnership enhances learning opportunities for students and encourages the attendance and retention of students in post-primary schools with DEIS designation. Involvement with local community services is a key aspect of the scheme, with HSCL coordinators from different schools in the same area working as a "cluster", cooperating together in the interests of

all the students and parents in the community. "The HSCL scheme is the pioneer in involving the school in the life of the community and involving the community and its agencies in the life of the school" (DES, 2006a, p. 8). It is also unique in how it fosters co-operation between primary schools, post-primary schools and outside agencies in an area.

When considering the involvement of parents in post-primary schools, the HSCL scheme offers DEIS schools the opportunity to engage more fully with parents, as the role of the HSCL coordinator is designed to support partnership with parents. The value of having a designated teacher for this purpose cannot be overstated in a climate where school personnel are increasingly busy. Schools external to the DEIS category do not have a similar opportunity, and finite teaching allocations do not allow for a teacher to be reassigned from the classroom to working with parents. Class tutors, year heads and school management meet with parents on an "as needed basis", with only one formal PTM with parents planned on a yearly basis. Opportunities for engaging with parents are therefore limited to various school events, such as open evenings; shows or musical nights; graduations and PTMs. Frequently, class teachers will only have met with parents when a particular issue or problem arises, as there are few other opportunities to do so. Therefore, promoting partnership with parents in non DEIS schools falls back on school management and teachers.

3.6 Conclusion on Models of Partnership

This chapter began by considering six models of parental involvement with parents, of which only the partnership model matched my experiences and research focus. This model can be implemented by utilising different approaches, three of which I critically examined. Schools involved in the HSCL scheme have a responsibility to actively promote partnership between parents and teachers. "The purpose of this partnership is to enhance pupils' learning opportunities and to promote their retention in the education system" (DES, 2006a, p. 8). However, Irish schools have no legal requirement to involve parents. Recommendations in the Education Act and Circular M27/91 only encourage the involvement of parents in post-primary schools. Also, there are no evaluation criteria for assessing if partnership is occurring within post-primary schools.

As previously described, the need for schools to develop a positive partnership with parents is widely accepted as good educational practice (Pushor, 2010). Research has shown that outcomes for students are greatly improved when parental involvement occurs (Jeynes, 2007). When parents' rights are recognised in legislation, as they are in the Irish Constitution and the Education Act 1998, partnership with parents becomes an aspect of social justice which should be enacted in schools (Auerbach, 2012). For the purpose of this research, I required a framework which would enable me to evaluate the existing partnership programme in a post-primary school. This led me back to Epstein, who describes a framework which schools can utilise to promote positive partnership linked with school goals. I selected Epstein's framework because it is a model which has clear principles and strategies that are linked to student outcomes. There are similarities to the HSCL scheme, of which I have experience. The model is very clear about practices and activities which makes it easy to recognise whether partnership is occurring or not. Furthermore, extensive research carried out within the USA using Epstein's framework suggested that it is applicable in a post-primary setting. As a researcher, I am aware that research carried out in the USA may or may not be suitable for the Irish environment. Our cultures are quite different, and funding in education, especially in relation to partnership with parents, is vastly different. However, as a framework with a broad understanding of what partnership with parents is and criteria for assessment of partnership, Epstein's framework offered a suitable tool for examining and analysing partnership in the participating schools. This research will use Epstein's framework to evaluate if partnership is evident in the case study schools and whether the model is applicable in its current form in an Irish context. I will now provide an in-depth view of Epstein's framework for partnership.

3.7 In-depth View of Epstein's Framework of Partnership

As described briefly in section 3.4, Epstein has been involved in research and theory development in the area of partnership with parents since the early 1980s. Epstein's school, family community partnership model is purported to be a persuasive model with international recognition which redefines the relationship between school, families and communities. The framework is described as a tool to help school management design purposeful, comprehensive programmes of partnership with parents (Epstein, 2006a,

2007). I will consider how the Irish situation is supported by Epstein's framework by examining how the types of involvement relate to the case study schools.

3.7.1 Background to Epstein's Framework for Partnership

Epstein states that the model and its framework can be used in a wide variety of schools to increase involvement and improve student outcomes. With over 5,000 schools in the USA having used this model, this is an acceptable claim, based on USA findings. The work carried out by Epstein and NNPS is based upon the goal of enhancing family and community involvement in education. The stated aims of NNPS are to increase knowledge of new concepts and strategies; use research results to develop tools and materials that will improve policy and practice; provide professional development conferences and workshops; share best practices for parental involvement and community connections; and recognise excellent partnership programmes at the school, district, organization, and state levels. Current membership of NNPS is over 600 schools within 60 districts, with 30 organisations and 12 state departments of education. These schools and educational organisations actively participate in NNPS activities, which include school-based research and Action Teams for Partnership (ATPs) for the purpose of strengthening partnership programmes within schools. NNPS provides reference materials and resources for schools to use, along with a handbook and website access to a bank of activities related to the identified areas of partnership. Membership of NNPS is maintained at a low level in order to facilitate training, communication, recognition and evaluations services to members (Type 2, 2016). Recent changes to the framework include an extension of the professional development supports provided to members including leadership institutes, customised workshops on site and Type 2 Blog, a quarterly communication related to good partnership practice.

Within the USA, a section of the NCLB Act provides schools with access to Title 1 funding to support parental involvement. Title 1 funding use is determined by each school/district, but parent involvement is one of the recommended areas. NNPS guides district leaders to help its schools develop goal-oriented programmes of family involvement and community connections to meet Title 1 requirements for parent involvement. In addition, NNPS assists state departments of education and organisations to develop policies and take actions that will support districts and schools in strengthening their partnership programmes. Researchers and facilitators at the Centre on School,

Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University work with the members of NNPS to study the nature and results of parental involvement.

3.7.2 Development of Theory

In 1981 Epstein began basic research and theory development in parental involvement. From 1987, eight years of field studies were carried out in elementary, middle and high schools to consider theories and practice around partnership. Epstein found that theories related to the separate and sequential responsibilities of school and family did not explain the data or findings that research was producing. Epstein stated that three views on school and family interactions are evident in research. These are described as separate, shared and sequential responsibilities. Weber (1947) alluded to the separation of families and schools as there was an incompatibility of views, with parents and schools having quite different goals. He stated that schools and parents were independent entities which adhered to a hierarchical power. Weber stated that people at greater levels of stratification have the authority to give direction to those at lower levels of stratification and this can lead to conflict, so the separation of school and family was of benefit to the school (Weber, 1947). The shared responsibilities view emphasises the co-operation between family and school. Education and socialisation are viewed as a shared responsibility with interrelated behaviours where both family and school need to work together (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The sequential responsibilities view maintains that attitudes toward education and learning are rooted during key stages of early development and that the early years are critical to later success (Epstein, 1986).

Epstein describes how these three views on school and family interaction did not consider how school and family influence each other; how history, development patterns and change are not considered (Epstein, 1986). Epstein claims her research outlines a number of changes which need to be incorporated in school family theory. The increase in mothers attending college, development in early education of children, changing family structures and federal funding and laws requiring parental involvement have all played a role in changing how school family theory should be considered. Epstein concluded that a theory for partnership between school and family must recognise these influences (Epstein, 1986). The theory behind Epstein's partnership framework is based upon how social organisations associate with each other and the evidence which was generated by the initial research carried out from 1981 to 1987. Epstein argued that overlapping

spheres of influence form the basis for the framework for partnership. An overlapping sphere of influence is where parents and schools recognise the benefit of working together towards the common goal of student success. In this context it is presumed that schools, family and communities have a shared interest in students and that how they interact with each other will affect students and their successful progression in school (Epstein, 1992). The overlap of the spheres represents the mutual interests and influences of the stakeholders in the child's education. Epstein (1992, 1994) describes two models of overlapping spheres of influence, the external model and the internal model, both of which are included in the framework. Both models of overlapping spheres of influence acknowledge that there are three key areas where students participate in learning: at home, in school and in the community.

The external model (Figure 3.2) recognises that these spheres of influence may "be drawn together or pushed apart" (Epstein & Associates, 2009, p. 10). Depending on variables such as family experience, school philosophy and community practice, the spheres can be stretched apart or pushed closer. For example, family culture may push or pull the spheres of influence apart; some families believe in supporting the child in school, getting involved in all support actions (paired reading, volunteering in the classroom) while others believe that schoolwork is the business of school and leave the school to that job. Some schools believe in offering parents tools to support their child and provide parent training in specific areas they can help in; other schools do not support parents in this way. Epstein believes that time in school, age of child and grade level are the three key factors which affect the degree to which the spheres of influence overlap. The younger the child, the more influential the family sphere, whereas the older the child, the more likely the parents leave the school to work independently.

Figure 3.2. Theoretical Model of Overlapping Spheres of Influence External Structures

External Structure

Force B
Experience,
Philosophy,
Practices
of Family

Family   School

Force C
Experience,
Philosophy,
Practices
of School

Force D
Experience,
Philosophy,
Practices
of Community

Community

Force A
Time/Age/Grade Level
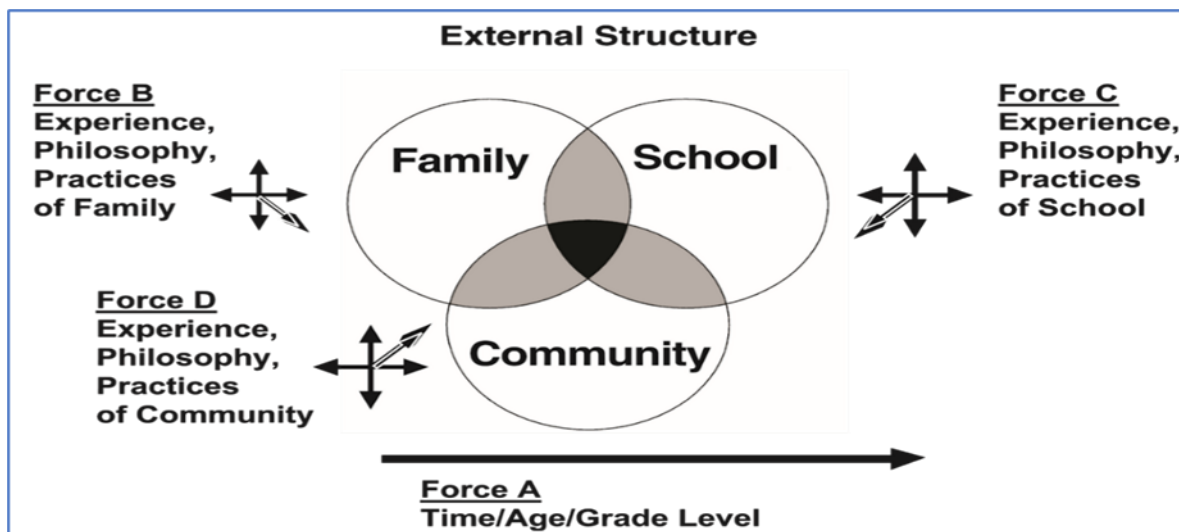
Image from Epstein, 2001, p28.

The time or age of a child alone does not increase the overlap of the spheres, as it is unlikely parents will gain more knowledge regarding how to help their child with school the older the child gets. It is more likely that parents become less involved with school the older a child gets. Family experience of the school has a direct impact on the overlapping of spheres, either pushing them together or pulling them apart. "When teachers make parents part of their regular teaching practice (Force C), they force greater overlap than would be expected from the regular patterns that develop along the developmental timeline (Force A)" (Epstein, 1986, p. 39). Within this model the converse is also true; when schools do not actively involve parents, they push the spheres further apart.

The internal model (Figure 3.3) of overlapping spheres of influence places emphasis on how the "complex and essential interpersonal relations and patterns of influence occur between individuals at home, at school, and in the community" (Epstein & Associates, 2009, p. 10). The internal model depicts what is happening within the central area of the overlapping spheres (coloured black in Figure 3.2); this is where interactions occur. This social interaction can occur on a general or individual basis but is interlinked (for example, all parents together at a talk or one to one meetings). Parents and school are influencing each other. Epstein emphasises that the partnership framework provides a way to examine what schools, parents and communities do to push spheres apart; what

being involved really means and what practices stimulate each type of involvement. She also examines the challenges involved in implementing these practices and the results for students, parents and teachers when the six types of involvement are activated within the school (Epstein, 2010a).

Figure 3.3.   Theoretical Model of Overlapping Spheres of Influence Internal Structures

Family **School**	Key Inter-institutional interactions (in overlapping area)
	F=Family C=Child S= School P= Parent T= Teacher
	Interactions include those at the institutional level (e.g. all families, children, educators and entire community) and at the individual level (e.g. one parent, child, teacher, community partner).
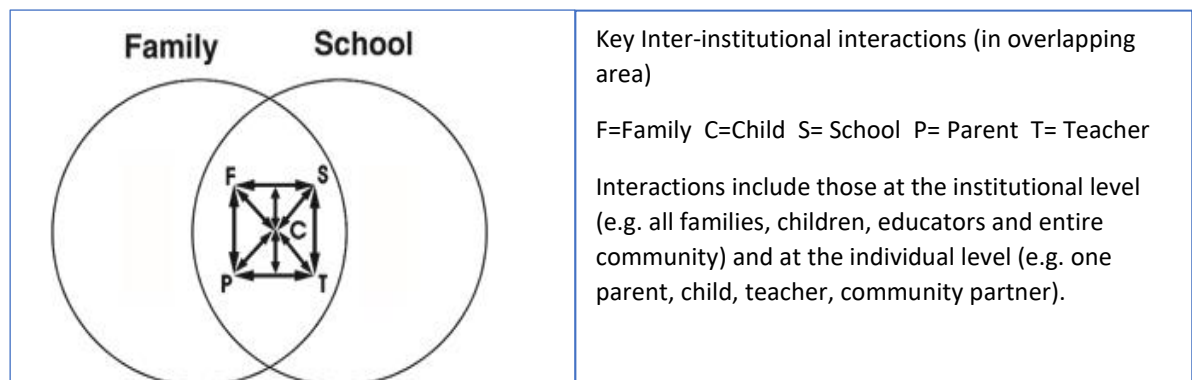
Image from Epstein, 2001, p28.

> When families and schools are viewed as overlapping organizations with shared responsibilities, respect is extended to parents and teachers who recognize the need to cooperate and collaborate to fulfil the shared obligation for the education and socialization of children. (Epstein, 1986, p. 20)

Epstein states that using the spheres of influence model puts students at the centre of all school activities; they are the common interest between school and home. She also indicates that as students play a vital role in their own success, they must be invested and motivated in their own learning to benefit from the curriculum and methodologies provided by the school (Epstein, 1995). Effective and targeted school partnership activities can enhance student engagement in their own education; for example, providing parent talks on implications of subject choice can support parent child discussion at home. This aspect of the framework does not clearly state what happens when students are not personally invested or motivated in their own success, as must be the case in some instances.

Epstein indicates that two-way communication between parents and schools is key. This correlates with Byrne and Smyth (2010) who indicated that students are frequently the main source of information about what is happening in school for parents. Students and parents having discussions about what is going on in school, what is interesting, what students are motivated about and feel successful in, is the development of a learning community, where the work of school is complemented by the support of families. Research such as Dauber and Epstein (1993) has shown that there is a shared common goal between schools and families that must be acknowledged. Families care about their children and want them to do well in school and in life. Teachers and schools also have the same goals for students. Epstein also argues that the partnership framework extends to the local community, suggesting that the community can offer students the opportunity to use their skills to the benefit of the community they live in. This in turn, will have a direct effect on the level of motivation and experience of success students feel. This will then promote enhanced school success (Epstein & Associates, 2009).

Epstein comments that in practice the spheres of influence theory is manifest in statements by parents who wish to know more about what is happening in school so they can help their child and vice versa when a school wonders about a change in a pupil. She used the term "family-like school" to represent a school which recognised the individuality of all pupils and makes them feel included. Similarly, the term "school-like family" refers to a family which also sees the child as a student and supports the work of the school by building skills and feelings of success (Epstein & Associates, 2009). Within Epstein's framework of partnership, the terms family-like schools and school-like families are used to refer to the caring environment which can be developed to support student success. Caring school communities are currently very topical in schools due to the increase in mental health issues presenting in students. Internationally, schools are promoting positive approaches to education which support and consider student mental health, for example Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines (NCCA, 2017). Research conducted by NNPS indicates that use of Epstein's framework for partnership supports the development of a caring school community which supports student success. Epstein (1986) states that when a school develops programmes of partnership which are feasible and equitable to all families, the students become part of a caring community. This means that a school communicates with all school families, not just those who indicate they want to develop partnership. Aspects of theory of care are reflected in this framework, though

no specific reference is made to this. Research based on Epstein's partnership framework suggests that the combined support of school, family and community develops a sense of security and being cared for in students (Epstein & Associates, 2009, 2018). Epstein also alludes to the fact that as students start to realise the purpose of education, they strive to achieve their potential, develop positive attitudes and manifest school behaviour which promotes their own educational success (Epstein, 1995). There is limited evidence for this view in articles by Epstein and Associates as details on the research procedures and quotes from participants are rarely included. Epstein's view that students begin to value education more would indicate a valuable aspect of the framework; however, it seems overly positive, and findings appear to be generalised to all students and parents. Commentary on research findings (Epstein, 1986, 2005b, 2006a; Epstein & Associates, 2009) make no reference to students or parents who do not benefit from the framework in this way, in particular no reference is made to findings in relation to students who did not demonstrate the required motivation. In all schools there are students who do not reach their potential and parents who do not engage for a variety of personal, academic, social or economic reasons.

Eccles (1996) and Dauber and Epstein (1993) indicated emerging patterns relating to partnership with parents in the USA. Parents in more affluent communities tended to be more involved while communication between schools and parents in less affluent areas was focused on negative communications. Other patterns which emerged included the recognition that while all families care about their children and want them to succeed, many do not know how to help, and they want to be more aware and informed of ways they can help.

3.7.3 Epstein's Framework for Partnership: Application in a School Setting

Having considered the underlying theory of Epstein's framework for partnership, it is necessary to develop an understanding of the framework itself and how it is applied in schools in the USA. Initially schools must be aware of Epstein's "threefold need" and the six principles (Table 3.1) which should be adhered to when implementing the partnership framework.

The threefold need which schools must address (Epstein, 1986, 2001) refers to:

- teachers who wish to cooperate with parents and the community to increase students' experience of success,

- parents who wish to help their children reach their potential by connecting and communicating with schools, and

- students who want to experience success in school.

School awareness of these needs drives the implementation of Epstein's framework and helps schools design strategies based on student needs. In other words, according to Epstein, for partnership to occur, the school needs teachers, parents and students who are interested in opportunities for partnership. School management must consider this when developing actions for promoting partnership. When the six principles are considered, "programs of family and community involvement can be planned, implemented, evaluated and improved from year to year" (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006, p. 2). The introduction of community as an aspect of the partnership is based upon research by Saunders (2001 & 2005), which examined the role of community partnership in building student success. Heath and McLaughlin (1987) also found that community involvement is necessary as the educational resources required for academic success are now beyond the scope of most families. Communities can offer "the experiences and support needed by students to succeed in larger society" (Heath & McLaughlin, 1987, p. 579). Community, in the context of this framework, can mean any connection, business, group, organisation or support agency which provides the school or students with resources to develop their potential, for example local work experience, health care information, leisure activities and skills, and volunteering opportunities (Epstein & Associates, 2009).

Epstein believes that the six principles (Table 3.1) transform the traditional understanding of partnership which exists in schools. Historically, activities involving parents were specifically for the purpose of having parents involved but are not directly linked to student development and learning. This could be described as an ad hoc approach to partnership without purpose or planning. Epstein argues that using the six principles as essential components of planning partnership instigates a process of partnership which "turns activities that were accidental and peripheral to school improvement into well-planned and intentional programs that are central to school improvement and that contribute to student success" (Epstein & Associates, 2009, p. 2). Epstein and Sheldon (2006) regard these new principles as necessary to facilitate the organisation of effective partnership programmes. They are central to the framework and change how schools

look at partnership with parents. Schools that consider these principles begin to understand partnership in a new way, and as a result, partnership becomes part of written school plans which are regularly reviewed and evaluated.

The framework also requires that partnership programmes incorporate robust leadership, teamwork, written plans, well-implemented activities, adequate funding, thoughtful evaluation, strong support from colleagues and continuous planning for improvement (Epstein, 2005b; Epstein, 2007b). These are areas of responsibility which school leadership needs to consider and monitor to ensure the framework of partnership is effective in achieving goals set in the School Plan. According to Epstein, careful consideration of these elements at the initial stages led to programmes of high quality which had specific goals and reached more parents.

Central to Epstein's framework are the six types of involvement which lead to a caring school community that promotes student success. The six types of involvement, also referred to as the six types of caring, are at the core of the overlapping spheres of influence. They are parenting, communicating, learning at home, volunteering, decision making and collaborating with the community. These are a widening of activities previously considered to be parental involvement in schools and reflect a changed understanding of partnership. Epstein and Associates (2009) found an improvement in student attitude, behaviour and report card grades when these six types of involvement are used in middle and high school. Within the USA this framework of involvement is recognised as helping schools develop a multifaceted approach to partnership. Detailed descriptions of practices of partnership to promote each type of involvement are provided within the framework as a reference for schools beginning the journey of developing positive parental involvement in their school community. These descriptions not only include sample practices of the six types of involvement (Appendix 5), but challenges and redefinitions of common activities for parents (Appendix 6) and expected results for students, teachers and parents (Appendix 7). School, Family and Community Partnership: Your Handbook for Action 4th Edition (2018) is a step-by-step guide, which includes strategies based on research and fieldwork to enable schools to develop an effective partnership programme. It outlines Epstein's comprehensive framework for partnership including sample which offered me a frame of reference for considering the level of partnership in the participating schools.

3.8 Chapter Conclusion

Epstein (1986) developed a framework for partnership based upon the theory of overlapping spheres of influence where students are at the centre of planning for partnership. This partnership framework which NNPSs promote is ultimately about student outcomes. Partnership with parents is not specifically about parents but rather a recognition of the shared responsibility of parents, schools and communities in supporting education (Epstein & Associates, 2009).

Epstein's research found that there is a positive impact on student performance and learning when schools embrace this partnership framework by adopting the core principles and developing the six described types of involvement (Epstein, 2016, 2015, 2007b, 1995, 1986). For Epstein, the six research-based principles and six types of involvement (also called indicators of partnership) should be the cornerstones of polices, programmes and practices in schools. Also important are aspects of school strategic planning which leadership can encourage and promote to ensure that a school's framework for partnership is transparent, targeted and purposeful. As schools deploy this framework, they are advised first to set their goals for students and have clearly defined reasons for partnership, and then identify the practices within the framework which will support the achievement of their goals. This method of partnership is based on purposeful plans with targets, which extends from the school and family to include the community. According to Epstein, this framework reflects a process whereby all stakeholders are consulted and informed of the clear purpose of partnership and how individual parents can affect their children's success at school. This framework provides opportunities for schools to design forms of partnership that are creative, innovative and clearly linked to ways of improving students' success in school (Epstein, 2016).

The research findings cited by Epstein and NNPS are often general and do not comment on families who do not avail of partnership opportunities or students who do not engage. However, the 40 years of research behind this framework makes this an influential model which is worth considering in the Irish context. It is a useful model due to the breadth of partnership activities recognised and its enhanced understanding of what partnership can include. The spheres of influence model, which puts the student at the centre of all school activities, is the key component of this framework. It recognises that schools and parents must support each other in order for students to benefit. Students

must also be invested, motivated and engaged in their own learning. The six types of involvement offer specific actions against which to measure and analyse the current practices of the case study schools. For these reasons, this is the model of partnership that determines the theoretical framework and structure of my research. Research in the case study schools is built around this framework, while questionnaires and interviews examine the six potential types of parent involvement and utilise them as indicators of partnership. This allowed me to gain an insight to how parents and teachers view these types of activities. Analysis of questionnaire results, interview transcripts and secondary data from the case study schools allows for all aspects of the framework to be considered in relation to each school. Combining this framework with my previous experience as a HSCL coordinator offers a new and insightful way to examine partnership with parents in Irish post-primary schools which is grounded in planning for student success and could support our current educational vision for post-primary education as laid out in LAOS (2016a) and the current Action Plan for Education (2016b).

Chapter 4 Research Methodology

4.1 Chapter Introduction

Chapter 1 described the key objectives of my research, the theoretical framework and the context of this research. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 outlined the literature around partnership with parents and models of parental involvement pertinent to this research. In this chapter, I will critically discuss my research design as it relates to my research questions. I will address my selection of the case study approach, my choice of participants and the methods and instrumentation used to generate data during fieldwork. I will provide a description of the research process which led to the completion of questionnaires and interviews. I will conclude with a brief overview of the challenges I encountered during the research, the limits of the study and how triangulation was used to ensure trustworthiness and transferability.

4.2 Nature and Purpose of Research

My research project focused on parents in post-primary schools, specifically on parents' experience of partnership with their child's school, as described in Chapter 1. The research approach I took was to evaluate partnership with parents, and the research questions were connected to types of involvement from Epstein's model of partnership. I used the six types of involvement as indicators of partnership activities to consider if any requirements for Epstein's framework were evident in the participating schools. I was aware of how complex parents' views can be and acutely aware of how my personal beliefs, ethics and bias could influence the interpretation of the research and that accurate representation of the "voice" of others was a key component of the methodological stratagem. I looked for evidence of school planning for partnership with parents and the role the principal and/or deputy principal had in this. The area of partnership with parents has been of interest to me for many years and I wanted this research to inform current practices in my school. I believed that this research would help me move towards a more planned process of partnership with parents to the benefit of student learning outcomes in my school.

4.3 The Case Study Approach

As a researcher, I examined how Epstein's framework for partnership with parents (Epstein & Associates 2009, 2018) applied to post-primary schools in an Irish context, while also keeping in mind other models of partnership which could have been apparent. The objective of my research was to evaluate and critique Epstein's framework of partnership and establish its relevance to the Irish context. I wanted to carefully evaluate if the areas of partnership described by Epstein were represented in Irish post-primary schools and if so, to examine how they were planned, implemented and supported by the school staff and management.

Action research was my initial consideration for a research approach. "To do action research is to plan, act, observe and reflect more carefully, more systematically, and more rigorously that one usually does in everyday life" (Kempis &Mc Taggart, 1992, p. 10). I had considered implementing Epstein's framework in the school where I was working as a HSCL coordinator in order to develop a community of practice based on the partnership indicators. However, after starting the research I changed job and school and had to reconsider the opportunities available to me. In my new position, action research was not applicable as I was no longer a HSCL coordinator with access to HSCL clusters and the range of parents' courses they ran. David and Sutton (2011) argue that action research is when a researcher improves or reforms practice. I was no longer in a position where I could implement an intervention which had been my intention. This research methodology was no longer suitable, and I had to change direction to look at current practices rather than implement a new practice. I decided to evaluate current actions in post-primary schools to ascertain if partnership with parents was a planned agenda with specific targeted goals and outcomes.

I had also considered ethnography as an approach, which is described by Brewer (2000) as "the study of people in naturally occurring settings or fields by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting if not also in the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning imposed" (p. 6). This approach to undertaking research was of interest as it can be applicable to a small-scale study. I was working full time in a new demanding position and was aware of my personal time limitations, therefore balancing the fieldwork research with my job was a major

consideration. I decided against this approach as I would not be able to immerse myself in the schools.

Yin (1994) defines a case study approach as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). This seemed to be an approach which would be conducive to my research aims and objectives. This research was focused on two schools due to access and time constraints. As a researcher I was aware that this meant the sample size was relatively small, however this allowed for an in-depth evaluation of social behaviour pertaining to partnership in the context of these two school. A small sample allowed me the opportunity to explore and understand partnership behaviours from the participants perspective. Using a small sample limits generalisations, but one of the merits of utilising a case study approach stems from the valuable information which the method can elicit from its participants. Also, a case study can provide "greater detail and likely accuracy of information about particular cases at the cost of being less able to make effective generalisations to a larger population of cases" (Hammersley, 1992, p. 186). During this research I was interested in gaining accurate detailed information on partnership in two specific schools rather than being able to generalise to all Irish post-primary school. David and Sutton (2011) refer to case studies as in-depth studies of specific units, which can be individual, organisational events, programmes or communities. An advantage of the case study approach is that a wide variety of research methods and a range of sampling techniques can be used (David & Sutton, 2011). The key aims and objectives of case study can vary; explanatory case studies tend to be more quantitative and deductive, whereas exploratory and descriptive case studies tend to be more inductive and qualitative (David & Sutton, 2011, p. 166). My research adopted an evaluative approach, which situated well within the case study structure.

Matthews and Ross (2010) describe the importance of the selection of cases: "The selection of the case is therefore significant, in terms of its potential to produce data that will enable you to address the research questions" (p. 128). The two schools which were willing to participate in my research happened to offer internal structures similar to my own school's position. This was of benefit, as a key aspect of this research was informing my own practice. For this research, I wanted to get in-depth information about what was really happening in the participating schools regarding partnership with parents. David

and Sutton recognise that a valuable aspect of a case study is that "its attention to the particular situation does allow for a deeper attention to how events came to turn out as they did" (2011, p. 173). Using a case study approach held the potential to show whether Epstein's framework was applicable to a representative and typical Irish post-primary school. Therefore, I identified the case study approach as the most suitable method for my research.

4.4 Mixed Methods in a Case Study Design

One of the main advantages of the case study approach is that it can combine a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. This enabled me to develop an understanding of, and possibly explain, social construction related to partnership with parents within the two schools. Case studies allow a researcher to interact with the research participants and "penetrate situations in ways that are not always susceptible to numerical analysis" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 289). This research required contextual information from parents as well as opinions and perspectives. Utilising various research methods allowed me to understand the reality of the participants and provided insight into the complexity of social truths within a school environment. Adopting mixed methods has enabled me to avail of the benefits of a number of research tools, including questionnaires, observation and interviews, thus enhancing the data available in order to evaluate the application of Epstein's framework in the participating schools.

4.4.1 Research Methods Applied

A mixed method approach was chosen because a single method alone would not have allowed for the voice of participants to be heard in the breadth or depth I required. Using the combination of quantitative and qualitative data generation tools allowed for "using all methods possible to address the research problem" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 13). The research was qualitative in the main, however; a survey questionnaire for parents and teachers was used to gather initial data (Appendices 8 & 9). Interviews were used to further interrogate information gained via questionnaires. The final two methods applied were observation and examination of secondary data. Observation of parents and school personnel interacting at PTMs offered me a sense of what it was like to be a parent in the schools and deepened my understanding of the parents' perspective and also of how the schools prepared for PTMs. Secondary data refers to document analysis, such

as brochures, policies, inspection reports, prospectuses, DEIS plans and School Improvement Plans (SIPs). Examination of school documentation to ascertain current practices and policies within the school was very advantageous and offered considerable insight into the schools' understanding of, and planning for, partnership with parents. Observation and secondary data are critically discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

As this research is about partnership with parents it was imperative that the research methods used allow for parent voice, opinions and perspectives to be heard. The use of a questionnaire allowed me to examine the prevalence of partnership events and activities, and the kinds of events parents were involved in at the school. Information from the questionnaires informed the direction of the subsequent interviews, which were of a more exploratory nature. This variety of research methods allowed me to gain a richer set of data, which was indicative of current practices and allowed for triangulation of data. Table 4.1 outlines the research questions and the research tool which was used to generate data.

Table 4.1   *Research questions and chosen research tools*

Research Question	Research Tools	Participants
What are the conceptual models of partnership in post-primary education?	Interview Document analysis	Principal/Deputy Principal, chairperson, teachers, parents
What is the role of partnership with parents in the context of Irish post-primary education?	Document analysis Interview	Teachers, parents, other school personnel
With reference to Epstein's partnership framework, how does partnership with parents occur in the context of two urban Irish post-primary schools?	Observation of events Questionnaire Interview	Schools, parents, other school personnel
Why does partnership with parents occur, is it effective and is there any correlation with Epstein's framework?	Analysis of data based on Epstein's principles and framework	Parents, teachers, other school personnel
How are senior management involved in partnership between school and parents?	Interview Questionnaire	Principal/Deputy Principal, chairperson

4.5 Questionnaires

In this section, I will describe the use of questionnaires during my research. A quantitative method such as questionnaires was very useful; however, their use was somewhat problematic in a school setting. I only had access to participants via the schools and was therefore dependent on the schools to promote and encourage parents

and teachers to respond. The purpose, design process, piloting and distribution of the questionnaires are described in the following sections.

4.5.1 Purpose of questionnaires

Matthews and Sutton (2011) describe questionnaires are one of the traditional methods of quantitative data generation frequently used in mixed methods research. The questionnaire process is fairly economical, questions are standardised, anonymity can be maintained, and questions can be specifically designed to elicit particular information (Opie, 2004). Questionnaires are frequently used to "compare the characteristics and experiences of different groups of people or to look for relationships between different characteristics" (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 204). Well-defined goals were essential to a successful questionnaire and helped me to clarify the questions needed. The purpose of my questionnaires was to establish statistical information on how Epstein's framework was represented in the case study schools. Having this initial information gave me a preliminary insight into what was happening in the case study schools and how parents and teachers were viewing partnership. This information then informed the development of an interview schedule and allowed me to hone those questions for the semi-structured interview process.

4.5.2 Designing Questionnaires

The design of the questionnaires was carefully considered, as the information they would generate was critical to the qualitative interview process. The questions used were mainly related to Epstein's six indicators of partnership. I examined each aspect of Epstein's framework and, based on my knowledge and experience of schools, devised questions which would offer some insight into the experience of partnership. According to Matthews and Ross (2010) "designing a questionnaire is both about working out how you are going to measure the presence of something and about the practicalities of finding a set of questions and answers that will enable you to do that and be meaningful to and answerable by all your respondents" (p. 206). The nature and structure of questions was a vital consideration as I needed to ensure, in so far as possible, that I acquired useful data from respondents. Questions needed to be clear and concise while linking to the research questions and the six indicators of partnership. I utilised close-ended questions, which allowed respondents to select

from a number of answer options i.e. multiple-choice questions. This type of question is used to measure opinions, attitudes or knowledge of respondents (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Though close-ended questions were simple to use, score and code for analysis on the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) programme, they required great consideration in their development. Answer options had to allow for all possible responses; therefore, the "specify other" option was also included, although this proved difficult to code and analyse. Open-ended questions allowed for personal responses from respondents and led to useful information, but again, they were difficult to analyse. I also included a series of statements incorporating a five-point Likert scale. The use of a Likert scale enables respondents to indicate strength of agreement or disagreement with a particular statement on a scale. This facilitated the measurement of respondent's feelings to help establish parent and teacher opinions on specific areas which correlate to Epstein's framework. Table 4.2 below shows how the questionnaires were connected to Epstein's framework. The Parent Questionnaire and Teacher Questionnaire are available in the Appendices 8 and 9.

Table 4:2: *Area of partnership framework and related questions on questionnaires*

Area of Epstein's Framework	Parent Questionnaire	Teacher Questionnaire
General Information	- Q1 Year in school - Q18a Male - Q18b Female - Q18c Age	- Q1 Year groups taught - Q17a Male/Female - Q17b Role in school - Q17c Years teaching
Parenting/Learning from Home	- Q3 Information given by school - Q4 Other information needed - Q9 Reports helpful - Q14 Support of homework/study	- Q3 Information given by school - Q4 Other information needed - Q9 Reports helpful - Q13 Support of homework/study
Communicating	- Q2 Communication methods - Q5 Methods of contact good enough - Q6 Visit how often - Q7 Main reason for visit - Q8 How does parent contact school	- Q2 Communication methods - Q5 Methods of contact good enough - Q6 Meet parents how often - Q7 Main reason for meeting parents - Q8 How do you contact parents
Volunteering	- Q10 Activities parents involved in - Q11 Other ways to be involved	- Q10 Activities parents involved in - Q11 Other ways to be involved
Decision Making	- Q12 Involved in decisions - Q15 Parent voice heard	- Q14 Parent voice heard - Q15 Partner with parents

Area of Epstein's Framework	Parent Questionnaire	Teacher Questionnaire
	• Q16 Partner in school • Q17 Parents need to be involved in school	• Q16 Parents need to be involved in the school
Collaborating with the community	• Q13 School involved in local community	• Q12 School involved in local community

4.5.3 Piloting of Questionnaire

According to Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009), in a pilot questionnaire "you collect a small amount of data to test drive your procedures, identify possible problems in your data collection protocols, and set the stage for your actual study" (p. 203). I was aware that when designing a questionnaire, it is easy to overlook ambiguities in question layout and construction and that piloting a questionnaire allows others to comment from a fresh perspective and assess the suitability and clarity of the questionnaire. While deciding upon appropriate questions for questionnaires, I had an informal meeting with three parents to help me clarify my questions before running a pilot. Parent feedback indicated that some questions were ambiguous and that a question on ways to be involved in school was especially important. Based on parent feedback, I restructured some questions for clarity and amended the sequence of the questions. The questionnaires were then piloted with a small sample of eight people, four parents and four teachers. The pilot groups were satisfied that the questionnaires were quick and easy to use. The parent respondents were positive but did indicate three questions which they had trouble with. These questions involved using a ranking scale of one to eight. Respondents felt that this was too many choices, and so I changed the ranking scale to one to five on the final questionnaire. Some queries were raised about the wording in a few questions, and their feedback led to adjustments in word choice within these questions. The teacher respondents indicated that they were happy with the questionnaire. They felt it was short and easy to respond to because of the ranking and Likert scales, which would make teachers more likely to return the questionnaire.

4.5.4 Sampling Strategy for Questionnaires

Case study sampling is frequently based "on logistics, likely receptiveness and available resources" (Mertens, 2015, p. 334). As I have taken a case study approach to my research, my sample population was predetermined as the parents and teachers at the participating

schools; this can be called a purposeful or theoretical sampling. Consequently, I attempted to ensure that every parent and teacher received a questionnaire and had the opportunity to participate in the research if they wished to. I discussed with each school how to ensure parents who did not attend the PTMs would get the questionnaire. In School A they posted out a questionnaire and explanation sheet to each parent who did not attend, and in School B a text was sent with a link to an electronic copy of the questionnaire. The letters of explanation to parents and teachers are included in Appendix 10 and 11. Reminder texts were also sent to parents, asking them to return completed questionnaires. Participation levels will be discussed later in Section 4.8.

4.5.5 Distribution of the Questionnaires and Response Rate

My choice to use questionnaires was contingent upon getting sufficient responses to ensure a wide variety of opinions would be represented. I was concerned that the low levels of parental participation in post-primary schools would be reflected by a low response rate; however, I believed that it was a worthwhile venture. I wanted to maximise the response rate as much as possible so, with that in mind, I contacted both schools and requested the PTM schedules for the school year. I then arranged to be available for each of the meetings in both schools so I could personally distribute the questionnaires to parents. Information stands were set up at each PTM with large posters explaining what the research was about. School A has a policy of running a pre-meeting for parents at 3.45p.m., which focuses on a specific area of interest for the parents of that year group, e.g. CAO talk for 6th year parents; Study Skills for 5th year parents; New Junior Cycle for 1st and 2nd year parents. This policy has led to an increase in attendance at PTMs. I briefly explained the purpose of the questionnaires to the parents at this pre-meeting and stressed that participation was voluntary and that all information was anonymous and confidential. I also explained that I was looking for volunteers for interviews. Following this, as parents entered the school hall for the meeting, I handed out questionnaires and pens to all parents. I found this method to be very effective in School A, as parents were aware of why I was giving them a questionnaire; and given the queue system for speaking to teachers, many parents were happy to pass the time waiting by filling out my questionnaire. Upon completion, parents placed the questionnaires in a box anonymously. I also distributed an expression of interest in interview form to parents,

which they could return to me if they were willing to participate in an individual interview. The response rate for questionnaires in School A was 42.5%.

In School B, I was aware that parents arrive very early to queue to speak to teachers; they do not have a pre-meeting talk. I was waiting for them on arrival with extensive information on the research, in both visual and written formats. I distributed questionnaires, an expression of interest in interview form and an information sheet to parents as they arrived. Parents were asked to complete the questionnaire while waiting to see teachers and returned them to me when leaving. Those interested in being interviewed completed the form and returned it to me. In School B, several parents had many questions about the research, its purpose and what the outcomes for the school would be, however despite significant questions and queries, the parent questionnaire response rate in School B was lower at 35%.

As I wanted to get teachers' opinions on partnership, I provided a similar questionnaire to teachers. The questions were almost identical as can be seen in Table 4.1. I spoke to the staff in both schools at a brief meeting and explained the purpose of the research and asked them to participate by completing a questionnaire. I also sought volunteers for interviews. The principal and deputy principal in both schools encouraged staff to complete questionnaires and participate in interviews. The return rate of teacher questionnaires was 55% in School A and 27% in School B.

4.6 The Interviews

According to Matthews and Ross, "when the researcher is interested in people's experiences, behaviour and understandings and how and why they experience and understand the social world in this way", interviews provide useful qualitative social data (2010, p. 221). As hearing the opinion of parents was a central aspect of this research, interviews were a core component of this mixed methods research and helped me to establish parents' experience of partnership in the case study schools. During my research, interviews offered me the opportunity to probe more deeply into response trends reflected in the questionnaires and also to ensure parent voice was recorded accurately.

4.6.1 Interview Structure

Qualitative researchers have shown a preference for semi-structured interviews; these use an interview guide which lists topics, issues or questions to be covered during the

interview (Opie, 2004). As I wanted to build a rapport with participants, a formal interview style was not appropriate.   The more relaxed nature of a semi-structured interview allowed me to develop a list of possible questions, which could be modified or rephrased.   As participants answered questions, development of responses could be incorporated into the interview process via modified questions.   I was aware that introducing flexibility to the interview schedule risked the possibility of researcher bias (Opie, 2004). Bias is always a possibility, as "interviewers are human beings and not machines" (Selltiz et al, 1965). Bias cannot be avoided completely, but awareness and self-control are vital to reduce the possibility. As the purpose of the research was to "get beneath the surface of people's experiences" (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 226), I found it necessary, during interviews, to respond to the direction the interview was taking and allow the respondent to articulate "their story" in the context of the research questions. Factors such as background, prior experience and social forces affect the way participants view situations and, therefore, their construct of what they know.   Parents' prior experiences with the school, and their own educational experience, affect how they view current practices in their child's school and how they construct their understanding of partnership.   As discussed in Chapter 1, this research is from a constructivist approach; so, allowing participants time to describe their experiences in detail helped me as a researcher to understand their subjective truth.

4.6.2 Sampling Strategy for Interviews

According to Mertens (2015) researchers who are using a constructive paradigm frequently utilise a purposive approach to sampling. This is evidenced in the case study schools which allowed for the possibility of a contrast in interview participants' experience of partnership due to the differences in demographics, affluence of local area, retention and college progression of students.   Based on international statistics for parental involvement in school initiatives, I was very aware that participation numbers could be very low; therefore, I extended the invitation to participate to all parents and teachers, in the hope that I would achieve a useful sample of interviewees. Parents were invited to volunteer during the distribution of questionnaires, and teachers were also offered the opportunity during a meeting I held with staff in both schools.   Various strategies such as reminder letters and texts to parents, student reminders and posters displayed in school receptions and staff rooms were deployed to encourage participation.

Interest was expressed via an Interview Volunteer Form, which was completed and returned to the school office (Appendix 12).

4.6.3 Designing the Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview approach allowed me to develop an interview guide of suitable questions while maintaining flexibility to probe deeper and discuss relevant issues as they arose during the interview. This type of interview method is often seen as the most appropriate in educational research as it allows objectivity and depth to be combined with an effective data generation method (Gall et al., 2007). I found the use of four key stages in the preparation of the interview guide helpful: "translating research questions into interview questions; deciding on the degree of structure in any questions; ordering of questions and deciding how responses will be collected" (Opie, 2004, p. 115). Careful thought was given to these stages, the selection and order of possible questions and how they related to specific areas of partnership. I also believed that the flexible nature of interviews would allow me to adapt as information or connections to Epstein's framework arose while conducting the interviews. The number of questions on the interview guide (Appendix 13) was kept to a minimum, with additional probing questions added as appropriate during the interview. The interview guide was not followed rigidly; interviewees were encouraged to describe their experiences, and questions followed the flow of discussion rather than the order of questions. The interview guide was used as a type of checklist to ensure that all topics were discussed and that all interviewees experienced the same standardized interview where possible (Opie, 2004).

4.6.4 Piloting

As previously discussed in relation to questionnaires, piloting is essential in order to establish the suitability and clarity of a research instrument. Pilot interviews allowed me to assess the interview guide and whether the flow of questions would elicit the kind of information I needed to evaluate the partnership between parents and both schools. They also provided an opportunity to eliminate ambiguous questions, check the timing of the interview and confirm that anonymity and confidentiality were being maintained (Opie, 2004). I found this process very helpful, as the last research I conducted was in 2006 and since then, my experience interviewing has been related to recruitment. This helped me refresh my skills for interviewing participants, which requires a more relaxed setting. It

was also advantageous to develop an awareness of what parents were currently talking about and what school issues were on their minds.

4.6.5 Recording of interviews

All interviews were conducted at a time and location to suit each individual participant. I used a digital audio recorder to record the interview as this allowed me to remain focused on the participant rather than on note-taking. The need to record the interviews was explained to participants, and a permission form signed; consent is discussed in Section 4.10. One participant expressed a preference not to be recorded, and notes were taken during that interview.

4.7 Observations and Secondary Data

Observation is a method of gathering data which can be structured and systematic or unstructured. Structured data collection is conducted using specific variables and according to a predefined schedule, whereas unstructured observation is conducted in an open manner without predetermined variables or objectives. My research observation used a structured approach. Mertens (2015) suggests that the observer should be interested in the physical environment, the human and social environment, programme activities and participants behaviour, nonverbal communication and also in observing what does not happen. The activities I wished to observe were the interactions between parents and the school during PTMs. I was interested in how the school supported parents at such meetings and the advance preparations made. I had gained permission from both schools to attend the meetings in order to distribute questionnaires and view school procedures. I did not interact with teachers or listen to their conversations with parents. As the researcher, I noted in particular:

- Parent arrival at PTM
- Welcome given
- Guidance given to parents on arrival
- Welcome during the meeting between parents and teachers
- Parent interaction with support staff
- Parents leaving the PTM

I was present in the case study schools for all the PTMs. On these occasions, I was able to observe interaction between parents and school personnel within the parameters of my

six predetermined areas of interest. As I distributed questionnaires to parents, I observed the method of welcoming and checking in parents and I was able to scrutinise the procedures employed by the school for the PTMs. This enabled me to evaluate aspects of Epstein's framework regarding partnership with parents. I made short observational notes under each of the six headings listed above at all PTMs, and a summary of my observations can be found in Chapter 5. I considered if my presence as an observer might influence the school's behaviour. However, I do not believe my presence changed the procedures for the PTMs in either school, as information provided by school leaders, teachers and parents indicated that the PTMs have run in the same way for many years.

Secondary data refers to "data that exist prior to the start of the research study that were produced to serve purposes outside the study, such as administrative records, prior research studies, extant databases and various forms of documentary evidence" (Mertens, 2015, p. 362). Secondary data provided additional context in the case study schools and offered me a deeper insight to the policies and procedures of the schools. "The qualitative researcher can turn to these documents and records to get the necessary background of the situation and insights into the dynamics of everyday functioning" (Mertens, 2015, p. 387). School documentation provided an understanding of the rhetoric, policy and practices regarding partnership within each school. It was a challenge as a researcher to interpret this secondary data and relate it to the research questions. I used the six key indicators of Epstein's framework via a colour coding system, as a method for searching for keywords and phrases linked with partnership in the school documentation. For example, each indicator was colour coded with parenting being yellow, learning at home pink etc. I then colour coded data related to each indicator and was able to draw together recurring themes under specific indicators and consider links and different point of view in each area. This helped me to prioritise specific documents over others and to focus on documents of relevance to the research aims and objectives.

4.8 Participants and Scale of Study

The scale of this study was constrained by a number of factors, including access, time and willingness to participate. As discussed in Chapter 1, Section 1.9, I approached schools similar to my own workplace because the fundamental purpose of this research was to inform my own practice. Time was also a key consideration as I work full time and had to be able to travel to the schools frequently. The two schools which agreed to

participate offered a valuable contrast which I believed could provide useful and informative data on partnership at post-primary level.

Table 4.3 below indicates the school personnel, parent population and the expected and actual number of responses. I aimed for a response of 30% for questionnaires and hoped that my presence at PTMs might improve on this rate. Such a number of respondents would give me an overview of parent opinions and of the activities in which parents were involved. Expected numbers for interview were based on one parent from each year group. The expected number of teachers for interview was estimated at eight teachers per school, based on a calculation of having time to conduct, transcribe and analyse all the interviews. However, in the end I conducted a total of 54 interviews due to participant interest.

Table 4.3:   *Number and Type of Participants*

Interviews/ Questionnaires	School A			School B		
	Population	**Expected Participants**	**Actual Participants**	**Population**	**Expected Participants**	**Actual Participants**
Principal	1	1	1	1	1	1
Deputy Principal	1	1	1	1	1	1
Chairperson	1	1	1	1	1	0
Teachers Interviews	40	6	16	45	6	9
Parent Interviews	340 approx.	6	15	600 approx.	8	14
Parent Questionnaire	340 approx.	102 (30%)	170	600 approx.	180 (30%)	209
Teacher Questionnaire	40	12 (30%)	22	45	14 (30%)	12

4.9 Data Analysis and Presentation of Findings

Data analysis and reporting of results were an important area of consideration in the context of how it impacts upon the type of instrumentation used and how information and data would be recorded. It was necessary to examine whether the data and information generated by the research was trustworthy and credible. The use of several methods for generating data offered a trail of evidence and allowed for triangulation. While

developing the questionnaire, it was crucial for me to consider how statistical analysis would be carried out. Each question had to relate to the research objectives, in a manner which generated useful data and facilitated analysis. I needed to be able to accurately record, codify and analyse raw data from the questionnaires in SPSS. Coding was therefore a vital process, as it "details how the collected data are going to be transferred into a computer for analysis by a statistical package" (David & Sutton, 2011, p. 291). I spent a lot of time developing clear codes for the question responses and linking categories to ensure a well-structured and concise schema for the data entry process.

I had decided to record the interviews on a digital recorder with the permission of the interviewees. This ensured that the natural language of the interview was preserved and that data could be re-analysed as necessary (Opie, 2004). This transcription process was carried out after each interview while the information was still clear in my mind. Listening to all the interviews repeatedly gave me a good overview of common recurring themes across the respondents. Though this process was quite laborious, it offered valuable insights. It enabled me to understand the kind of information being generated and observe connections to Epstein's indicators of partnership which I was using as a framework for this research. Frequent examination of transcripts allowed me to draw connections between the research questions and participant comments. I used the same colour coding system as for school documentation and this helped separate data into specific categories. I identified trends and recurring themes, and the occurrence of particular keywords which indicated aspects of Epstein's framework. This then allowed me to examine, in more detail, specific features related to the indicators of partnership. The data generated via interviews was also cross-referenced, as regards themes and opinions, with the questionnaire data.

A summary of my observations during PTMs in both schools and a critical commentary on the secondary data provided by the schools is presented in Chapter 5. The results of the questionnaires completed by parents and teachers during this research are considered in Chapter 6. The parent and teacher interviews conducted during this research are discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, respectively. Chapter 9 discusses similar and contrasting views along with conclusions on indicators of partnership with parents and a summary of key findings is provided. Recommendations intended to support the work currently undertaken in the case study schools and enhance practices around partnership are presented in Chapter 10. These recommendations comprise a series of practical

suggestions which will enable the schools to build on current activities which promote partnership in a planned and purposeful manner which will not only support the work of teachers but improve the learning outcomes for students. These recommendations are in line with DES guidelines for partnership with parents and contribute to the domains and standards of LAOS (2016a) and SSE guidelines (2016c), thus enabling schools to move from areas of effective practice to areas of highly effective practice. They will support the new Education Bill (2019) and help guide schools in their engagement with parents.

4.10 Ethics, Validity and Reliability

Mertens and Ginsberg (2009) state that ethical research methods recognise that while truth is good, respect for human dignity is better. Bearing this in mind as a researcher, I had an obligation to ensure I represented participants as accurately as possible. The context in which the research was conducted, data generation methods, report writing and representation needed to be considered from an ethical standpoint. Negotiating access to post-primary schools was a fundamental requirement of this research, and the gatekeepers of the schools indicated their willingness to be involved in the research after meeting with me and discussing the research project and agreeing on the scope of the research in each school. Informed consent meant that the participants knew what the research involved, its context, its purpose and how information would be sought, held and disseminated. Participants were made aware of the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Substantial consideration was given to ethical questions such as privacy, anonymity, confidentiality, representation and researcher influence. Clarification was sought from participants on comments, both general and ambiguous, to ensure understanding and accurate representation. My application for ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee in Trinity College Dublin (Appendix 14).

I was very aware that a questionnaire could be considered an intrusion. I wanted a questionnaire which was easy for respondents to complete and which did not impinge on their time too much. It was imperative that respondents were aware of the confidential and anonymous nature of the questionnaire and that participation was on a voluntary basis. At all PTMs, I made it very clear that participation was optional, and this was also highlighted in all the informational literature about the questionnaires. Ethical responsibility was also a pertinent consideration while carrying out the interviews. The

wellbeing of the interviewees was paramount. The risk level to participants in the interviews was considered during the application for ethical approval and identified as minimal. No vulnerable people were involved in the research. An important concern during interview was respondents' understanding of consent, that they understood the interview process and their ability to withdraw at any time if they so desired. The consent form (Appendix 15) highlighted the participants' right to privacy, anonymity and confidentiality. At the start of each interview, I ensured that the interviewee was aware of the purpose of the study and how the interview would be conducted. Time was given for clarification of any questions regarding the interview.

Researcher power was examined as part of the ethical and reflexivity approach to the research. I recognised that a clear understanding of "voice" was necessary as part of the research framework. This research represents the voice of participants who are not a homogenous group, and that is reflected in the variety of quotes used and recommendations made. Consultation ensured that representation of quotes and opinions was accurate and that the power balance was more equally distributed (Pillow, 2003). I took care to clarify any ambiguous comments and ensure my representation of participant comments was a true reflection of their meaning. These strategies attempted to balance the power between myself, as a researcher and the participants, in order that consultation and participation were authentic and that the research findings reflect a dialogic engagement.

As part of my research, I endeavoured to maximise validity by using multiple sources of evidence: questionnaire, interviews, observation and secondary data such as school documentation. I cross-referenced the data gathered from each of these sources to scrutinise patterns, outliers and comments that seemed at odds with other information. During data analysis I examined similar and contradicting comments and patterns. I presented participant viewpoints on the six indicators of partnership as described by Epstein (2006a, 2016, 2018) and drew conclusions which relate to Irish schools based on participant comments and actions.

4.11 Reflexivity

Gewirtz and Cribb (2006) advocate an ethical reflexivity, which is both meticulous and attentive to values, as a key component of methodological rigour. Reflexivity allowed

me as a researcher to consider the generation of knowledge and how the representation of this knowledge occurred during my research process. A constructivist approach is based on a relativist ontology; this approach asks, "does something exist?" and if it does, "what constitutes its existence?" Ethical reflexivity is described as a means by which to "interrogate the relationships between researchers' value positions and the ways in which they conduct and write about their research" (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2006, p. 152). Researchers have a responsibility to consider the role their piece of research could play in ethical and political contexts. Hammersely (2008a), who also advocates ethical reflexivity, propounds that "adopting any other goal than the production of knowledge is, in my view, unethical for a researcher, because it undercuts her or his obligation to pursue knowledge in the most effective manner possible" (Hammersley, 2008, p. 557). My key goal was to generate knowledge around parents' experience of partnership, not to record my own opinions and positionality.

Having worked in post-primary schools for over 25 years, I have developed opinions and expectations regarding the parents of my students. Working as a SEN coordinator and a HSCL coordinator have given me unusual access to parents, which I would not have had as a subject teacher. My previous roles have allowed me to receive CPD in the area of partnership with parents, but actual contact with parents on a daily basis has given me a unique insight into parents' experiences of post-primary school. While conducting this research I needed to be aware of my own position in relation to partnership with parents and to be cognisant of presenting the views of the participants rather than my interpretation of their views. Reflecting on participant statements and clarifying any ambiguity with them allowed me to critically examine my representation of participant views and ensure that the voice of parents was accurately described.

Pillow (2003) suggests that reflexivity is a means by which qualitative researchers "legitimize, validate and question research practices and representations" (p. 175). She contends that researchers are using reflexivity in a manner which offers "comfort", relying on it as a methodological power that is commonplace. Instead, she advocates a reflexivity of discomfort as a means of interrupting these common practices. "A tracing of the problematics of reflexivity calls for a positioning of reflexivity not as clarity, honesty or humility, but as practices of confounding disruptions" (Pillow, 2003, p. 192). This resonated with me as some parents expressed opinions that did not sit well with me, I had to be careful not to be "on the teacher side". On occasion, I had to revise because

I found that I had unconsciously included researcher bias. I brought to the research my own values, assumptions, beliefs, and bias, which could have impacted the study, not only through data generation, but also in interpretation of this (Mertens, 2015). I was very aware of how my own experiences as a teacher could influence my interpretation of comments and data. Due to the nature of this study and the involvement of participants' reflection upon activities and occurrences within their schools, it was imperative to carefully monitor my own interaction with participants, my bias and reactions, so as not to distort the participants' construct of their reality. As described by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009), I had to consider the construction of social reality as well as its representation.

The issue of reflexivity ran concurrently with the research work. All aspects of the research were open to reflexive practices which acknowledged my own thoughts and opinions and then sought to understand their part in the research. Following the advice of Mertens (2015), I used an interaction journal to record my actions, thoughts and considerations during the research phase. I was acutely aware of my own position in relation to this research and actively questioned my interpretation of the data to ensure that my results and conclusions were not biased but accurately reflect the voice of participants in the research.

4.12 Generalisations

Generalisation of data and findings is frequently seen as the limitation and weakness of the case study approach. Some researchers believe that findings cannot be representative of the general population. However, case study advocates such as Yin (1994) and Hammersely (1992) reject the idea that case studies are intended to be representative, in the manner which surveys would be. Yin argues that analytical generalisation, not statistical generalisation, is relevant to case studies. Hammersely states that when considering the implications of case studies there is a balance between the accuracy and detail of the research and the empirical generalisability. "Generalisability to large, finite populations is not always the goal of research" (Hammersley, 1992, p. 191). Within this study, the aim of the research was to widen and generalise theories, a recognised purpose of case studies as identified by Yin (1994). The purpose of my research was to ascertain if Epstein's framework is applicable in an Irish post-primary context. It was also to inform my own practice and to enable me to develop a more planned process of

partnership with parents in my own school. This research provides an understanding of parents' construct of their partnership experience in the case study schools. Findings also offer an insight into the effectiveness of current practices and the scope for improvement or new developments as regards promoting partnership with parents.

I believe that the findings and recommendations applicable to the case study schools can be generalised to other schools with similar circumstances. The recommendations also widen the understanding of what partnership is at post-primary level and indicate what parents who participated in this research value as partnership. This research has enhanced my ability to develop policies related to partnership for my own school and begin to embed partnership with parents within our school planning, in line with DES and LAOS requirements.

4.13 Challenges

Conducting research brings with it challenges and I have experienced a myriad of these. My original proposal was to complete action research in partnership; I wanted to set up a community of practice based on Epstein's framework and examine its effect in a school. However, I moved school to a new position and suddenly found myself reconsidering my approach to the research. My research area also brought with it inherent problems. As discussed in Chapter 2, my area of interest, partnership with parents at post-primary level, experiences a lack of parental engagement both at national and international level. In addition, little research has been conducted on partnership at post-primary level in Ireland, which meant there was little directly relevant literature. The limited literature available to me did offer useful insight into partnership and provided invaluable suggestions on partnership activities favoured by parents.

Developing a good relationship with gatekeepers was of vital importance because my research required access to the schools on numerous occasions. Also, my observational research required that staff and parents were comfortable with my presence. I was aware that getting questionnaire responses would be difficult even though the participating schools were supportive. Fortunately, in the end I received a large quantity of completed questionnaires. This brought its own challenges. Familiarising myself with 379 questionnaires and the volume of data they generated was an arduous task. Moreover, the PTMs required a major time commitment. I had to accommodate myself to the PTM

schedule in both schools as well as attend my own school's six parent teacher meetings. Sourcing participants for interview was another challenge. Parents were reluctant to be involved as some were too busy, and others were afraid they would not know the "right" answers. I spent a lot of time informing parents about the interview process, explaining that there were no right or wrong answers, only their experience and point of view. Interestingly, it was difficult to get teachers in School B to participate in interviews. This school is seen as very academic, and many of the teachers did not see an interview on partnership with parents as relevant to them. I did explain that it would be very helpful to have their views and opinions, but it was still difficult to persuade more teachers to participate. In School A, the opposite was the case, and many teachers had opinions and insights they were eager to share. The interview process took much longer than I expected due to the semi-structured nature of interviewing. Participants were very generous with their time and therefore transcripts were long and detailed. Overall, the most challenging aspect of this research for me was remaining neutral; not showing my reaction to particular facts or incidences that were recounted to me. I was conscious of bias and wished to remain impartial but on occasion was confounded by the lack of mutual communication between schools and parents. This reinforced to me the value of the research I was conducting.

4.14 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach used in this research: how Epstein's framework for partnership formed the theoretical scaffold for evaluating partnership activities in the participating case study schools. A constructivist approach was utilised to gain insight into parents' understanding of current partnership activities. I used a mixed method approach, incorporating 379 questionnaires and 54 semi-structured interviews. The information generated by the quantitative data informed the interview process and also provided context and triangulation to allow comparisons to be drawn between data and maintain reliability and trustworthiness. Chapter 5 will describe the context of the research schools in detail, utilising the rich information gained via observation and secondary data. The subsequent chapters (6, 7, 8 and 9) will present the findings from the questionnaires, parent interviews and teacher interviews.

Chapter 5 Meet the Schools: Context Setting

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 1, Section 1.9, provided initial contextual information to situate this research. This chapter will augment this with additional details on the individual schools which will draw a clear picture of the current school settings. I will utilise information gained from observations, school documentation and parent associations to help the reader understand the actions occurring in the school which link with partnership, as described by Epstein. I will also refer to other models of parental involvement observed. During this research I had the opportunity to observe the case study schools during PTMs. This gave me an insight into how parents experienced a key moment in the school year. I was also able to observe school preparations for the PTMs and the common features of this preparation in each of the case study schools. As part of the research process, I was also able to critically examine secondary data such as policies, procedures and plans. This chapter will describe the observation findings and the types of documentation provided by the school as well as school documentation freely available on the web and DES website. The parent association in each school provided insight into their engagement with the schools which is also discussed in this chapter. This chapter will begin by describing the additional research methodologies used and then provide a detailed contextual portrait of each school.

5.2 Observations

As part of this research, I observed all PTMs in both case study schools. Each year, post-primary schools hold a PTM for each year group. This comprises of a meeting which runs from 4.15pm to 6.45pm on a designated evening where teachers of a specific year group are available to meet parents. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss student progress with parents and provide guidance on improvements which can be made. The length, as well as the start and finish times of the meetings, are set by the DES. I attended six PTMs in School A and seven in School B to distribute questionnaires and expression of interest forms for interview. These visits provided me with the opportunity to observe school-parent interaction and, to a lesser degree, parent-teacher interaction. In advance I had prioritised specific actions to observe. These were:

- Parent arrival at PTM

- Welcome given
- Guidance given to parents on arrival
- Welcome during the meeting between parents and teachers
- Parent interaction with support staff
- Parents leaving the PTM

These areas were of interest as they related to aspects of Epstein's partnership framework and offered insight into school communication approaches and school planning for a key event with parents. My attendance at all meetings in both schools ensured that I was able to observe the usual practices regarding these meetings in both schools. Therefore, I was able to discern if an occurrence was commonplace or an isolated incident and ascertain the common actions that occurred at all the meetings

5.3 Secondary Data

School documentation offered potential insight into how the case study schools plan and incorporate partnership with parents within policies and procedures. I was able to access a variety of documentation from the case study schools, and I also examined the websites of the schools and promotional materials from open evenings. Below is a list of the documentation provided by each school.

Table: 5.1: *School Documentation Provided*

Documentation	School A	School B
Acceptable Use Policy	Yes	Yes
Administration of Medication Policy	Yes	No
Admission Policy	Yes	Yes
Anti-Bullying Policy	Yes	Yes
Application Form	Yes	Yes
Assessment and Reporting Policy	Yes	No
Attendance Strategy	Yes	Yes
CCTV Policy	Yes	Yes
Code of Behaviour	Yes	Yes
Data Protection Policy	Yes	Yes
DEIS Plan/School Improvement Plan	Yes	No
Home School Liaison Policy	Yes	n/a

Documentation	School A	School B
Intimate Care Policy	Yes	n/a
Mission Statement	Yes	Yes
Religious Education Policy	Yes	No
School Journal	Yes	Yes
School Newsletters	Yes	Yes
School Tours/Trips and Tours Procedures	Yes	Yes
Special Educational Needs Document	Yes	No
SPHE Policy	Yes	Yes
School Calendar	Yes	Yes
Whole School Guidance	No	Yes
Whole School Inclusion Policy	Yes	No

As outlined in Chapter 4, Section 4.7, secondary data can provide knowledge of a school setting and provide contextual information about how partnership with parents is represented in the schools' key policies and procedures. As shown above, both schools provided a wide range of documentation, including policies, procedures, mission statements, school journals and newsletters. Documentation was also available on the DES website in the form of school inspections. The most relevant recent inspection reports were the Whole School Inspection Reports (DES) which examined aspects of partnership with parents. I undertook a critical analysis of these documents for evidence of the six key indicators of partnership with parents and to understand how the schools included parents in key school planning.

5.4 Feedback from Parent Associations

As discussed in Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2, all post-primary schools must have a parent association as outlined in the Education Act (DES,1998). Its role is to develop partnership between parents and the school, while representing the voice of parents. Both case study schools have an active parent association. As part of the research, I was interested in acquiring the parent association's opinion on a number of topics. Each parent association answered a range of questions which provided me with an understanding of their role within the schools:

- How many members are in the parent association?
- How many parent representatives are on the BoM?
- What is the main role of the parent association?
- What activities do the parent association organise?
- How does the school benefit from having a parent association?
- Do you have an AGM each year?
- Approximately how many parents attend this AGM?
- Do you fundraise? Is this the main area of work for the parent association?
    - What do you raise money for?
- Are you involved in policy discussions with the school?
    - If yes, what policies have recently been discussed?
- Are you affiliated to the NPCpp (National Parents Council Post-Primary)?
    - If no, why not?
- Are you aware of the Post-Primary Education Forum and its role?
- Any other comments.

5.5 Other Models of Partnership

Chapter 3 outlined the six different models of parental involvement which are identifiable in education (Swap, 1993; Cunningham & Davis, 1985; Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). While this research is concerned with the partnership model, I was also cognisant that other models might be evident in the case study schools. Elements of the protective model were evident in both schools. This model represents a separation between the roles of school and parents. This is a historical model of partnership where parents and schools work independently. Practices in both post-primary schools still have elements of this model, which is to be expected as many decisions in Irish schools do not involve parental input. The expert model places teachers as experts who do not value the opinions of parents. This was not the case in either school; both schools indicated an awareness of SSE guidance on including parent opinions. Both had some procedures in place for parental input and opinions on their child's education to be heard. However, it is true to say that few parents avail of this. The transmission model was apparent in School A via the HSCL courses run by the school. Within these courses, parents were seen as a resource and helped to develop a skill which could be utilised to support their child or other students in the school, for example the paired reading programme and the 1st year maths programme. This model was not apparent in School B as they do not run any parent courses. This should not be interpreted as a criticism. It is simply a matter of fact that most post-primary schools outside the DEIS scheme would not have the resources to run courses for parents. I did not observe any evidence of the curriculum enriched model

which centres around parental control over what is being taught in the school. However, School A did demonstrate aspects of this model in the very specific setting of dealing with students with SEN. Teachers and documentation described how parents are involved in individual education planning for students with additional needs. The consumer model of partnership, which situates parents as the experts without considering the professional expertise of teachers, did not present itself in either school during my research.

5.6 Background Information on School A

School A was established in 1963 as a voluntary, non-fee-paying Catholic post-primary school under the trusteeship of CEIST: Catholic Education: An Irish Schools Trust. CEIST has overall responsibility for schools of five collaborating religious congregations, including School A's founding congregation. "The core values of CEIST are intended to support and nourish the lives of the people who are at the heart of our schools" (CEIST, 2020). CEIST schools promote parents, students and staff working together to benefit all members of the school community. Resources and information on School A reflect a commitment to excellence; to improving the quality of teaching and learning; to showing respect for all; to promoting a welcoming and caring school community; and to developing a community of support via parents, past pupils and neighbours (CEIST, 2020). According to School A, "the educational progress and personal development of each student is the overriding consideration in the decisions taken and the policies drawn up" (School A, DEIS Plan, 2020). The DEIS plan, which provides a summary of school planning in the areas of retention, attendance, literacy, numeracy, examination attainment and educational progression is also informative about the school's key values and into how partnership is embedded in the school's processes and actions. Collaboration with community is clearly evident in School A as an integral aspect of its planning, and numerous community partnerships are identified within the DEIS plan. Analysis of student performance in Leaving Certificate examinations within the School A indicates that the number of students achieving third level places is steadily increasing. Attainment of third level places rose from 29% in 2014 to 47% in 2019. In 2020, 42% of Leaving Certificate students in School A attained third level places.

Students in School A come for a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, some of which can require additional support to engage with education. Some families are

experiencing homelessness, poverty and addictions. The school engages in a wide variety of community supports to promote school retention and college progression. Many students and parents engage fully and achieve their potential, while a minority find the challenges of post-primary education difficult. These students and parents would form the HSCL target group and avail of a range of additional services, such as guidance counselling, learning support and a young careers support group.

Both the principal and deputy principal were interviewed during the course of this research, and they confirmed the benefits of parental engagement and partnership with the school. They also expressed an awareness and understanding of the varying degrees of participation by parents in school life.

> I think our expectations aren't set in stone because they depend on where different parents are at, in terms of their availability workwise, more than anything else, but also their own [maybe] history with schools and whether they're willing to come into school or not. (Principal, School A)

Senior management in School A clearly indicated that partnership was a key aspect of school planning, but they acknowledged that despite their efforts a limited number of parents become involved in school activities.

5.6.1 Observations in School A

School A use the good attendance at PTMs as an opportunity to inform parents of relevant and important information by having what they call a pre-meeting. When parents received the reminder texts about the PTM, they were also invited to the pre-meeting. It ran from 3.45pm to 4.10pm and provided parents with information pertinent to the year their child is in. A pre-meeting was given at four of the six PTMs I observed. The 6th year parents were given a talk on completing the CAO application, 5th year parents on Study Skills, and 3rd and 2nd year parents on the implementation and assessment of the New Junior Cycle.

School A uses their gymnasium for PTMs. This is a large hall, and teachers were seated at individual desks around the perimeter with two visitor chairs. (See Appendix 16 for a diagram of set-up.) The general atmosphere was welcoming, confirming the stated school ethos and its commitment to partnership with parents. The gymnasium was warm

and bright, and staff appeared to engage well with parents. At each meeting there were at least three, sometimes four, members of staff present who did not teach the year group but were available to support parents when required. It was clear that parents were aware of the supports available and were appreciative of these. A queue system was set up close to each teacher station where parents could sit and wait. Upon arrival, parents were met by the principal and/or deputy principal who took their name and registered their attendance. The principal and deputy principal displayed excellent knowledge of all the parents' names and of who their child was. The HSCL coordinator was also in attendance at the entrance and welcomed parents. The parents were given their child's school journal which had been collected that day before school ended. The journal had a space where the child had listed subjects and teacher names for parents. I observed there were eight parents for whom there was no journal to collect as their child was absent that day. Three of these parents had brought a list with them, but the others did not know which teachers they had to visit. School staff went to the main building to look up the full list of teachers for these parents. This was an additional burden on staff during a busy time. Either a laptop at the check-in desk or having parents download the VSware app would have allowed these parents to quickly identify their child's teachers.

Teachers were situated in alphabetical order around the hall, their names displayed above them in each case. Parents then chose a queue to join and waited to speak with the teacher. Circulation to all the teachers took between one and a half and two hours depending on the year group. Junior cycle students have more teachers, so it took parents longer to see all the necessary teachers. Just inside the main door was a refreshment station. Tea and coffee were provided by the staff who ran the breakfast club and the student support worker. I noticed that parents tended to stand and chat with staff members about the school while taking refreshments. It was clear that they were interested in the school and recent events.

During the 1st year PTM, parents were informed about the layout of the room and advised on how to progress around the hall. My observations indicated that interactions between parents and teachers were positive. Parents and teachers greeted each other in a friendly manner, with a smile and welcome. Parents' conversations with teachers were private and varied in length from a few minutes to as long as 12 minutes. Teachers tried to keep each conversation short and to the point due to the number of parents waiting to see them.

I observed that the majority of parents thanked teachers as they finished before moving to the next teacher.

I noticed the HSCL coordinator approaching parents who looked upset when leaving a teacher on four occasions. She provided support and in one case helped the parent decide who to visit next. In one case, I observed that, upon arrival, a parent gave a list of teachers to the deputy principal and asked where to go. This parent was illiterate and was helped in navigating around the hall to see all the necessary teachers. After speaking to the parent each teacher showed the parent where to go next. This parents' interactions indicated that they were comfortable with the staff and aware that support was available. The HSCL coordinator appeared to be very supportive of parents and also showed an awareness of which parents may have needed additional support during the meeting. I asked the HSCL coordinator if she spoke with all parents at the meeting, and she explained: "Yes, I am available to all parents, but I am watching out for a few people who might find this meeting difficult for a variety of reasons" (HSCL coordinator, School A). At all the meetings, I observed the HSCL coordinator keeping a watchful eye on proceedings and checking in with parents as they left. During the course of the meetings, some parents came up to the principal and deputy principal for a private word. The guidance counsellor was also on hand at all the meetings. In some cases, they also had a subject on which to report to parents, and at other times they were just circulating and speaking to parents.

In School A parents are asked to pre-register for PTMs. This provided the HSCL coordinator with the opportunity to contact parents to make alternative arrangements. It was clear that teachers had done a significant amount of preparatory work. Some had individual notes made for students, and others had samples of work. Each parent who left the PTM was checked out so that teachers knew if a parent had left the meeting. This was important as some parents did not visit all teachers either due to lack of time or perhaps because they did not want to speak to a particular teacher.

5.6.2 Observed links to Epstein's Partnership Framework

After completing observation of the six PTMs in School A, I critically examined my notes and drew some conclusions. As I was aware that these conclusions were open to interpretation, I decided to request some feedback from the principal on my observations

and conclusion. The principal of School A was in agreement with my observations and conclusions.

School A demonstrated a high level of engagement with the partnership indicators: communication, parenting and learning at home. Parents were provided with the date of the meeting at the beginning of the year, and reminders were sent home by text and letter. The school's pre-meeting policy maximised parenting and learning at home opportunities. The pre-meetings afford parents an opportunity to acquire essential information relevant to their child. These meetings were described by staff as providing crucial advice and knowledge for parents to support their decision-making process. By aligning opportunities to develop parents' awareness of school topics and ways to support their child with the PTM, School A is providing parents with a way to attend two important events in one afternoon.

Communication between parents and school staff was observed to be welcoming, respectful and appreciated. Careful records of parental attendance at the PTM were kept, and parents who did not attend were contacted by the HSCL coordinator afterwards and invited to another meeting. In my opinion, the school demonstrated a high level of concern and care for parents in how PTMs were set up and how parents were welcomed and supported during the meetings. Key members of staff were available to support parents during the meetings, such as the HSCL coordinator, the guidance counsellor, the deputy principal and the principal. However, one notable omission was the school's failure to make information available to parents who did not attend the pre-meeting in other formats, for example in handouts or on the website.

5.6.3 Secondary Data provided by School A

School documentation and the school journal clearly state that School A is a caring school, with school structures designed to support a strong ethos of care. The Mission Statement of School A describes the school's ethos and its commitment to collaboration and partnership with parents and the wider community. One of the five core values of the founding religious order and the school is creating community. Documentation indicated that the school aims to create strong links between home and school which is described as for the good of the students. The school has a HSCL policy that aims "to establish close links between home, school and community which facilitate the

development of a learning environment for the students which promotes the development of the whole person" (School A, HSCL Policy). Parental links are initiated and supported by the HSCL coordinator who visits all 1st year parents and supports targeted parents. The HSCL cluster also runs classes for parents on a variety of topics, provides a Parenting Plus Programme for Parents and supports the parent association of the school. The Parent Plus Programme is a practical solution focused programme which builds on the strengths of parents. It is a programme which helps parents to manage and resolve conflict; build self-esteem and confidence; create connected relationships; positively discipline their adolescent and solve problems together (Parents Plus, 2020). This evidence suggests that interactions between the school and parents are prioritised and that there is active engagement to develop partnership with parents.

All Irish post-primary schools must have a SIP or a DEIS Plan (DES, 2016c). School A made available their DEIS plan which indicated that the school has included a section on partnership with parents and how to promote this. The school has set targets for increasing attendance at PTMs and at parent association meetings, providing training for parents on parenting teens and increasing school communication with parents. The DEIS plan outlines the steps to be taken to achieve these targets and the staff responsible for leading in these areas. The plan also includes strategies to promote partnership with outside agencies and further develop community links. The DEIS plan also recommends home visits by the HSCL coordinator and the SCP coordinator to parents of 1st years and then other parents as need arises. A key aspect of student retention in School A focuses on SEN students, supporting parents making decisions about the future and considering opportunities for these students after completing school. The parents of students recognised as poor attenders are also included in the target groups for developing communication and links. Parents are also referenced in the literacy and numeracy aspects of the DEIS plan. One literacy measure is to provide targeted families with a box of books suitable for the whole family. A numeracy initiative is to hold maths classes called "Helping your child with Maths" for parents of 1st years. Measures to improve attainment include a homework policy and guidelines which are given to parents of 1st years at incoming meetings. While measures to enhance educational progression include information sessions for parents pertaining to the Central Applications Office (CAO), Post Leaving Certificate Courses and Higher Education Access Routes.

As a DEIS school, School A prioritises attendance. The Attendance Strategy in School A has developed strong parental links in order to promote improved school attendance. If a student is absent without explanation for ten days, they are referred to the attendance committee. Parents are informed of support available to them and the HSCL coordinator links in with families. The school keeps a tracking list of students with ten or more unexplained days absent, and parents are asked to contact the school directly regarding any further absence.

Other documentation which referred to parents in a general sense were the Social Personal Health Education (SPHE), Visiting Speaker, Religious Education and Trips and Tours policies which described procedures for informing parents of pertinent information. The school's Anti-Bullying Policy explains the procedures for parents and students to bring a bullying incident to the school's attention and the actions which the school will follow while trying to resolve the situation. It provides parents with guidelines on what to do and expect in such a situation. The Assessment and Reporting Policy mentions parents briefly with the main aim of reporting stated as "to inform parents and students of progress" (School A, Assessment and Reporting Policy). School A also has a policy called "Whole School Inclusion" which addresses how SEN is supported in the school. Parental rights to consultation and involvement in their child's educational plan, as described in EPSEN (2004), are clearly stated in this policy, and parents are encouraged to communicate with the school.

The school journal is a key source of information and communication to students and parents, and it explains how parents and the school can work together to support students in their learning. The journal content includes vital information for parents, such as the calendar, attendance strategy, dress code, and lunchtime arrangements. A special message in the journal explains the communication systems in the school and reminds parents to contact the school if they have any concern about their child. The role of parents is also clearly laid out; there is a list of what the school expects parents to do, ranging from ensuring attendance at school to ensuring homework is done. Suggestions on how to support homework are also given. In School A, teachers can record positive and negative comments on a student's behaviour or homework in the journal. The journal is monitored by a teacher each fortnight, and parents are expected to sign the journal each week. The journal is described as a vital part of the school communication system with parents in School A. I did not receive a homework policy from the school, but the school

journal does provide parents with information on how to support their child with homework. School A publishes a newsletter twice a year, which includes a lot of information on school events, student activities and achievements, photos, parent activities and sporting events. It is a colourful, entertaining read which provides the reader an insight into school life in School A.

The school website requires updating; some information is out of date, and school policies are listed but not available to open or download. The website does provide good information on the history of the school and details on how to contact the HSCL coordinator, but more recent and up-to-date information would be of benefit to current and potential parents. School A also has a very active Twitter account which keeps followers up to date on recent developments and school news.

The final area I examined was the School Inspection Reports, which were available on the DES website. The most recent Whole School Inspection provided some insight into aspects of the partnership framework. School A was described by the Inspectorate as a caring community, with inclusive school structures and a strong ethos of care for all. The inspection report also described parent feedback during the inspection as manifesting strong support for the work of the school and also indicated that parents appreciate the welcoming atmosphere of the school. The report indicated that inclusion of parents in planning was evident and recommended building further upon this. Another recommendation was to develop parental awareness of the BoM and the work it does in the school.

5.6.4 Connecting Secondary Data to Epstein's framework

The array of documents provided by School A enabled me to familiarise myself with school's policies and procedures. These documents relate to the specific context of the school and the circumstances and environment in which the school operates. Directives from the DES state that school policies should be reviewed regularly, include parental input at the consultation phase and be approved by the BoM. Based on this knowledge, I was aware that these documents offer valuable insight into how the school has included partnership with parents during planning and offered me an understanding of the school's rhetoric on partnership with parents.

The School DEIS plan includes a plan to promote partnership with parents and includes targets which aim to enhance parents' attendance at school events. The plan does not include opportunities to develop participation, decision-making or refer to any of the excellent information sessions the school provides. It clearly demonstrated that partnership is very closely linked to parental attendance at school events and indicates that School A would benefit from broadening activities they include in partnership development. School A's policies clearly reflect a commitment to community, one of the indicators of partnership with parents. It formed an integral part of the school mission statement and was reiterated in other policies. The Whole School Inspection Report also commented positively on the school's commitment to community. The DEIS plan in particular listed actions and strategies that the school was employing to develop partnership with parents. A valuable point to note is that these actions had a targeted approach, with staff members linked in and review dates set.

Parenting and learning at home are two partnership indicators that Epstein included in her framework. School A has a distinct advantage in this area. As a DEIS school, it has a HSCL coordinator, a SCP coordinator and the home visits and parent courses they provide. It is clear from questionnaire findings, parent and teacher interviews and documentation received that a variety of parent courses are run by the school and the local HSCL cluster for the benefit of parents. The content of the courses varies from educational to personal development. These courses represent School A's awareness of parenting and how parent courses can help parents support their child's education. Consideration of parenting is reflected in the provision of the school calendar early in the school year, which provides parents with adequate notice of school events and allows parents to plan for attendance at key school information events. Planned pre-meetings indicate that learning at home is also promoted in this school. All evidence in school documentation would indicate that the concept of partnership is a foundation stone of this school, is a part of the school culture and affects the decision-making process of the school. There is a clear link between the rhetoric in policy documents and school practice in planning and review processes related to partnership.

5.6.5 Parent Association in School A

The parent association in School A consists of 18 members, 8 of whom come regularly to meetings while the others help with events and attend meetings when they can. There

are two parent representatives on the BoM. The two main functions of the parent association are organisation of the 6th year graduation ceremony and fundraising. On occasion, representatives from the parent association are involved in policy review. Each year, the parent association organises the 6th year graduation, an annual bingo night as a fundraiser and a hot chocolate morning for students. The parent association highlighted three key benefits of their work to the school. It encourages more involvement of parents, keeps parents more informed about what is going on in the school, and it is good for the students to see that their parents are taking an interest in their education. Annually, the parent association holds an AGM in October which informs parents of the work of the parent association, and usually there is a guest speaker on a topic relevant to parents. The AGM is usually attended by about 15-20 parents, but sometimes fewer. Fundraising was described as the main area of work for the parent association with monies raised being used for the 6th Year graduation and for any item the school might be looking for or small improvements to the building. When asked if they were involved in policy discussions in the school, the parent association indicated that it was sometimes involved and is currently working on the uniform policy. The parent association in School A is not affiliated to the NPCpp due to the associated costs and were happy with this decision. They were not aware of the Post-Primary Education Forum and its role.

School management indicated their appreciation of the work undertaken by the parent association, while acknowledging that it is the same parents who are involved each year. It recognised the difficulty experienced in sourcing new members and supporting attendance at the AGM each year and that this was a long-term issue for the school.

5.7 Background Information on School B

School B was founded in 1890 and has occupied its current building since 1950. The school has a long tradition of academic excellence of which it is very proud. It is a non-fee-paying school, in the Le Chéile Schools Trust. Le Chéile consists of schools from 15 religious congregations. The main object of Le Chéile is to develop a vision of Catholic education and oversee the implementation of this vision in its schools, encouraging preservation of key aspects of the evangelical heritage of their founding congregation, and to facilitate the opening of new schools if and where the need arises and resources permit (Le Chéile, 2020). School B aims to "provide an excellent, all round education in a Christian environment" (School B, policies) Key objectives of the school include the

development of a friendly and caring environment, recognising responsibility to the wider community and developing a spirit of service. Parents are recognised as primary educators in school documentation, and School B declares a commitment to working in partnership with parents. School B also states in policies that it supports the principles of inclusiveness and partnership.

Analysis of student performance in Leaving Certificate examinations indicates that the number of students who achieved a place in third level education is maintained at a very high level each year. Figures demonstrate that in the last six years, over 92% of students gained a place at third level. In 2019 and 2020, 100% of students achieved third level places.

5.7.1 Observations in School B

When observing PTMs in School B, I followed the same process as used in School A. I attended all meetings and noted my observations on each occasion. I then compiled a summary of my observations and provided this to the school principal for feedback. The principal of School B clarified that the PTMs also provided the opportunity to meet with the year head, the guidance counsellor and learning support teacher/s. In addition, they informed me that on average 10% to 15% of parents meet with the principal or deputy principal at these meetings.

The assembly hall and a few nearby classrooms are utilised for the PTMs. A similar layout to School A was used with teachers around the perimeter of the hall and a queuing system in operation (see Appendix 16 for diagram). Approximately 25 teachers were stationed here, and their names were displayed above the teacher in each case. Depending on the number of teachers involved in the meeting, two classrooms across from the assembly hall were also used. A list of student names was on a desk at the main entrance and a sign indicated to parents to sign in and sign out. Beside the list was a handout with a plan for the assembly hall and extra classrooms in use for the PTM. It listed the teachers' names and their subjects, and also showed a map of where each teacher was located. Upon arrival, some parents did not notice the sign-in desk and headed straight into the assembly hall. Others signed in and took the handout. At two of the PTMs, for the first hour or so, the school caretaker sat on a desk at the front door and directed parents to sign in. This was a very casual approach to support parents on arrival at the PTM. I

was mistaken for a member of staff and asked many questions about the location of certain teachers, if anyone was absent and what to do, especially at the 1st year PTMs. There was a clear need for more supported check-in arrangements.

Upon entry to the assembly hall, parents picked a teacher queue to join. A number of couples arrived together and split up to attend different teachers. One couple told me that they alternate each year which teachers they see; they described it as a 'divide and conquer' approach. This was for speed as the meeting could be quite long, lasting about two to two and a half hours depending on the year group. The principal and deputy principal were in their offices and occasionally circulated during the evenings. They circulated in the Assembly Hall, spoke to some parents and checked in with the students serving tea and coffee. The guidance counsellor was in her office upstairs if needed, and the location was included on the handout. Parents began to queue very early for some teachers. These tended to be teachers with a number of classes or the year head.

Volunteer students stayed in school to help out. They provided tea, coffee and biscuits to parents as they entered the hall. Parents tended to take their drink to the next queue they were joining. Teachers greeted parents in a friendly manner, and the atmosphere was positive and busy. Many teachers had examples of students' work for parents and student copybooks, and some had individual progress sheets showing the student's progress in comparison to the class and individually. Some parents spent a long time with teachers, while others moved quickly from teacher to teacher. I observed that many parents in School B had a printed copy of the latest report with them. This could have been to have teachers' names to hand or to check grades with teachers. When leaving the PTM, parents were to sign out but many did not; either they did not see the notice to do so, or they were in a hurry.

5.7.2 Observed links to Epstein's Partnership Framework

School B had good levels of communication between parents and teachers, and meetings lasted approximately 10-15 minutes. However, upon arrival there was an air of uncertainty as parents of younger year groups did not know the format of signing in and out and collecting the handout. The principal and deputy principal were friendly and welcoming when they attended the PTM. However, overall parents' interaction was with the subject teachers, and no specific staff member was in charge of welcoming parents

and offering support. The volunteer students who served tea and coffee represented the school very well and were observed answering parent questions. I met many parents who had questions about what to do and where to go while handing out my questionnaires. There was an apparent need for a supported system of checking in for parents; this would also be useful for facilitating accurate records of who had attended as well as providing some reassurance to parents.

5.7.3 Secondary Data provided by School B

School B's mission statement focuses on the development of excellence in all areas of school life, along with opportunities for spiritual development. The school's founding congregation sees itself as having a responsibility towards the local community. This is acknowledged as an objective of the school with a view to developing a spirit of service. So, while the school focuses on students and their development, the statement also refers to a responsibility to the wider community. Parents could be included in this wider community but are not specifically referred to by the mission statement.

The school's Attendance Policy refers to parents as the primary educators and commits the school to support and enhance this education: "We work in partnership with parents to ensure that an environment is created where students look forward to coming to school" (School B policy, 2020). These aims of the Attendance Policy promote a spirit of partnership with parents and the community, with a view to supporting attendance. This policy outlines the steps the school will take to improve attendance including contacting parents, listening to parent concerns regarding absences and providing support. It also outlines parents' responsibility to ensure their children come to school and highlights the impact of extended holidays during term time.

The School Code of Behaviour document outlines the expected behaviour of students within the school and how parents can support this. This document begins by informing parents of how positive behaviours will be acknowledged and then informs parents of sanctions for various student actions. Parents are urged to support the school and monitor their child. Parents are requested to monitor compliance with policy on uniforms, and provide notes for absences and early off's. It is also briefly mentioned that the school appreciates the support of parents in these matters. Similarly, the Admissions and Enrolment Policy states that it supports the principles of inclusiveness and partnership; it

outlines the organisation of the school, with a BoM which includes two parents and a parent association made up of parent volunteers. In general, this document focuses on items that parents will be provided with, such as calendar, return to school arrangements and booklists. It also highlights information sessions and PTMs that parents will be invited to attend. The Whole School Guidance plan outlines a consultation process with parents in relation to guidance activities and networking to establish links with parents who can contribute to guidance events such as careers evenings and mock interviews for students. Discussions with parents at PTMs, information sessions and talks in relation to work experience are described as an aspect of the guidance plan. This plan also refers to conducting surveys of parents in relation to their views and experience of guidance. The Anti-Bullying Policy outlines actions parents can take to report bullying; how parents can be involved in decision making around the anti-bullying policy; and how parents can support the policy by discussing bullying, its behaviours and effects with their children. The Acceptable Use Policy refers to the use of digital technologies and internet within the school. It states that parents will be informed of key support structures and organisations that deal with illegal material or harmful use of the internet but does not include details of how this will be done. The policy also states that parent representatives will be involved in an annual review.

Initially the school website was very poor and had little information, but it was revamped in 2019 and now has a wider range of information. Parents can access information on the school, its policies and procedures. There is information on extra-curricular activities but not specifics about times or how to join. The website is much improved but would benefit from more information about student activities and school events. Eight of the school policies are available on the school website for download, and there is a detailed guidance site for parents and students. The Guidance Website is accessed from a link on the main school website and is an excellent resource to both parents and students. The link could be more visible and more easily accessible to parents. Parent association newsletters from 2015-2017 are available on the school website. In addition to the above, I examined the school inspections. As mentioned in relation to School A, Whole School Inspections offer an insight into school planning and implementation. The most recent whole school inspection in School B indicated that the parent association was very supportive and engaged in activities in the school. Parents surveyed during the inspection commented on the good atmosphere in the school and that they felt welcome at the school.

However, recommendations by the Inspectorate included seeking parental views on school issues on a regular basis.

5.7.4 Secondary Data connected to Epstein's framework

School B provided a wealth of documentation and information regarding policies and procedures in their school which contributed to my understanding of the way partnership with parents is currently addressed in the school. The policies and procedures are school specific and offered a clear indication of school rhetoric regarding partnership. School B's mission statement clearly articulated a sense of responsibility to the wider community via a spirit of service. The mission statement is referenced in most of the school policies, but the information provided did not clarify how this responsibility is acted upon. School B's policies do refer to parents and partnership; in particular, the attendance policy described working in partnership with parents to create a school environment that students looked forward to. Though the policy expands on ways to support attendance, it does not identify how the school and parents will work in partnership.

The indicator of community is also alluded to, but the documents provided do not specify how this is planned for or evaluated. Communication, another indicator of partnership, is mentioned frequently within School B policies. The school stated clearly how it will contact parents regarding absence, and behaviour issues, and its documentation outlines how parents can contact the school if they have an issue to discuss. However, the documentation does not reference regular communication on general school matters. The Admissions and Enrolment Policy refers to supporting the principle of partnership within its operating context, but no further details are given, except what information parents can expect to receive (such as booklists and calendar).

Secondary data confirms that School B does engage in some activities that support parenting and learning at home activities. Parents can avail of a wide range of information sessions, and guest speakers provide input on such topics as internet safety and sexual health. These partnership activities are part of the regular school calendar but do not appear to be connected to a school plan or targeted actions to support student outcomes. It appears that these sessions are traditional occurrences in the school, but their purpose and value are not clearly explained in any of the school literature. Volunteering, another indicator of partnership, did appear in the guidance plan. This document described the

value of establishing a network of parents who can support guidance activities such as mock interviews and career evenings. School B utilises parent expertise to run mock interviews with 5th and 6th year students and also to provide a career evening where students can meet experts from different professions and ask questions about career paths and related matters.

The most recent Whole School Inspection Report recommended that the school engage more with parents, seeking their opinions and views on different issues. This suggests that incorporating parent views in decision making could be improved. In summary, references to partnership with parents do occur within the provided secondary data but in an abstract format, without a clear vision of how this will be achieved or how it will contribute to student outcomes.

5.7.5 Parent Association School B

School B parent association meetings are regularly attended by 12 to 15 people. The parent association's WhatsApp group has 40 participants, and there are 30 in the parent association email group. There are two parent representatives on the BoM. The parent association's main role is to support the school in whatever way it can in delivering the best educational experience possible to the students. The association organises a variety of activities for the school, some of which are fundraisers. The benefits of having a parent association as described are having the opportunity to consult on issues affecting children in the school, such as mobile phone usage, and having parents' perspective on issues that arise and are informed by forces outside the school environment. Each year the AGM is held at the beginning of October and is attended by approximately 60 parents. The AGM provides parents with an overview of the past year and the accounts for the year. A speaker is invited to address the parent body on relevant issues such as supporting student mental health. Fundraising is part of the work of the parent association in School B but is not the primary area of work. Fundraising helps finance study skills sessions for students, transportation to sports events, library resources, additional science and home economics equipment and any other items the school suggests would benefit the students. The parent association described its main work as organising a variety of activities for the school, including mock interviews, career evenings, pre-debs reception and social evenings for parents of new pupils. The association is involved in policy discussions with the school, the most recent of which has been the mobile phone usage policy. The

parent association is not affiliated with the NPCpp. They view that the affiliation costs are too much, and they would rather students benefit directly from monies they raise. They indicated that they were actively voicing opinions in their school and did not feel that membership of the NPCpp would offer anything additional. The parent association indicated awareness of the PPEF and its role but has not engaged with it.

5.8 Chapter Conclusion

Observations and secondary data have yielded a broader understanding of the participating schools. Consideration of this information sheds light on how partnership with parents is represented in both case study schools. Observations during the PTMs helped me to understand how parents experience these important yearly meetings. The secondary data provided by the schools allowed me to familiarise myself with policies and procedures and consider how partnership with parents is represented in the planning of both schools. Combining this information with the data generated by the questionnaires and interviews has made possible a fuller understanding of how partnership is currently operating within schools. Mapping Epstein's indicators for partnership upon the actions and activities in the case study schools has enabled me to evaluate partnership in action and also to recognise missed opportunities for partnership. In chapters 6, 7 and 8 below, I will introduce the data generated by parent and teacher questionnaires and the findings elicited during parent and teacher interviews. In Chapter 9, I will discuss Epstein's partnership indicators as represented within the case study schools.

Chapter 6 The Analysis of Quantitative Data

6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the responses made by parents and teachers who completed questionnaires entitled "Partnership with Parents in Post-Primary Schools". The sample population for the questionnaires was described in Chapter 4, Section 4.5.4. Throughout this chapter I will make observations based on the data which was generated during fieldwork and analysed using SPSS v25 for Windows as recommended by TCD for use in academic research to analyse complex statistical data analysis. This chapter aims to evaluate Epstein's framework for partnership by critically examining parent and teacher responses. The examination will use Epstein's six indicators of partnership as key heading for discussion.

6.2. Participation in Questionnaires

All parents and teachers were provided with a copy of the questionnaire and encouraged to participate in this research. Overall, School A had a higher rate of participation in questionnaires compared with School B.

Table 6.1:   *Questionnaire response rate*

Response	School A		School B	
	%	**No.**	**%**	**No.**
Parent Response Rate	50	170/340	35	209/600
Teacher Response Rate	55	22/40	27	12/44

Questionnaires were the initial part of my research and were expected to provide a snapshot of parent and teacher opinions on partnership, which could then be examined in more detail during the interview phase. I attended all PTMs in both schools, distributed the questionnaire as parents arrived and collected completed questionnaires from parents as they left. Some parents did not return forms when leaving. Parents who did not attend the meetings were identified, provided with a questionnaire and invited to participate. Zechmeister and Shaughnessy (1994) state that the typical return rate of questionnaire is 30%, while Baruch and Holtom (2008) indicate that the average response rate is 35.7%. I was sceptical of getting sufficient questionnaires back as I have found that the level of

response to similar activities in my own school was always low, but I decided it was a worthwhile endeavour due to the possibility of rich data. Overall, I was fairly happy with the response rate, and I believe respondents provided very useful data.

6.3. Themes for Analysis

Thematic analysis formed a major aspect of my research as I utilise Epstein's framework as a structure for considering partnership in the case study schools. As discussed in Chapter 3, Section 3.7, Epstein's framework offered me a systematic measurement of partnership, which enabled me to evaluate the current position of partnership in the case study schools. The clear structure of partnership activities allowed me to ascertain if these partnership indicators were represented in the case study schools and evaluate the level of partnership reflected.

Consideration of the data generated was completed under six general headings. The first heading, General Information, referred to context questions, such as the year group of participant's children in school and the age and gender of participants. The five remaining headings mapped to the six indicators of partnership as outlined by Epstein (Epstein 1986, Epstein & Associates, 2018): parenting and learning at home, communicating, volunteering, decision making and finally, collaborating with community. I combined parenting with learning at home as both of these areas are firmly linked together in both schools and would be difficult to separate into two distinct areas. The areas of learning at home and parenting are not terms readily used in Irish post-primary schools; therefore, key words and activities pertaining to these partnership indicators were prioritised in the analysis. School A has actions which fall within the parenting category, and both schools provide talks on various topics to parents at transition periods, which can be related to learning at home. Neither school indicated that these talks were specifically designed to support parenting and learning at home, but in reality, that is what they are doing. Bearing these key indicators in mind, while analysing the data generated, allowed me to continually consider if I was observing aspects of Epstein's partnership framework or not.

6.4. Analysis of Parent Questionnaires

The parent questionnaire consisted of 18 questions which related to key areas of the Epstein framework, which I used to evaluate partnership in the case study schools. This section will summarise the questions which appeared under each theme and describe the findings. A copy of the parent questionnaire is available in Appendix 8. A full copy of data generated from the parent questionnaires is available in Appendix 17. How the questions connected to each theme is indicated in the table below:

Table 6.2:   Area of partnership framework and related questions

Partnership Framework	Parent Questionnaire
General Information	Q1, Q18
Parenting/Learning at home	Q3, Q4, Q9, Q14
Communicating	Q2, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8
Volunteering	Q10, Q11
Decision making	Q12, Q15, Q16, Q17
Collaborating with community	Q13

6.4.1 General Information Questions

A total of 379 questionnaires were returned with 170 from School A and 209 from School B. Three general questions were used to generate information on parent context. These questions were asked in order to give an insight into the parents who participated in the questionnaire.

- Q1 What year is your daughter in?
- Q18 a) Gender?
- Q18 b) Age?

As shown in Table 6.3, each year group was represented within the parent respondents. The spread of participants was beneficial as parents had different experiences within the case study schools. This suggested that possibly parents would have had the opportunity to experience different aspects of school partnership with regard to parenting and learning at home and in relation to the other indicators of partnership.

Table 6.3 *Year group of children (%)*

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
School A	23	6	20	17	12	22
School B	14	18	19	17	17	15
Total	19	12	19	17	15	18

Overall, 81% (86% School A and 76% School B) of respondents were female, with 19% (14% School A and 24% School B) being male. This trend was also observed during the PTMs as the majority of parents visiting teachers were female. Approximately 37% of parents in School A were between the ages of 30-40, while only 6% of School B parents were within this age group. In School B, 34% of respondents identified as within the 51+ age group in comparison to 13% of parents in School A. The age profile of participants suggested that parents in School B were older. As previously noted, School A is located in an area of deprivation and School B is in an area of affluence (HP Pobal Index, 2020). The age profiles are in line with data from HP Pobal index which indicated that parents tend to be younger in areas classified as disadvantaged and that in areas of affluence parents tend to be older.

6.4.2 Parenting and Learning at Home

For Epstein, the indicator parenting refers to schools helping all families to establish home environments which support children as students (Epstein & Associates, 2009, 2018). This can be done via school advice, workshops, messages on parenting the different ages, parent education and training, family support programmes and home visits. Learning at home is described as providing information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions and planning (Epstein, 2009, 2018). A full list of the six indicators and sample activities as described by Epstein is available in Appendix 5. The questionnaire included five questions for parents related to these themes:

- Q3 What kind of information does the school provide you with?
- Q4 Is there other information you would like to get from the school?
- Q4a If yes, what kind of information would you like to get?

- Q9 How helpful do you find school reports? Explain.
- Q14 Does the school provide you with information which helps you support your child with homework and study at home?

Responses for both schools indicated that parents were happy with the general information provided on school policies, subject information, examinations and subject choice. Additional information was not required by 72% (77% School A and 68% School B) of respondents, while 20% (17% School A and 22% School B) requested additional information on school committees, parent association, extra-curricular activities and student progress. Parents in both schools indicated that the schools provide a series of information sessions at times of major decisions which are helpful to them in supporting their child. There were active parent associations in both schools, but only School B's website provided details of the parent association, its work and activities; however, the contact information was outdated. Neither school indicated how to join the parent association if a parent was interested in becoming involved. According to the schools, extra-curricular activities are announced and displayed on the school noticeboards for students. This method of advertising extra-curricular activities does not support parental inclusion. Some students do not bring information home about school activities, and parents are unaware of opportunities for their child. Parent responses indicated the benefit of having information available in a format which parents can look up themselves, when needed, rather than the only option being to contact the school. School A parents indicated that more information on extracurricular activities and sports was needed, while School B parents requested enhanced information on recent events, school developments and news about what was happening for students in school.

Responses in relation to school reports indicated that 57% (75% School A and 43% School B) of parents found reports to be very helpful. A total of 40% (23% School A and 53% School B) of parents indicated that school reports were only a little helpful, suggesting that the quality of report comments or use of standard comments was problematic, while 3% (2% School A and 4% School B) found reports unhelpful. The use of short standard comments from dropdown lists is available in both schools. Teachers could choose a standard comment or create their own free text comment. Students therefore received very varied reports depending on teacher choice of comments or very generic reports if teachers selected similar standard comments from the drop-down menu. Forty per cent is a large portion of parent respondents who are unhappy with the current form of reporting student progress. Parents in School B, in particular,

were dissatisfied with the school report. In light of the recent changes to Junior Cycle and the required changes in reporting for students, the use of these standard comments should be declining. They do not reflect the necessary type of assessment for learning feedback that teachers are now required to provide students and their parents with. School A and School B should consider ways to enhance reports so parents find them more helpful as this would benefit student outcomes.

When parents were asked to explain how helpful they find school reports, 89 (School A 32, School B 57) of the 360 respondents gave reasons why reports were helpful. These answers were thematically analysed and indicated three key areas of comment by parents in both schools: details of student progress, clear information and feedback on reports, and the need for freeform teacher comments rather than a generic bank of comments. Feedback on reports refers to the process whereby teachers provide students with specific guidance on how they can improve their work and grades. Of the 89 parents who made additional comments on the helpfulness of reports, 43 indicated that reports were the key component in understanding their child's progress: "They are an excellent point in time view of my daughter's academic progress and highlight any area that may require attention and/or support" (Parent, School A). Thirty-one parents indicated that the information on reports was generic, lacking in detail and gave no recommendations for improvement: "generic comments are given by some teachers, they should state areas where improvement can be made" (Parent, School B) and "not particularly useful, does not give adequate indication of progress or learning needs" (Parent, School B) and "details are too short, advice on improvement would be great" (Parent, School A). Parents in School A (75%) displayed a higher rate of satisfaction with reports than parents in School B (43%). These remarks by parents indicated that parents require comments on school reports which are relevant to the individual student and which offer suggestions on how to improve. This would be in line with DES advice on reporting, where assessment and feedback should offer constructive advice. Despite the differences between the schools, parent comments were very similar.

Q 14 examined the level of support provided to parents to help guide their child in homework and study. Overall, these results were thought-provoking, with 36% (24% School A and 40% School B) of respondents in both schools showing a large representation in the "no information provided" category. Thirty-three per cent (39% School A and 29% School B) of respondents felt they got some information, and 31%

(37% School A and 26% School B) felt they got a lot of information. A majority of parents surveyed indicated the need for more guidance on how to support homework and study at home. With 69% of respondents indicating "no or some information provided", this is an important area for the participating schools to address. As a teacher, I wondered if it was a specific year group where parents felt this need for more guidance on homework and study. However, further examination of the associated year groups where parents indicated "no information provided" on homework or study indicated that this was fairly equally distributed across all year groups. From 6% to 7% in each year group indicated they need more input on how to support their child. On examination of individual schools, the figures indicated that fewer parents in School B were satisfied with the amount of information provided for support of homework and study. Parents in School B clearly indicated their need for more informational support on homework and study.

Table 6.4   *Information provided to support homework and study (%)*

Respondents	No information	Some information	A lot of information
School A	24	39	37
School B	45	29	26
Total	36	33	31

6.4.3 Communication

Communication is a key aspect of Epstein's framework for partnership with parents in post-primary school. Effective forms of communication about school activities and student progress are declared essential for good partnership with parents (Epstein, 2009, 2018). Forms of communication include PTMs, formal and informal meetings, language translators, useful notices/information leaflets, information on school policies, programmes, transitions and curricular and extracurricular activities. The questions asked relating to this area were:

- Q2 How does the school communicate with you?
- Q5 Do you think the school's methods of communication are enough?
- Q6 How often do you visit the school?
- Q7 What is the main reason you would visit the school?

- Q8 As a parent, how do you contact the school?

Parents indicated in both schools that they felt communication methods from the school are sufficient, with 85% (90% School A and 82% School B) in agreement and 11% (7% School A and 14% School B) not agreeing. The remaining parents did not answer this question. Slightly more parents in School B believed school communication methods to be insufficient. The main methods of communication used by the schools were text messages, a yearly PTM, letters and reports. Two of these methods of communication (the yearly PTM and reports) conveyed information regarding student progress, and two provided information about events/activities in school. This showed that parents were also interested in what was happening in the school as well as in relation to their own child. In total 53% (48% School A and 57% School B) of parents surveyed indicated that they visit the school once a year for the PTM, with 28% of parents (25% School A and 30% School B) indicating they visit the school once a term.

When parents were asked to identify the main reasons for attending the schools, responses clearly indicated that for 72% (65% School A and 77% School B) their main reason to visit school was the PTM. Other reasons for visiting the school were less frequently cited: meeting with a staff member (11%), student progress (6%) and parent association (3%). This finding demonstrates the value and importance of PTMs for parents. The annual PTM is regarded as vitally important by parents, school management and teachers, this being the main method of communicating student progress in both schools. School management indicated that attendance at the PTMs is very good and provides the schools with an opportunity to engage with parents in person. Parents were also asked about their preferred way of contacting the school; 92% of parents indicated that a phone call was their preferred method of communication. School journal (38%) and letter (14%) were the next two preferred methods of contact for parents. Use of the website was very low on the preferred methods of communication for parents in both schools. This may be indicative of the lack of up-to-date information on the schools' websites. Communication preferences were very similar in both schools and indicate the commonality of parents in relation to school communication methods.

6.4.4 Volunteering

According to Epstein (2009), volunteering is recognised as the organisation of parent support and help with a school. Classroom volunteers, parent rooms, school survey on availability, parent telephone trees and parent participation to support safety and help with particular programmes are seen as key indicators of volunteering in Epstein's framework (Epstein 2018). In Ireland, parent rooms are generally only available in DEIS schools which have the HSCL scheme. Parent telephone trees/contact lists are available at primary level in Ireland but not usually at post-primary level and not currently in the case study schools. To establish if parents were involved in volunteering activities, the following two questions were asked:

- Q10 As a parent what kind of activities do you become involved in at this school?
- Q11 In what other ways would you like to be involved?

Seventy-six per cent (75% School A and 76% School B) of respondents in both schools indicated that the main activities they were involved in were attending events or shows held in the school. The next highest area of involvement overall was in fundraising at 25% (15% School A and 22 % School B). School B had a higher proportion of parents involved in fundraising as indicated by information and data received from the school. The parent association in School B raises a significant amount of money each year. Other volunteering activities were limited to a small number of parents in both schools. Volunteering by parents in school accounted for 4% of activities in School A and 27% in School B. Involvement in activities related to school curriculum/planning accounted for 6% of respondents in School A and 13% of respondents in School B. The number of respondents involved in the parent associations was particularly low in School A at 5%, in comparison to School B was 28%. School A has disadvantaged status, and management indicated that parent representation on the parent association is limited usually to the same few people each year. This may account for the low representation in School A. School B indicated that parent association meetings are well attended with between 10 and 25 parents attending each meeting, and larger events with speakers usually have good parent representation with approximately 60 plus parents. However, attendance at sub-committee meetings for policy review is lower, with only between 3 and 5 parents in attendance.

These findings, as summarised in Table 6.5 below, indicate that parents were predominantly involved in events their children are part of and to a lesser extent involved in fundraising. There was less participation in areas of school development, which reflects national and international trends (Andrews, 1999; OECD, 2006b; OECD, 2013a). The difference in participation between School A and School B can possibly be explained by the geographical and economic situation of each school.

Table 6.5   *Activities parents become involved in (%)*

	School A	School B	Total
Attending School Show/Event	75	76	76
Fundraising	15	32	25
Volunteering in school	4	27	16
Parent Association	5	28	18
Decisions about Curriculum	2	6	4
Discussing School Policies	4	7	6
BoM	2	13	8
Helping with Sports Trips	3	12	8
Other	7	7	7

When parents were asked about other ways they would like to be involved in the school, only 24 parents out of 379 answered this question. The majority (14 respondents) said they were too busy to become involved in the school, while the other 10 (all from School B) indicated various activities they would like to be involved in. These included mock interviews, green school initiatives, sports days and parent association. The answers of these respondents indicate that there is a perception that involvement in post-primary school requires a time commitment.

6.4.5 Decision Making

The inclusion of parents in school decision-making processes is a key indicator of partnership in Epstein's framework; partnership is about including parents in school decision-making processes and developing parent leaders and parent representatives (Epstein & Associates, 2018). As described in Chapter 2, all post-primary schools in

Ireland are required to have a parent association, and BOMs must have two parent representatives. Four questions sought insight into parents' involvement in these aspect of the case study schools.

- Q12 Are you involved in any decision making with the school?
- Q15 Do you think your voice is heard by the school?
- Q 16 Do you see yourself as a partner with the school, in your child's education?
- Q17 Do you think parents need to be involved in the school?

When surveyed on involvement in decision making, an overwhelming 87% (86% School A and 88% School B) of parents indicated they were not involved, 6% (6% School A and 6% School B) indicated they were involved and 7% (8% School A and 6% School B) were unsure if they had ever been involved in decision making regarding school issues. As parental involvement in decision making is a key aspect of SSE, this is a concerning statistic. Parental opinion is a key aspect of evaluating how a school is operating. Parents require multiple opportunities to give their opinion, and there are many creative ways for schools to solicit parent feedback (DES, 2016c). It is also a requirement of the LAOS process of school planning for post-primary schools that parent opinions be sought and considered. The very low figure of involvement indicated that parents do not consider themselves to be involved in school decisions. Both schools need to reflect on the opportunities for decision making which are open to parents and to engage in school self-evaluation on their inclusion process for parent opinions and views within school planning processes.

Parents were questioned about their perception of 'voice' within the school and asked to indicate, on a Likert scale, if they "felt heard, heard sometimes or not heard at all". Overall, 45% (55% School A and 37% School B) of parent respondents indicated that they felt "heard" by the school. A higher percentage of School A parents felt they were "heard" in comparison to School B. Other findings in relation to parent voices being heard indicated that 33% (31% School A and 34% School B) felt they were "heard sometimes" and 22% were "not heard at all". Examination of data generated by each school indicated that 29% of parents in School B felt that they were "not heard" in contrast to 14% in School A. Results could be indicative of many factors, including lack of explanation by schools on decisions made, or requests from parents that were not possible to accommodate and/or unreasonable parental expectations of schools. The demographic of the schools could also be in play here, with parents of School B having

very high expectations for their child, where the transfer rate to 3rd level education is over 95% (School A transfer rate is 40%). Both schools are thought to have good communicating methods, as discussed in Section 6.4.3, so this could indicate that these feelings could be in relation to factors related to individual students and outcomes of specific discussions or events. A significant number of parents felt unheard in both schools, and it would be in the interest of both schools to consider why this is.

Questions 16 and 17 examined parents' need to be involved in their child's post-primary school and if they regarded themselves as partners with the school. There is a certain amount of ambiguity in these findings. Overwhelmingly in both schools, parents indicated the need to be involved in the school as indicated by the 83% (82% School A and 84% School B) of parent respondents. Eight per cent (10% School A and 6% School B) of parents indicated that they did not feel any need to be involved with the school. Comparing this need to be involved with 53% (56% School A and 52% School B) of parents who felt like a partner in their child's education indicates that not as many parents see themselves as in partnership with the post-primary schools despite wanting to be involved. Overall, 22% (18% School A and 25% School B) of parent respondents indicated they occasionally felt like a partner, and 25% (26% School A and 23% School B) felt they were not a partner in their child's education. Interpretation of these findings reflects a disparity between parents' desire to be involved and how they felt about partnership with the school. When asked, management in both case study schools indicated that parents are partners in education and that their support is invaluable to the progress of their child. However, questionnaire responses clearly displayed that a substantial number of parents in both schools did not feel like a partner in their child's post-primary education. Many parents believe partnership is something extra, different or unusual, rather than understanding that partnership with school is largely about the basic supports which parents provide. These include sending a child to school every day, checking on homework, participating in surveys, attending relevant events, asking questions, giving opinions and bringing concerns to the school. The case study schools need to explicitly inform parents about partnership with the school: what it is, what it involves, and how parents and the school can support each other.

6.4.6 Collaborating with Community

This indicator in Epstein's framework for partnership requires schools to "identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practice and student learning and development" (Epstein, 2009, p. 16). As discussed in Chapter 3, the definition of this indicator is rather broad and how an Irish school identifies community and its resources and services can vary greatly. I asked one question on this area:

- Q13 Is the school involved in the wider community?

Respondents from School A indicate that there was very limited knowledge of community involvement among parents. Overall, 31% of parents in School A were aware of community involvement, while 8% said the school was not involved in the community. In total 52% of parents in School A did not know whether community involvement was an aspect of their child's school. Within School B, 36% of parents were aware of community involvement with 12% indicating no involvement. Forty-two per cent of parents in School B did not know if community involvement was occurring in the school. The parents' lack of awareness could be due to their child not informing them about community events happening in the school, insufficient advertising by the school of activities they participate in within the local community or the schools' lack of involvement with their local community.

Data generated by questionnaires indicated that both schools are involved in their local community in a variety of ways; however, a limited number of parents are aware of this. Both schools have a wide variety of community initiatives which are commendable. Students are very generous with their time and skills and are involved with organisations that support local sports clubs, the elderly, children with disabilities and the homeless, to name but a few. The value of these actions is not widely recognised by the parents or the schools. Informing the wider community of the school's involvement in such activities would help to build a strong rooted connection to the local community, and this can only be of benefit to the school and its students (Epstein, 2009).

6.5 Analysis of Teacher Questionnaires

The teacher questionnaire was similar to the parent questionnaire as the common aim was to establish if partnership with parents was occurring in the case study schools.

Therefore, I considered the school's perspective on whether partnership was happening and if so, how it was represented. As outlined in Table 6.1, 34 teachers completed the questionnaire. The data generated by these questionnaires helped to direct questions for the interview process and provided some baseline data on specific activities and processes within the schools. The teacher questionnaire consisted of 17 questions which connected to Epstein partnership framework as described in Table 6.6 below. A similar approach of thematic analysis as utilised in the parent questionnaires was implemented for the teacher questionnaires.

Table 6.6   *Area of partnership and related teacher questions*

	Teacher Questionnaire
General Information	Q1, Q17
Parenting/Learning at home	Q3, Q4, Q9, Q13
Communicating	Q2, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8
Volunteering	Q10, Q11
Decision making	Q14, Q15, Q16
Collaborating with community	Q12

The sections below outline the questions which were asked on the teacher questionnaire and describe the key data generated by teacher responses. A copy of the teacher questionnaire is available in Appendix 9. A full copy of data generated in relation to Teacher Questionnaires is available in Appendix 18.

6.5.1 General Information Questions

Four general questions sought information on the teacher context:

- Q1 What year groups do you teach/work with?
- Q17 a) Gender
- Q17 b) Post Held
- Q17 c) Years Teaching

Both schools have a predominately female staff and 94% teachers who answered the questionnaire were female, with 6% male. No male teacher in School A answered a questionnaire, while two answered in School B. Teachers were asked to indicate their

post within the school and the number of years they had been teaching. A variety of posts can be held by teachers, such as form teacher, year head, Assistant Principal 1 (AP1) and Assistant Principal 2 (AP2) posts. Assistant principal posts refer to management positions in the school, AP1 being the most senior position. Until recently, these posts were linked with seniority, but now seniority does not contribute to the selection process. All post holders in the case study schools were appointed on the old system, so for the purpose of this research we can conclude the AP1 and AP2 post holders are the more senior members of staff. Form teacher is a voluntary post where teachers assume responsibility for a particular class group within a year.

Table 6.7 *Teacher roles (%)*

	Form Teacher	Year Head	AP1	AP2	None
School A	9	4	18	5	64
School B	17	0	8	17	58
Total	12	3	15	8	62

Responses indicated that there was representation from all teacher roles in both schools. Overall, 15% held AP1 positions, 8% held AP2 positions, 12% were form teachers and 62% of the teachers did not hold additional roles beyond subject teacher. The number of years teaching also indicated the profile of the teachers who participated in the questionnaires: 26% of respondents had been teaching for over 30 years; 24% for 21 to 30 years; 41% for 11 to 20 years; and 9% for 10 or less years. Most teachers who answered questionnaires had extensive experience within teaching and its associated responsibilities, e.g. attending PTMs, completing reports and communicating with parents. The final question within this section enquired about which year groups teachers had taught, and results indicated that the respondents had taught multiple year groups. These findings suggested that teachers would have had a variety of experiences in teaching juniors, seniors, exam classes, students with SEN and transition year classes. This breadth of experience offered the possibility of generating data with a variety of viewpoints.

6.5.2 Parenting and Learning at Home

Parenting and learning at home are two indicators of Epstein's framework for partnership. Epstein suggests that schools need to consider the goals that schools have prioritised for students and concurrently devise practices to support and encourage parents in a "climate of partnership" (Epstein, 2009, p. 14). There were four questions on the questionnaire related to this section:

- Q3 What kind of information does the school provide parents with?
- Q4 Is there any other information you would like parents to get from the school?
- Q9 Do you think school reports are helpful to parents?
- Q13 Does the school provide parents with information which helps them support their child with homework and study at home?

Teachers indicated a wide range of topics about which the schools provide information to parents. The top six areas mentioned were: subject choice, transition year, school trips, exam information, school policies and CAO information. Teachers also described anti-bullying and social media as other areas the school provided input on. When asked to consider if there was any additional information needed by parents, 82% (77% School A and 92% School B) of the teachers said no. The teachers believed that parents were currently receiving all the information needed. Q9 asked teachers to consider how helpful reports were to parents. Fifty-nine per cent (64% School A and 50% School B) of teachers indicated that reports were "very helpful", while 38% (31% School A and 50% School B) indicated they were "somewhat helpful". In total 3% (5% School A and 0% School B) of teachers did not believe the reports to be helpful at all. When asked to explain their opinion on reports, none of the teachers who said reports were not helpful commented. Teachers who indicated that reports were somewhat helpful stated that "they can be too broad – face to face conversation at PTM is better" (Teacher, School A) and "if comment is suitable and informational, they can be helpful" (Teacher, School B). Another teacher's comment was "they are too infrequent and the comment bank should not be used" (Teacher School A). These observations by teachers show that some teachers think report comments made must be relevant to the student and not generic; they also alluded to the benefit of having more that the current two reports a year. The final question pertained to supporting children's homework and study by providing information to parents. Overall 50% (50%% School A and 50% School B) surveyed said "some information" was provided, 26% (25% School A and 27% School B) said "no information" was provided and 24% (25% School A and 23% School B) said "a lot of

information" was provided. Findings indicated that teachers in School A and School B have similar opinions in this area. These figures are important because homework and study are key areas for enhancing student progress and progression. If only 24% of teachers surveyed felt parents get enough information to support their child in completing homework and supporting study, that needs to be addressed by the schools and by the teachers who are in the best position to offer advice on homework and study in their subject area. These figures also indicate that, in both schools, there is room for improvement in the area of providing information to support homework and study at home which would be of benefit to both students and parents.

6.5.3 Communication

According to Epstein's framework, the area of communication is a critical indicator when examining partnership. Communication includes effective methods of communicating with parents regarding their child's progress and school programmes (Epstein, 2016). I asked teachers five questions to examine practices in this area and to elicit opinions from the teachers' perspective:

- Q2 How does the school communicate with parents?
- Q5 In your opinion, do you think the school's methods of contacting parents are good enough?
- Q6 How often do you usually meet the parents of your students?
- Q7 What is your main reason for meeting parents?
- Q8 What is your preferred method of contacting parents?

Teachers indicated that they felt the schools' methods of contacting parents were sufficient, with 91% (86% School A and 100% School B) of teachers agreeing. Both schools had almost identical methods of communication with parents. Almost all teachers who answered questionnaires mentioned letter and text as the major ways of communicating with parents. 88% of teachers included reports, 85% included the yearly PTM and the next highest reported area of communication was appointments with year head (74%), deputy principal (74%) and principal (71%). Appointments with subject teachers accounted for 56%. These figures indicate that staff within both schools were very willing to meet parents. It was interesting to note that the two least used methods of communication were the website and email, as a website in particular has the potential to offer parents easy access to information. Six teachers from School A included the school journal as a way of communicating with parents, indicating that they used the

journal to write notes to parents. Five teachers from School B also made suggestions around improving use of technology (email, school app) to communicate with parents. The frequency of contact with parents was of interest, and Q6 sought information on this. Overall, 65% (68% School A and 58% School B) of the teachers stated that their contact with parents occurred once a year, which would be at the yearly PTM. Twenty per cent (23% School A and 17% School B) of teachers stated they have contact with parents once a term and 9% (5% School A and 17% School B) have contact monthly, with just 6% (4% School A and 8% School B) having weekly contact. These findings indicate that within the case study schools, the PTM is reflected as a key occurrence during the school year for teachers. Responses indicated that teachers in general only had contact with parents if there is a concern of some kind. Teachers were asked to indicate the main reason why they would meet parents. In total 53% (82% School A and 17% School B) of respondents indicated the PTM, 21% (9% School A and 33% School B) indicated discussions of progress of students and 18% (5% School A and 33% School B) indicated a concern about SEN students. Five per cent of teachers in School A indicated activities in the school as their reason to meet parents e.g., school parent activity, but no teacher in School B cited involvement in similar activities. Eighty-five per cent (100% School A and 77% School B) of teachers surveyed indicated that their preferred method of contacting parents was by a phone call. The next highest method was appointment, at 50% (50% School A and 50% School B), followed by school journal at 35% (50% School A and 27% School B). Overall, teacher responses indicated that they prefer personal contact with parents to discuss issues. Contact with parents by letter or email was only mentioned by a small minority of the teachers. Neither school used email with parents as a method of communication.

6.5.4 Volunteering

Parent participation in school activities can be limited at post-primary level, as indicated in Chapters 2 and 3. Teacher views on how and what parents volunteer for in their school provided additional context to the research and confirmed information from other sources. Epstein (2018) states that volunteering is an indicator of partnership; therefore, in order to establish the level of volunteering in the case study schools, I asked teachers two questions:

- Q10 What kind of activities do parents become involved in at this school?
- Q11 In what other ways would you like parents to be involved in the school?

Teachers recognised parents in their school as being involved in four particular areas: attending school shows/events, the parent association, the BoM and fundraising.

Table 6.8   *Activities parents become involved in according to teachers (%)*

Activities parents become involved in	School A	School B	Total
Attending school show/events	100	100	100
Parent Association	91	92	92
Board of Management (BoM)	83	86	85
Fundraising	50	96	79
Policy discussions	25	46	38
Decisions about Curriculum	0	96	79
Helping with sports trips	17	55	41
Volunteering to help with school activity	17	50	38
Volunteering to help in the classroom	0	0	0
Other: Mock Interviews	0	33	12

Teacher respondents indicated that attending school events was the most common way parents become involved in school. Teachers also indicated that the parent association and the BoM were the other two main areas that parents were involved with. In total 96% of teachers in School B stated that parents were involved in fundraising, in comparison to 50% in School A. Parent involvement in policy discussion was not high on the list of activities parents participated in, according to teachers in both schools. Teachers in School B indicated that parents were highly involved in decisions about curriculum, which strongly contrasts to parents' perspective. When teachers were asked about other ways they would like parents to be involved in the school, 79% (91% School A and 58% School B) of teachers said none. Neither school formally tracked parent involvement in any of the activity areas, nor did they have any statistics on parent involvement in their own school.

6.5.5 Decision Making

Partnership with parents requires schools to provide parents with opportunities to be involved in decision making within the school. According to Epstein's, parent input into policy development and other key decisions in schools develops stronger connections between parents and schools (Epstein, 2016). Teachers were asked three questions to elicit information on how decision making was shared with parents in the participating schools.

- Q14 Do you think parent voice is being heard in the school?
- Q15 Do you see yourself in partnership with the parents?
- Q16 Do you think parents need to be involved in the school?

Overall, 74% of teachers felt parent voice was "always listened to". Closer examination of these figures showed that in School A, 82% of teachers believed that the voice of parents was always heard with 58% in School B. Teachers were asked if they see themselves in partnership with parents. Responses to this question were very informative. Responses indicated that 59% of teachers in School A felt in partnership with parents, while 23% felt they were not partners with parents. The remaining teachers occasionally felt like a partner. Respondents in School B were equally split, with half of respondents viewing themselves in partnership with parents, while the remainder felt occasionally like a partner. Conversely, when asked if parents needed to be involved in school, 94% (91% School A and 100% School B) of the teachers indicated yes. There appears to be a disparity between teachers' recognition that parents need to be involved in the school and actual partnership with parents. There is a need for clarity on what partnership with parents entails for all members of a school community.

6.5.6 Collaborating with Community

According to Epstein, community involvement can strengthen a school and support its students and parents. Epstein's description of collaborating with community is extensive; it suggests a rich awareness of community resources which are utilised to enrich the school curriculum and support parents and students (2018). The partnership framework suggests that community resources should be integrated into the school "to strengthen school programs, family practices and student learning and development" (Epstein, 2009, p. 16). Irish post-primary schools are not generally connected to the local community as

this indicator would propose. The case study schools connect with their local community by supporting organisations and providing volunteers, not, as Epstein describes, by providing service integration, summer programmes for students or information on community, health, cultural and social supports. Evaluating teacher knowledge of collaboration in the community offered an opportunity to establish if this indicator was occurring in the case study schools.

- Q12 Is the school involved in the wider community? If yes, how?

In School A, 82% of teacher respondents indicated that the school was involved in the community. Teachers in School A listed a wide range of community involvement including choir, church, local parish, local primary schools, sports clubs, paired reading, and parent community classes. In School B, 92% of respondents indicated that the school was involved in the community, with activities such as supporting the elderly, volunteering in a special school, fast friend programme, local church, choirs, sports clubs, and social justice projects. Many of the activities mentioned in both schools involved students going out into the community building links, but some involved the community coming into the school. School A also utilises a variety of support services for students who are struggling with attendance and mental health. School B avail of the expertise of parents and past pupils for career evenings and mock interviews for senior students. School Management in both schools were very aware of areas of collaboration with community, but teachers were not. However, despite the examples of community involvement, questionnaire responses suggest that neither school exhibits the level of collaboration recommended by Epstein's framework. This is not unexpected as collaboration with community is not a partnership practice currently evident in Ireland.

6.6. Chapter Conclusion

Questionnaires were linked to specific indicators in Epstein's framework in order to provide a glimpse into parent and teacher experience of partnership. This chapter has described the data generated by the parent and teacher questionnaires and how the relevant indicators were represented in each case study school. Questionnaire responses indicated similarities and differences between parent and teacher perspectives which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 9. Chapter 7 will now present the data generated by the

parent interviews, and similarly Chapter 8 will present the reader with the data generated during the teacher interviews.

Chapter 7 Parent Interviews

7.1 Introduction

Chapter 6 presented the results of both parent and teacher questionnaires which provided some initial findings on partnership with parents in the case study schools. Interviews conducted during this research considered these findings and utilised the interview process to examine these in more detail. Critical examination of the interviews with parents provided an opportunity for closer examination of activities within the case study school to consider if Epstein's six indicators of partnership are evident in participant comments and also to what extent partnership between parents and teachers is reflected.

7.2. Participation

While attending PTMs I distributed Interview Volunteer Forms asking parents to indicate a willingness to participate in an interview. Parents were more willing to complete the questionnaire than offer to participate in interviews. Information was sent home to parents to encourage participation in interviews, and parents returned expression of interest forms for interview to the school offices.

Table: 7.1   *Number of Interview Participants*

	Parents Interviewed	Teachers Interviewed	Total Interviewed
School A	15	16	31
School B	14	9	23
Combined Totals	29	25	54

The gender of parent participants for interview in both schools, was mainly female; there was only one male parent interviewee. This reflects the PTMs where it was observed that there was a greater presence of female parents.   This also repeated the gender participation observed in parent questionnaires, where 81% of participants were female and 19% were male. The age of parent interviewees ranged from 30 to 51 plus in both schools. The majority of parents interviewed in School A were in the 30-40 range, while parents in School B represented the 41-50 or 51 plus category.

7.3 Themes for Interviewing

Questions for the interviews were based around the six indicators of partnership as outlined by Epstein's framework for partnership. Findings related to these indicators from the parent and teacher questionnaires were also considered when developing questions for the interview guide. I wanted to ascertain if the six areas were represented in school activities or referred to by parents, and I also wanted to clarify if any of the indicators were prioritised over others by parents. An essential aspect of the interviews was ascertaining whether parents regarded themselves as partners with the case study schools. I was interested in what parents thought constituted partnership and what they thought an effective partnership between parents and post-primary school would look like.

7.4 Analysis of Parent Interviews

Audio recordings were made of each interview with the informed consent of the interviewees. Each interview was then transcribed and analysed. Interviewees were assured that their anonymity would be preserved and that any comments used would not identify them. Therefore, parents are identified only by school and assigned number. Combining interview data with the findings already obtained via questionnaires, observation and school documentation helped me to develop a deeper understanding of how partnership was represented in the schools. A similar thematic approach was taken during analysis, to ensure consistency in analysis and enable me to observe trends. Analysis was based on the six indicators that represent Epstein's framework which underpins this research: parenting, learning at home, communication, volunteering, decision making and collaboration with community. Analysis also included a focus on parental expectations, parent voice and partnership between parents and the case study schools. Each of these areas is discussed within this chapter. In each section I will discuss School A followed by School B and then a final commentary on the specific indicator.

7.4.1 Parent Expectations

Initial questions referred to parent expectations of the schools. In the case of both schools, parents' choice of the school was closely linked to their expectations for their children. All parents interviewed indicated that they chose their child's post-primary school based

on key factors such as school reputation and academic standard, well-rounded education, extra-curricular opportunities, school founding ethos, and a happy, supportive environment. Comments from parents in School A on their expectation of the post-primary school indicated that they had good knowledge about the school when deciding whether to enrol their child. For some, this knowledge was based on personal experience, whereas others valued community opinion of the school. One parent in School A commented:

> The reason I sent them here was because I actually came here myself and had a good experience. So, I knew coming in that there was a good set up and I was happy with the way the school ran and dealt with stuff. (Parent A1)

Another parent made a similar comment: "You see, I was in the school myself. I used to go there and I always knew it was a good school." (Parent A3). A supportive environment was seen by parents as a valuable aspect of post-primary schooling when making an enrolment decision:

> I had hoped that she would settle in and be allowed to be herself. Sometimes in primary school there was a bit of a push and a pull because she was always a little bit outgoing and expressive and sometimes she didn't feel like she could be expressive. I just hope that she will be able to be grounded and to be able to express herself. (Parent A5)

Another area of importance to parents was the amount of extra-curricular activities open to their child:

> Well obviously, academically I want them to do the best that they could possibly do and also to encourage any other talents that they have . . . like in a school play or in sport or any other things. (Parent A6)

Parent A2 indicated that she had received information from neighbours about the school, as they had moved into the area: "My neighbours' kids went here and they got on well. I moved here so didn't know the schools around and asked about what they were like" (Parent A2). This information informed their decision to send their child to School A.

Similarly, parents in School B indicated that consideration of a suitable school for their child's post-primary education included personal experience and the information passed on to them by neighbours and the local community.

> The reason we decided to send them to a local school is because they would have local friends. We had three older kids that live next door to us that babysat for us all along the years and they had all gone to School B and had a good experience. So, my expectation was that the school was well run, that there was a nice atmosphere and that it was good. (Parent B3)

Another parent described their decision to enrol their child in School B was based on the academic record of the school:

> I was a past pupil, so I know the school very well. Mind you, I'm a long time out . . . But I knew that the principal was very well respected and a very good principal. I'd always known that the school is very academic. (Parent B4)

Parent B4 also commented on the decision to send their child to a faith school and the detailed research they had undertaken when making this decision. This parent felt that a single sex school would offer the best opportunities to their child:

> The whole issue about . . . it's a Catholic single sex school . . . I . . . toyed with that, but actually I mean I had looked at research and said look these kids are better on their own. So, I thought right . . . just stick with it . . . I went through it, I developed lifelong friends. (Parent B4)

Parents in School A and School B had similar expectations for their child's post-primary education. Parents in both schools placed value on their own personal experience and used it to aid decisions regarding school choice. They expected their child to be happy in school, to be challenged, supported and given opportunities in both academic and extra-curricular areas. Parents in School A indicated a desire for their child to "improve and build a future" (Parent A2) and they also placed value on school support: "I expect school to support them and challenge them to get them to reach their potential" (Parent A7). Parents in School B indicated a similar desire for their children: "I expected it to be a school which would facilitate learning with a Catholic ethos which would be open and inclusive" (Parent B8). Parents indicated the desire for a school with "good strong academic supports and that they would thrive within that academic environment" (Parent

B7). Responses by interviewees indicated that parents had considered their choice of post-primary school very carefully and did have specific requirements and expectations of the chosen school.

7.4.2 Communication

In general, when asked to consider what communication they had with the schools, parents were positive about the kind of communications they received. Parents in both schools identified texts and letters as the types of communication most appreciated, but email was also referred to by parents in School B as a desirable option.

Parents in School A indicated that "good concise information was sent home" (Parent A7) and "you don't even have to ask anything, because there is so much information given to you" (Parent A1). Parents in School A also commented that text messages were very helpful, especially the texts in the morning regarding absences or lateness. Only two parents in School A indicated that they would look at the school website. Flyers or letters home in the school bag were appreciated, but parents said they also needed a text to tell them that the flyer is in the bag: "You need a text to say letter in their bag because the kids forget to tell you" (Parent A8). Another parent commented:

> Communication is important; the school will always send a text out, and they always give you plenty of notice, so I am always aware of what is happening. (Parent A5)

Parents in School A did suggest sending more texts to parents when a message was being given to students. This would alert parents to the fact that information was being sent home in their child's school bag. Parents also identified the HSCL scheme in School A as a very useful communication resource. School A parents described how the school made great efforts to communicate; one parent commented that the school has "good intentions, was willing and want to do their best for students" (Parent A6). When asked about reports, parents indicated the value they placed on school reports and how they used them to incentivise their child.

> I think they are great because you nearly have a threat over them. 'The report will be out now in January and you won't be getting this, and you won't be getting that', and it just pushes them because they know they have the exams

coming up, so they have to study and if they don't, they answer to me. (Parent A1)

Another parent commented on the content of the reports:

> There wouldn't be that much detail in whatever teachers say. But if they could say - she needs to improve on such and such and that gives me an idea of how to help her. (Parent A7)

Another parent also stated that reports are "limited, they don't tell much" (Parent A9) and "they need to give more advice" (Parent A6). In School A, opinions on reports indicated that parents felt they constituted important information from the school but that their content could be more focused and related to the individual student.

Generally, parents in School B indicated that traditional communication such as texts and letters was good, but there was room for improvement.

> Communication wise, I love getting the big long letters from the TY [Transition year] coordinator; she's fantastic. Previous to her really there wasn't a lot of communication; it was just the standard telling you if there was something coming up. The letters are fantastic. I would prefer more open obvious lines of communication. I still don't know what the clear lines of communication are. What should I be doing? They don't put it on their letterhead or on their website or anything. That's why I tended to turn up at the door a lot of the time. (Parent B5)

This parents' comment shows the uncertainty parents can experience when they are unsure of correct procedures for contacting school personnel. It also indicated that some knowledge of the school does not necessarily make this clearer for parents; transparent, clearly stated information on communication is important for clarity. Parents expressed a tremendous desire for information, to be kept in the loop about everything that was happening in the school. This was clearly important to parents as a way of facilitating communication with their child. Understanding what was happening in school specific to their child made it easier to have conversations about school. Additions such as a school website and use of VSware were described as huge advancements and contributed to increased awareness among parents of school activities in School B.

This year now they've got more into online stuff which I think is better. They seemed to be quite resistant to using social media for quite a while but they got into it. The school website made a big difference and the fact that you can get the reports down from VSware was very helpful; the information is there for you when you want it. (Parent B4)

Interviewed parents showed an appreciation for information which is freely available, such as that on a school website. School B had a new school app which was described as "a fantastic communication tool and is making a real difference to sharing of information about the school" (Parent B7). An interesting comment was made by a parent in School B who suggested there could be better communication of student achievements to parents:

I could count on one hand the amount of times I could say, 'Oh God that's a fantastic achievement'. . . . Their sports team is phenomenal. You know everything just is very much enclosed in the school. I know the principal comes on the intercom every day and says congratulations . . . the students know that but the parents don't know it. (Parent B9)

This opinion was confirmed in statements by other parents in School B. "I think the number of information pieces that come out about things that are happening in the school could be better" (Parent B7), and

I think you can always improve on communication and that's not that I'd say they're desperate, but I think you can always keep improving. If I've ever had a problem they always come back to me. But I think maybe you could get more targeted communication like, you know, to different year groups. (Parent B6)

Parental comments indicate that some parents feel there could be more information available about what is happening in School B. Areas indicated by parents for enhanced communication are sporting events, extra-curricular activities, changes in school community (such as new staff or curriculum) and general information about what is happening in school. In School B, reports were also recognised as a form of communication but were referred to as generic and repetitive, "reports can be useful but not if teachers are using a list of pre-prepared comments that really don't tell you anything e.g., Lovely girl, works well" (Parent B10). Parents expressed a need for useful feedback

which gives direction on ways to improve learning. Other areas of communication identified by parents included the use of Easy Payments system in School B as very beneficial to parents. One parent in School B requested more advance notice about trips and described the difficulties with short notice:

> There's some things that sometimes I'd think, 'Oh God I would like to have known that'. My daughter came home and she had a hand-out on a school trip. They had been called and told there was a school trip before the parents were told, which I thought was a bad move on the school's behalf. I think they should have consulted parents first because your daughter comes home and she wants to go on that trip, without any consideration being given to parents on finances. So three weeks after Christmas, your daughter comes home with this letter saying she wants a deposit and you know she wants to go. . . . but they were looking for a sizeable enough deposit, you know next week. (Parent B9)

Parent B9 shows how important communication is with parents. This parent explains the pressure felt when a school trip came up unexpectedly. This comment also shows the conflict this parent felt: wanting her child to participate in the trip but anticipating the difficulty of paying the large deposit at short notice. It also reminds the school that assumptions cannot be made about money and the affordability of school trips for parents.

Parents in School B also had some suggestions on communication. The TY letter each term was hugely popular and mentioned by all parents interviewed who had a child who had participated in transition year. Parents in School B also stated that communication should occur around difficult issues such as not having a substitute teacher. Parents described the need for timely information rather than being left to guess about what the situation is. Parents in School B also expressed a desire to be invited to more school events such as the carol services. "Everything is very much enclosed in the school, the students know, but the parents don't know, we are watching from the outside" (Parent B9). Parents of School B acknowledged that school management was open and welcoming, but on the more difficult issues such as teacher performance/lack of a teacher substitute, this was reduced. Some parents felt that a complaint would lead to their child being disadvantaged by a teacher so were reluctant to bring issues directly to a teacher. Student success in sports and creative activities was also identified by parents as an area to be highlighted by School B. Suggestions by interviewed parents on how to improve

communication in School B included immediate and up-to-date acknowledgement of students' success via Twitter, Facebook or Instagram.

Overall, parents indicated that the schools were in communication with them. Parent views on communication were more positive for School A than for School B. Parents in School A praised the efforts the school made to keep in contact which contrasted with comments by parents in School B who indicated that information was kept to a minimum. Several parents in both schools pointed out that by only giving information to the pupils, opportunities for parents to discuss important issues and decisions with their child were reduced.

7.4.3 Parenting and Learning at Home

Parenting and learning at home were two other indicators considered during interview. These areas of partnership support families with parenting skills and arranging home conditions to support children as students, as well as involving families with their children in homework and other curriculum related activities and decisions (Epstein, 2015). These areas include activities provided by schools which support parents in helping their child with school homework and making decisions related to school.

In School A one parent commented: "Any meetings I came to; they were always so informative" (Parent A1) while another said, "They do these information meetings, some are before the PTM but they are all about stuff you need to know, Junior Cert, Transition year, CAO. I find them really helpful" (Parent A4). Similarly in School B another parent commented:

> I think that the transition from primary school to secondary school is actually a big change for parents and parents don't necessarily appreciate that; they learn it by going through it. So, the child will not want to be referred to as a child for a start and a lot of the information is going directly to the pupil and the amount of involvement from parents can drop off substantially. The information evening for parents was really helpful and I think these meetings can be used to prepare parents for what to expect and what they can do. (Parent B8)

This parent's comments support the premise that parenting and learning at home are key areas for schools to develop. They offer substantial support to parents and help them adapt to the post-primary school system.

During the interview process parents in both schools mentioned the various information talks they had attended over the year/s and the help they provided. Meetings occur in both schools and include information sessions on beginning post-primary school, subject choice, transition year choices, study skills, pre-meetings before the PTMs etc. These were spoken of as a school tradition, an aspect of the school year taken for granted by parents. These events would represent aspects of parenting and learning at home, as identified by Epstein in her framework, but there was not obvious recognition by parents that these sessions are developing partnership or part of a planned parenting support programme within either school. Parents did not demonstrate a knowledge that these school activities were connected to partnership, and it is worth considering if the schools consider these activities as partnership actions.

7.4.4 Volunteering

Epstein described the concept of volunteering as an indicator of partnership with parents. She defined it as people to support the school and students, while providing volunteers multiple and varied opportunities to help out and become involved (Epstein & Associates, 2009, 2018). During the interviews, parents in both schools revealed that they do participate in some activities at post-primary level but that in general, these are connected to their child's involvement in the activity, such as attending school musicals, shows, or choir.

In School A one parent commented on their volunteering in the school as limited to events their child was involved in:

> No, I'm not involved because I work, I couldn't commit to anything. . . . I would always support any shows that were on by attending. I would always like to know what is going on, although I can't come up and help. (Parent A1)

This reflects the questionnaire findings where 75% of parents in School A indicated that they attend school events their child participates in. When asked about volunteering and involvement in the school's parent association, interviewees indicated that they do not

usually participate. Two of ten parents interviewed in School A were involved in the parent association at the time of interviews; none of the others had been involved to date. One parent in School A expressed how she felt she had the time to give the school and how pleased the parent association was with fundraising:

> Well, I have always been involved in parent associations because I had the spare time when she started school. It is actually great here in the school because we did two very good fundraisers and our fund is quite up, so we have everything covered. For the graduation we don't owe anybody any money. (Parent A2)

Other parents in School A articulated their difficulty in volunteering for school activities relating to parent associations and the BoM:

> Well, I would have been involved in primary but secondary, no . . . because I work. I feel it's more for people who are not working, who have a lot more time. . . I'm a single parent, so I don't have the time. (Parent A6)

Another parent commented "No, I haven't been, no. Because I have a child at home that needs me, I have two at home that need my attention" (Parent A4). While Parent A7 commented that they did not know much about the parent association and had no information on how to join.

> When I started here . . . I didn't know how many needed to be on it [the parent association] or what the story was. So, like a few months after she started she said "Oh so-and-so's mammy is on the parent association" and I was like how do you get on that? (Parent A7)

Six parents interviewed in School A indicated that they were aware of the value of being involved and volunteering in their child's post-primary school:

> The fact that they [the child] knows that I am interested, and I'm around the school when there is anything going on is important. I know I have heard a few parents saying - oh my child would die if they thought I was in the school helping out or whatever. And then I have heard other parents saying, I think the child secretly loves it. (Parent A10)

Another parent commented on the benefits of meeting people in similar situations and the support this can offer:

Well, I have met good friends; I have met good parents and there are a few of the parents who also have children with special needs, so that sort of helps because you can talk about different things that other people wouldn't be interested in. You can figure out together what is best for your child. (Parent A2)

School A had a wide range of activities for parents to become involved in such as craft fairs, bingo, green group, sports day, 5km park run, graduation and open evenings. Despite this, volunteering was limited. Work and child minding were the most common reasons cited for non-involvement in volunteering and parent associations. Also, a small number of parents said there was a lack of information on the parent association and how to join it.

In School B, a greater amount of volunteering was evident, seven of the ten parents interviewed involved in the school's parent association either at the time of interviewing or in the past two years. School B Parent (B3) stated:

I suppose the reason I've always been involved in the parent association is because I wanted to give something back to the schools. I have three kids and I reckon that I should do something since the three of them are going through the same places. That's why I decided to get involved in the PA; to help out in whatever way I could and that varies from school to school; how much they want you to be involved or how much they want the PA to do or not to do. I think it depends on the principal really. (Parent B3)

This parent expressed the opinion that a school principal leads the type of engagement a parent association has with a school. She also explained her desire to support the school as a few of her children were attending the school and benefiting from its programmes. This parent also stated, "I think that it's not encouraged by the schools but I do think that if parents want to be involved there aren't that many ways for you to be involved, really" (Parent B3). This is a very interesting perspective from a parent heavily involved in the school's parent association who is very familiar with all the opportunities open to parents and has regular contact with school staff and other parent association members. When questioned further, this parent explained that the opportunities to volunteer were limited to doing tea/coffee at events, serving at graduation and helping with arrangements for a few other social events. Parent B3 also mentioned that this is all done via the parent

association, so if you are not a member it is hard to know of opportunities to volunteer. As discussed in Chapter 5, the parent association in School B described a list of volunteers they utilise for events, but this parent's comments suggested that this list is not common knowledge. Other parents interviewed in School B indicated that it can be difficult to be involved in the parent association. One parent in particular commented:

> I think it is really important, I think you can't just get rid of your responsibility because your children are going to post-primary school. I think it's got to be a partnership; it has to be working together. I was involved in the parent group for the first year or two but unfortunately the job I was doing was 60-70 hours a week. So, I actually had to pull out of the PA because it was just so difficult. I think it is really important that parents are there. (Parent B4)

School B has activities such as mock interviews, career fairs, parent mixer nights, table quizzes, book fairs, green group, sports day, graduation and open evenings. Members of the parent associations were very familiar with them, but those not involved with the association had little knowledge of these opportunities. Parents in School B had similar opinions to parents in School A on the benefits of volunteering and being involved with the post-primary school, to both parent and child. One parent described how being involved in the school was of benefit to them:

> Because I had been involved with the primary school I understand that involvement means better understanding of the school's ethos, their systems, their methodologies and their reasoning behind decisions made. I have a good understanding of what's going on in this school and I feel very welcome in the school always. (Parent B7)

Another parent alluded to the gaining of insider information and the possibility of building relationships with key stakeholders such as principal and deputy principal.

> Well, it's the inside track, you just feel that you can build up a relationship with the principal, with the deputy principal . . . with everybody. . . . You might meet some of the teachers as well. You'd meet other parents, you can discuss things with them. You'll get more of what's going on because in secondary school . . . it's completely different to primary school. (Parent B10)

Another parent in School B expressed the opinion that being involved with the post-primary school allowed parents to not only have a greater understanding of how the school operates but the difficulties it faces:

> Just to find out more about what's going on and understand it a bit more . . . I had got involved in the school and I think it helps because you just get a feel for it and for the barriers that the school has; you know, the limitations they have in terms of budgets, decisions and how they're trying to manage stuff. (Parent B6)

Finally, the comments of Parent B5 show us how conflicted a parent can feel. This parent acknowledged their desire to be involved to a greater degree in their child education but showed a keen awareness of how the school might view this and described their feelings of "doing something wrong" by wanting a level of information and co-operation that other parents did not at post-primary level.

> I suppose they'd know me very well because I am pretty pushy, and I'm very hands on with education. So, I tend to walk in the door without having made appointments and that kind of thing. Now I have to admit it's down to individual teachers how they interact with you, but I think the principal and vice principal are very open-armed. They would always welcome me even if I've just turned up on their doorstep or called them off the cuff. But with individual teachers, it can be more difficult. Well, I don't really feel comfortable there, I feel as if I shouldn't be there. I like to be very involved and like to know what's going on and everything else. But I do admit that I feel as if I shouldn't be doing it; I feel like I'm doing something wrong. But having said that, the principal and vice principal have always been very good to me when I have come in, even though I kind of know I'm doing something I shouldn't. (Parent B5)

Within both School A and School B there was a wide range of activities for parents to become involved in, but interviews indicate that uptake on volunteering was very limited. Parents in both schools recognised a variety of benefits of volunteering and being involved in the school. These benefits include greater understanding of the school and how it works, better grasp of the school ethos, and getting to know the school and teachers. Parents involved in volunteering illustrated how it helps build relationships with

the school and other parents and how the child sees the interest you have in their school. However, time was cited as a key reason for non-involvement. Parents in School B demonstrated a keen knowledge of how building a relationship with the school was of value and could be useful if an issue arose. Despite this, some parents indicated that schools do not make it easy to volunteer and be involved while other parents said they are just too busy to volunteer in the school.

7.4.5 Decision Making

Overall, 87% of parents who completed questionnaires indicated that they are not involved in decision making. During the interviews, I focused on this to clarify if this was an accurate representation of parent experience. In School A, parents involved in the parent association indicated that their opinion had been sought on specific topics such as phone policy. Comments of parents not involved indicate that they had no experience of their opinions being sought.

> "No, I don't think so" (Parent A3)

> "No, I don't think so. Well, I never get anything to ask me" (Parent A6)

> "Not that I can recall" (Parent A7)

Interview comments reflect the lack of general parent input to the school decision-making processes, with only parents involved in the parent associations confirming active involvement in such a process. This was indicative of the questionnaire finding, as discussed in Chapter 6. One parent commented "I don't think I have been asked, but I would help out if asked, especially as an opinion is easier to give" (Parent A3).

Parents in School B indicated that they were involved in the school's starting time change which involved indicating a preference of two options for a new school start time: "Yeah, well we were consulted to do the time changes. It went from nine to, ten to nine, starting classes, and we were consulted about that and we were given a vote. So yes, I think we are" (Parent B2). Another parent did not feel involved in decision making within School B and reflected a sense of scepticism that they had no influence:

> Not really, occasionally we're asked to attend policy meetings and stuff like
> that but a) I haven't gone to them and b) I don't really think there's still that

much influence that the parents can bring to bear on stuff like that; I think it's more lip service than anything else. (Parent B3)

This parent stated they had not gone to policy meetings because they felt they would have no impact upon decisions as the decision was already made and parents were to "rubber stamp it". These feelings of lack of impact on school management decisions was reiterated by another parent:

From what I've seen, we are not involved in decisions. I think we can influence a bit and put in our tuppence worth but in terms of like the core decisions in the schools, no. But in things like the girls' day to day outings we are involved. (Parent B6)

Another parent had similar feelings of lack of influence in decision making processes within School B and also expressed a lack of understanding of the BoM:

Not really. I think we're allowed to make suggestions. The Board is like a big secretive place. They make decisions, and I don't know anything about it, and I don't really know what they're saying behind those doors. How do we know what they do? (Parent B5)

Another parent in School B stated that "I think occasionally we are asked to sit in on, to attend policy meetings. I know that the policy was sent out to parents in the PA, to look at and then they were looking for feedback" (Parent B4), and another parent expressed "Oh yes, I mean we were invited to take part in the school policy review. I think that that perhaps will become more established as time goes on, but I think there's a requirement maybe for that to happen as well" (Parent B10). Another parent made this observation about parents and decision making at post-primary:

There has been consultation on some aspects of how the school is run but I would also point to the lack of involvement by parents through the parents' association, which is a channel for communication that parents don't avail of, even though they're told about it repeatedly. It's the same people you meet on different PA's. (Parent B8)

This parent's comments reflect the opinion that many parents do not avail of opportunities to be more involved with the school: that it is a small minority who do and that these

same parents had usually been involved in primary schools too. A small number of parents in School B indicated involvement in a policy group, a new venture in the school that had three parents in attendance.

> We were invited to take part in the school policy review and that's I think for the first time this year that a proper meeting was held. Now only three of us turned up for the meeting. I think that it will become more established as time goes on . . everybody had an opportunity to have their say. I think, from a parent's association point of view what strikes me is, most of the parents don't seem to be that interested or are not prepared to put themselves out to be interested and they're not engaged for whatever reason . . . people say, 'Oh I'm very busy'. (Parent B7)

This opportunity was referred to by parents during the interviews as a worthwhile activity to participate in, but again, they recognised the limited participation of the general parent population of the school in such events.

Interviewees in School A and School B demonstrated different perceptions of decision-making opportunities. Parents in School B commented on their lack of opportunity to be involved in school decisions, and also on their feeling that they would have no influence on these school decisions, if involved. In comparison, most parents in School A who commented on lack of involvement in decision making did not exhibit the same feelings of lack of influence or any particular feelings of being left out. Four parents in School A indicated that they would vote on school decisions if asked. They also stated that they would prefer to vote in a way that did not involve attending a meeting. These parents also recognised that not all parents were interested in supporting the school in decision making. Parents also indicated that they would like to know more about the BoM. The agreed report was mentioned as not available to parents, and only parents who were involved on the BoM were aware of what an agreed report was.

Parents in School B suggested that ways to involve parents in decision making should be varied, not just having to attend a meeting in the school. Parents also indicated that there was a plethora of information and support available for making decisions related to your own child on topics such as subject choice, transition year, or the CAO. However, larger decisions about school policy were not viewed as open to parents. Parents who had experience of sitting on the BoM reflected an involvement in decision making in the

schools. Eight of the twenty parents interviewed displayed some awareness of opportunities provided by schools to participate in decision making in relation to policy etc. However, the other twelve parents interviewed did not feel involved in decision making. Four of the twenty parents interviewed indicated that they recalled a particular occasion when they were asked to be involved in decision making in the schools. The reduced level of involvement in the schools would be in alignment with figures from the questionnaires and with OECD research as discussed in Chapter 2.

7.4.6 Collaboration with Community

Epstein's framework for partnership defines collaboration with community as the co-ordination and provision of resources and services in the community for families, students and the school. This is defined as a two-way operation where school and communities support each other (Epstein, 2015). In School A, six parents interviewed had no knowledge of the school's community involvement, while four parents had some knowledge of school community initiatives. One parent commented:

> I know the outside community comes in to do part of the sessions that are on, and they have their own little oil painting club, reading club and all that. But I actually did bring it up at a committee that I think it would be good, even for the TYs . . . to go to be more involved in the community. (Parent A2)

Two of the other parents interviewed in School A were aware of some kind of community activities going on but not the details. Interestingly, one parent who had been on the BoM stated: "Well, I know they are involved in various fundraising, they have their runs and other stuff. I couldn't name specifically what they are" (Parent A5). There appears to be some vague acknowledgement of connections to the local community around the school, but specific knowledge is incomplete.

In School B, seven parents interviewed were aware of how the school interacts with the community, with three unaware of collaboration in the community. Some parents were aware that transition year students do participate in a variety of community clubs. One comment was: "I know the school has links with various other organisations and that it looks to the local business community for sponsorship" (Parent B8). Another parent expanded on a similar point, explaining the value of such involvement in the community and the social capital it builds:

The only thing I know of, is what the students do in TY. It's good because you're part of the area. It promotes the name of the school, it gives the students a feel for different things coming up in their community, different issues. I met somebody totally coincidentally who did the "Log on and Learn" about three years ago and she was raving about the students, and I thought well that was great publicity for the school. (Parent B6)

Parent B5 reflected a different opinion, they did not see any value in collaborating with community. "Actually, not really. I suppose it could be advantageous and beneficial to the girls but not important".

According to Epstein's framework, collaboration with community is one of the six indicators of partnership with parents. It is noteworthy that in both case study schools this area was not well represented except where it pertained to transition year activities. Parents' knowledge of community collaboration was limited at best. After examining this information, I noted that parents of students who were involved in transition year were more aware of community links. Interview comments indicated that most parents believed that collaboration with the local community built a positive reputation for a school and exposed students to a range of social justice issues. Both schools are active in the local community, in terms of student actions in the community and initiatives run within the schools to include the community. Parents' lack of familiarity with this suggests that schools could publicise more their support of the local community and how the community supports the school. Collaboration with community as depicted in Epstein's framework is not currently a specific educational target in Irish schools. Based on information received from questionnaires and the parent interviews, links with the local community were tied to school activities for students and in a small number of instances accessing additional supports for a student or family.

7.4.7 Parent Voice

When asked to consider if the voice of parents was heard by the case study schools, parents provided contrasting accounts. Some parents in School A stated clearly that they felt their voice was heard.

One hundred percent. I am trying to pinpoint why I have said that, why I would say yes. It's just because the lines of communication are so open and if I am

ever worried I can call the school. They remember you and they know you. Even the ladies in reception they wouldn't know you by name, but they would know my child, and they would know myself. (Parent A5)

Another parent commented on how their voice was heard by School A and that the support and feedback given was much appreciated :

Oh yeah, the time I did come down, it was taken very seriously, and the time was made. I went in and I sat down, and everything was listened to, things were thrashed out and then I got feedback after a few days which was great. So, that was good as well because I like to follow through with things. (Parent A1)

Both parents felt their voice was heard, whereas another parent commented "No, just at the PTMs, I would have discussed whatever needed to be discussed with them" (Parent A6). But when questioned further, this parent had not had occasion to bring something up with the school; there was no problem that went unheard. Furthermore, another parent believed that if they had something to say the school would listen. Parent A9 commented that in their experience the principal was the person to contact; they had good follow through and did not forget to do what they said they would do. The parents did not feel like their voice was heard by others apart from the principal to the same degree.

No, it's not heard. The principal is good but sometimes I need to speak to her/him personally because, you feel like you don't trust all the other people like teachers/office around you. They forget or don't do what they said they would. The principal does, so that's who you talk to. (Parent A9)

These feelings of confidence in the principal were reiterated by another parent within School A. "Just go in and speak to the principal. Yeah, well if there is anything wrong or anything happens or anything, I would go straight to the principal" (Parent A8).

These comments support questionnaire findings which exhibited that over half of parents (55%) in School A felt heard all the time and 32% felt heard some of the time. It was noteworthy that one parent mentioned how important feedback was after they had contacted the school. This had made the parent feel reassured the issue was dealt with; the parent expanded to say they felt their concern was prioritised and dealt with appropriately. In School B questionnaires, 37% of respondents felt heard always, 34% felt heard some of the time and 29% did not feel heard at all. During interview one parent

commented on their desire to have a say in larger school issues: "It's my child and I feel I should have a say in what's happening in the schools. Sometimes we get asked about small stuff like timetables, but I'm interested in the bigger stuff, like curriculum, staffing" (Parent B5). Another parent commented on the limitations of schools and acknowledged the responsibilities of parents:

> Yes, I would feel that my voice would be heard by the school but not all of us parent the same. Where the school does its best to support and to empathise within an issue, there is only so much that they can do if the parent themselves isn't willing to take responsibility for decisions made for each individual child. Because there is a consequence to everything and that comes down to parenting. The school can only do so much within its parameters, beyond that, it's the parents. (Parent B2)

One parent commented on the importance of the relationship that had been built with the school. They felt they would be listened to because they were known to the school and had developed a positive connection to the school.

> I'm not a person that would be down complaining very much, so if I did have something to give out about, I think they would listen to me. And I think because they know me, from helping out, that would also help matters. (Parent B3)

Another parent had an alternative opinion. This parent put forward the belief that as post-primary students get older, they should be the ones using their voice, being involved in decisions and taking responsibility for themselves.

> I think there is obviously a parent voice, but I think there has to be a respect for the students trying to develop more independently. The parent voice needs to be almost in the background, working with the teachers and planning bigger things. As a parent I'd like to be aware of what's happening with my daughter of course; but I also need to be mindful that, particularly when they're over 16, they need to be making choices and we must allow them to make those choices. So, the voice of the parent I think is important, but I think you have to balance it with the voice of the child particularly from 4th, 5th and 6th. Under 1st to 3rd year, there's a slightly different dynamic. (Parent B4)

Parent B5 felt that the parent association was a way of being heard, of providing opinions and suggestions to the school. This parent felt that individual issues related to their child were heard but more general proposals for the school were not heard by the school.

> My voice and opinions heard? That would be no. If it's about my child I am heard but if you make a suggestion for the school in general, no. There's no clear way except for the parents' association, of putting forward ideas so they're often diluted before we would discuss them or before they'd be put forward, perhaps, to the principal. So, it's kind of a filtering system really. And I would love if there to be a way for individual parents to put forward suggestions for things. (Parent B5)

Two parents B6 and B10 spoke about the limitations of the school and how teacher-related issues that may be raised by parents cannot easily be handled.

> I would say having participated in the school, I'm kind of aware of their limitations. They've tried to do what they can, but they can't always address the issues that you have. Some problems are not just for the PA, some have to be with the principal. I think individual parents are usually heard, but some problems can't be sorted easily, especially if it's related to a teacher. (Parent B6)

They also acknowledged that the parent association is not the place for complaints about teachers and that these should be individually addressed to the principal.

> I think you can put your opinion across to a certain degree in the PA, but you've limitations. It's not the forum to fully voice all your opinions. Their ideals can be different and narrower. (Parent B10)

Parents interviewed from School A described their voice as being heard in general and articulated clearly that the principal of the school had great time for parents and had excellent follow through. It was interesting to note that some parents expressed a lack of confidence in other staff members in relating to hearing parent voice. Comments by parents interviewed in School B indicated that parents felt an individual issue was heard and listened to at the time, but that some issues had no solution. Three parents mentioned staffing and staff leave as an area they wanted more information on and commented that their voice was not heard on this issue. Five parents expressed an interest in voicing opinions on curriculum and school structures. Parents of School B, more so than School

A, appear to have a greater sense of how their opinion should be accommodated within the school. This is reflective of the findings by the OECD in 2006, as discussed in Chapter 2.

7.4.8 Partnership: Partners in Education

During parent interviews, I asked parents if they felt they needed to be involved in the school and whether they felt like partners in their child's post-primary education. Six of the ten parents interviewed from School A indicated that they were happy with the school and what it did; and felt no need to be involved.

> The school do their thing and I do my thing. Sometimes I get a text saying there is a match on, and I will get off work then and I will go to the match etc. If they ask me to go somewhere, no problem, I will go. (Parent A8)

These parents indicated that they were satisfied with the school and knew they could contact the school if there was a problem but in general, they did not have the time to physically go to the school for parent courses or to help with activities or to volunteer. "Yeah, I would think I'm a partner so I am. The school do their bit like classes and activities and I do mine. I send them in each day and see the homework gets done. Yeah, we are partners" (Parent A6). When asked if they felt like they were in partnership with the school, one parent made the link between partnership and attending particular events:

> I do, but I think it's important that the parents take on a role of interest, linking in with the school, getting involved when you can, like as I said, I work, so I can't. But even the likes of coming to the PTM, coming to the information nights, coming to the talks that they might have on. It's only an hour, everyone can spare one hour, and I think if the kids see that you are involved, and you do attend these things.   I would imagine that children that see their parents are involved work and behave better. (Parent A1)

Another parent described their partnership with school as the support they gave at home each day.

> Yes, we are partners because when they come in to do their homework, you sit down to help and ask how the day was, and you have to get up in the morning,

like check do they have a breakfast and stuff for the day. I would be there to make sure they're all right going out to school. (Parent A4)

Parent A5 spent a lot of time thinking before answering and explained what partnership with the school means to her:

> I think that's kind of a difficult one to answer because when I try to frame in my head what partnership means to me, the only thing I can judge it against is the communication, the relationship that I have with the staff in the school. And if anything changes or if anything new is on the horizon, they will always put it to you first and ask your opinion. Even when I am talking to any of the teachers, that open communication does very much feel like a partnership. I know I would never be blindsided. (Parent A5)

This parent was very sure that nothing unexpected would happen, that she would always be aware of how her child was doing and that the school would always consult her about things pertaining to her child. These are interesting understandings of partnership within a post-primary school context which highlight this parent's view of their role in supporting their child's education and working in partnership with the school. Parent A7 acknowledged the common goal of parents and schools and demonstrated respect for the professional judgement of the school.

> I think yes there is partnership because we both want what's best for the child. Ultimately, the child's wellbeing and educational needs are first and foremost. If they are doing their bit, bringing my child along the road that s/he is capable of and if they can challenge her/him in any way, yes, I would say that's partnership. I would always, if they suggest anything for her/him, I would go with that because that is their job and that is their expertise and I would trust their judgement. (Parent A7)

Not all parents interviewed in School A believed they were in partnership with the school. One parent stated:

> No, I think that would actually wear you down mentally if you were to be constantly thinking of the school. Well, I think if too many parents have partnership in school, I don't think the schools would be run the way they are

now. I think they would be run totally differently. So no, not partners, you know what they say … Too many cooks…school knows best" (Parent A2)

Another parent did not feel in partnership with the school as they saw their only contact with the school as text messages. "Not really, no. Because, as I said I only get the texts…. Does that make me a partner?" (Parent A3).

Overall, there was a clear link between parents' perception of partnership in School A and attending events in the school. Six parents indicated that attending school events was an aspect of partnership which they participated in. They tried to go to a few activities each year, a parent course or talk, and all mentioned the PTM as a key example of how they are involved in partnership with the school. Four parents indicated that they were not in partnership with the school and did not need to be involved in the school.

Parents from School B indicated that the parent association is the main way parents are involved in the school. When asked about being involved with the school, parents indicated the benefits to their child when they are involved with the school. "You get to know how the school is run basically, you hear about things that are happening that you may not hear about if you weren't involved and I think it's nice, you know, for the teachers to be able to put a face to a name" (Parent B3). This comment reiterated comments by other parents who recognised the benefits of being involved in the school as a way of keeping informed about what was happening in the school. When asked to consider if they are a partner in their child's post-primary education, one parent indicated that they were, with the caveat of "to some extent" (Parent B4). "I felt more engaged as a partner when I was on the PA, I've stepped back, so I am not as engaged now" (Parent B4). Another commented "Probably not, no, I would feel they're the stronger partner" (Parent B9). Another parent explained: "I'd say partner might be a bit strong. So, I'd say I'd feel I'd be involved, and I'd be consulted and stuff, but I wouldn't feel like a full partner - definitely not an equal partnership you know" (Parent B6). While another remarked, "Very much, because we have the vision of what we would like her/him to achieve, and the school are helping with that" (Parent B7).

Evidence from interviews indicates that parents' feelings of partnership were closely linked to that parents' involvement in the school. Parents who participated in the parent association had a stronger feeling of partnership with the school. Other parents indicated that they were in partnership with the school regarding their child's education, but the

school was the lead/stronger partner. "Well, it's more them than us, I do my bit and they have expertise in the area of education. I'm happy with that" (Parent B9). One parent also said "I feel I'd been involved, and I'd been consulted - but definitely not an equal partnership" (Parent B6). This opinion was similar to another parent: "I would feel that I'm a partner to the extent that I can expect it to be so, given that I'm one of the thousand. But I think that it's down to the parents to become more involved if they're actually interested" (Parent B8).

Almost every parent had a different view about partnership with the post-primary school, and it is interesting to note that many of the partnership actions parents appreciated were simple and straightforward and easy for schools to implement. These included regular communication, asking for parent opinions before decisions are made and talking about the difficult topics (such as not having a substitute teacher for a class). Some parents had an awareness that the school was bound by educational legislations and DES circulars on numerous school issues, while others wanted a level of partnership that reflected high parental involvement, indicative of a consumer model of partnership as described in Chapter 3.

7.5. Conclusion of Parent Interviews

Of the six key indicators of partnership in the Epstein framework, two were underrepresented during parent interviews in both School A and School B: learning at home and parenting. Evidence indicated that both schools displayed actions in these areas, but parents did not realise that they were participating in two key areas of partnership. This is to be expected as post-primary schools do not generally articulate partnership activities. This would reflect a need to develop a deeper understanding of school activities and their purpose. Parents did not have a clear definition of partnership with their child's school, so they did not recognise how the school is supporting partnership activities such as learning at home and parenting. Post-primary schools in Ireland do not usually refer to parenting skills/courses or learning within the home unless it is a school within the HSCL Scheme. However, activities and actions which fall into these categories do occur in both schools, but parent knowledge and recognition of them, as aspects of their partnership with the school, was not evident.

Three other indicators of partnership (communication, volunteering, and decision making) which were evident in school practice within both schools were also conspicuous in parent responses. Communication and decision making were the two areas most frequently commented on, followed by volunteering. The area of communication received many positive comments with some requests for more information, especially from parents in School B. Decision making reflected a key area in need of attention with parent experiences indicating a lack of opportunities. The final partnership indicator, collaboration with community, was not recognisable as described in Epstein's framework in comments by parents and proved to be an area that lacked significant recognition. Evidence acquired during these parent interviews demonstrated that the case study schools do engage in partnership activities which fall within the six indicators. However, the extent of these activities vary across indicators and recognition of these partnership actions by parents can be limited.

Chapter 8 Teacher Interviews

8.1 Introduction

Chapter 7 outlined the interviews conducted with parents in the case study schools. This chapter will continue with the analysis of teacher interviews. The transcripts of these teacher interviews were critically examined in the same way as the parent interviews, focusing on Epstein's six indicators of partnership. Teacher comments pertaining to each of these areas of partnership will be presented within this chapter. A critical comparison between parent and teacher responses will follow in Chapter 9.

8.2. Participants

Teachers in the participating schools were approached at a pre-arranged time in the schools, informed about the research and asked to volunteer for an interview. School management arranged days for me to come to the schools and conduct interviews. All willing teachers were interviewed on these days. Sixteen teachers in School A and eight teachers in School B participated in interviews. The majority of teacher participants were female, both schools having a predominantly female staff. Interviewees in both schools ranged in experience from recently qualified to AP1 post holders with over 20 years of teaching experience. Teacher identification codes were used to ensure anonymity. Teachers are not distinguished in any other way, as some of their roles would make them easily identifiable.

8.3. Analysis of Teacher Interviews

As described in Figure 7.1, Chapter 7, 25 teachers were interviewed during the course of the research. The purpose of the interviews was first to contextualise the study by affording insight into teacher views on partnership in the participating schools and second, to consider any overlap in parent and teacher perceptions with the six key indicators as described by Epstein. All transcripts of teacher interviews were critically examined to establish common ideas, opinions and related themes. I will provide an analysis of teacher views on the six key areas of partnership as well as on teacher expectations, parent voice and partnership with parents.

8.3.1 Teacher Expectations

Teachers in the case study schools indicated that they have expectations of the parents of their students. When asked to consider the expectations they had, teachers in School A indicated that they greatly appreciate the signing of the journal as it shows parents are checking in with their child about schoolwork and homework. School A utilises the school journal features more than School B. It is used for notes regarding absences and leaving early but also to record both positive and negative behaviour, which parents have to sign. In School A, the journal is viewed as a communication aid, whereas in School B it is mostly utilised for noting homework, absence notes and early off permission notes. This value placed on the school journal was mentioned by other teachers in School A, and the expectation of parental support was very evident in teachers interviewed:

> With the journal system that we have in this school, I would expect them to check that. And I would expect them to be receptive to any contact we might have to make with them and kind of not be like 'Well why didn't you do this? Why didn't you do that?' Kind of meet us halfway and, because the only reason we're getting in touch with them is to, generally, to try and help the student, even if it is about, you know, bad behaviour or something, it's not to just give out. We are genuinely trying to find some sort of solution. (Teacher A1)

Teachers interviewed in School A indicated that parents and teachers have similar goals and that they have an expectation of support from parents which they see as very important:

> Well, yes I have expectations and hope that parents would support me, because we're only working for the good of their child, and any advice we give or support we need, you'd hope they would be on your side, on the same page. (Teacher A4)

Teacher expectations also included parental support with schoolwork, checking work was done and helping students revise. These are similar activities to those which parents would have undertaken in primary school. Teachers did indicate that this kind of support was especially important for the Junior Cycle year groups. One teacher alluded to parental expectations of the child's success in school and how this is a support to a teacher:

I would always expect a parent to want their child to do well and to want them to succeed. We need their support so much; the students are with them most of the time and we only see them a few times a week. Parents can have such an impact on educational success. (Teacher A7)

Another teacher acknowledged the gap that can occur between parents and teachers and their expectations. This teacher was very aware of how past experiences could affect a parent's ability to engage with a school and that some parents might be nervous or intimidated about conversations and/or connections with a school:

I suppose the reality is, we all come out of our own experience. I know there is more than just a negative experience of education at play with some of our parents. There is also a kind of disempowered feeling around school, and I'm really conscious when I phone someone of a nervousness in parents' voices at the other end of the phone. So, yes, I had expectations. I think it's completely realistic to expect that a parent will care about and promote their child's wellbeing and part of that is their educational success, right? (Teacher A11)

When teachers in School B were asked about their expectations of parents there were varied opinions. One teacher expressed the view that they did not have any particular expectations beyond getting the child ready for school:

I think I expect them to do the basics like make sure that children are ready for school, that they are on time for school, and that they come in fed. All the sort of areas that I guess address a child's wellbeing and readiness to learn. Parents now are working, they are exhausted, and realistically a child should be able to do his or her homework without the help of the parent as much as possible, because otherwise there is something missing. So, you know, some participation from the parent but not in a very concentrated way. (Teacher B1)

Other teachers had broader expectations of parents and the support they can offer to the school and teachers. The value of information provided by parents was mentioned by teachers as an essential way to provide the appropriate support to students who need it and ensure their success and wellbeing:

I would have an expectation, of information, which I would deal with sensitively, but it's very important if there's anything to know about a child, be

it an illness or a learning difficulty or even, you know, maybe changing circumstances at home, that you would know, so that you can therefore make the life of the child easier in school. (Teacher B4)

One teacher commented on the relationship between home and school and on how parents should understand that they could contact the school if needed:

I suppose I do have expectations. I'd want them to be involved, you know, in my particular role, sometimes the issues I would be working with are more personal in nature. So, I would like the parents to feel welcome, that they could just pick up the phone and talk to me. (Teacher B6)

Moreover, if teachers contact parents because there is an issue, they expect parents to respond and be supportive. "Parents, well I expect that they support us in the work we do here with their children" (Teacher B7).

For teachers in both schools the main expectations were that parents support the school by providing necessary materials, checking journals, informing the school of relevant information or changing circumstances, supporting the school ethos and getting involved and participating in school events. Teacher expectations in both schools were similar: that parents need to be supportive of the school by attending the yearly PTM; providing daily general support such as enquiring about school day, checking homework and being interested in school; and providing support when requested by the school. For teachers in both schools, parents meeting these expectations is vital and has a positive impact on student learning. Teachers expressed their appreciation of parents who support these expectations and actions. However, comments indicate that teachers experienced both supportive parents and what they considered to be non-supportive parents.

8.3.2 Communication

Teacher communication with parents varied greatly depending on their role within the schools. Subject teachers in School A described their contact with parents as limited and only if there was a problem in class: "I don't have much contact with parents to be honest. Really just the PTMs, and the only other time I'd have contact would be, if a problem arose through a phone call" (Teacher A2). Teachers with additional roles beyond subject teaching such as year head, class tutor, guidance counsellor, HSCL coordinator or

learning support had more contact with parents. In general, this contact was due to students requiring additional support in the area of academics, behaviour or mental health:

> I suppose my first contact with parents would be in relation to the transition to post-primary school. And I feel that that's very important, kind of first step in establishing a few links. That positive relationship is very important. I suppose then obviously the PTMs would be the key points and at transition times then, subject choice. (Teacher A6)

This increased level of contact was reflected by other teachers in School A who had a role additional to subject teaching:

> In my role, in learning support, I would have an awful lot of contact with parents. I suppose at the start of the year, trying to set up classes and looking to see when we could take students. Then mainstream teachers would often come to me and maybe have concerns about students and then I'd have to ring parents and see if it's okay to test and you know, get some feedback. (Teacher A9)

Teachers in School A placed great importance on parents attending the PTM. Teachers viewed these meetings as very useful means of communication and the main link with parents. "I think it's good to develop a relationship with them so in the future if we do need to contact them, you know who they are, they know who you are and they kind of put a face to your name" (Teacher A10). Subject teachers in particular placed great importance on this as the main way of communicating with parents, as they were aware that students frequently do not tell parents what is going on in school:

> It might be the only link with them, and you need to let the parent know what is going on in the classroom, whether their child is doing great work, whether their child is working or not and what else they need to do so they can do better and so on. (Teacher A4)

However, despite the benefits of PTMs the teachers in School A mentioned that the parents they need to see most are generally the parents who do not come. This opinion was shared by other teachers: "I find it very useful, it's very helpful. If they were to all show up. Because it's always the ones that you want to see most that don't come in"

(Teacher A1). One particular teacher acknowledged that PTMs need to be welcoming, as they can be scary and intimidating for some parents:

> I think a lot of parents find it very difficult to come into a school and talk to 10 or 11 teachers. Post-primary is quite different to primary and they're nervous and they're wondering what they're going to hear about their child. And I suppose it's that nobody wants to hear anything negative about their child, you know? (Teacher A6)

Teacher A12 recognised the importance of providing honest feedback to parents at such meetings while remaining sensitive to the parents' feelings:

> Even if the child is bold you have to give a positive comment back because they can become very disillusioned so I would find it's an opportunity to try and get my point across without being too negative. (Teacher A12)

Another aspect of school life referred to under communication was school reports. Teachers in School A emphasised the value of reports to parents: "It's a picture of what's happening here" (Teacher A6). However, some teachers acknowledged that reports can be a stressful thing for both parents and students:

> There was a parent I wanted to see at the PTM this year. But nobody came to the PTM, you know, any year. So, I don't know if it's just they are so busy, if they consider that their children once they get to secondary school are old enough, I don't know what it is. Maybe the students who are struggling, and their parents find the report and PTM depressing. (Teacher A9)

Teachers in School B commented that PTMs were: "our main way to communicate with parents. It is so important, and most parents come, which is really great" (Teacher B2). This fact was reinforced by Teacher B4 who recognised the vital importance of meeting parents:

> The PTM is really our key connection with parents. We meet them once a year to discuss their child's progress. It gives the parents a chance to get to know us. I know it's short but it's important that we get to speak to each other and parents then know we are available if needed, [that] if something comes up, they can contact us. Together we can help the students improve. (Teacher B4)

Teachers interviewed in School B described the preparation for PTM and showed their awareness that parents had high expectations for their children: "I bring a record of their exams, class tests and how they are performing within the class group. Parents are interested in this and seem to have high expectations" (Teacher B5). In School B, teachers had similar comments to School A regarding school reports. They felt reports were important and could provide valuable feedback to parents and students. One teacher also demonstrated an appreciation for free text comments rather than the use of a generic comment bank:

> I always use free text. Because the comments on a bank won't cover what you need to say. They are very generic. That is fine for some kids. Personally I like to put the name in and sometimes I'd have specific advice for a child. (Teachers B2)

One teacher considered the benefit of more than two reports a year while acknowledging the resistance this might face in school:

> It does help but that is only twice a year; you are just getting a snapshot really. I think and it's probably controversial and a lot of people wouldn't want it, but we could do more, you know, end of term reports, that are not a grade but just a communication and with everything going online now it would be a lot easier. (Teacher B3).

In general, teachers in both schools viewed communication with parents positively; communication methods referred to mainly involved PTMs, reports and contacting parents when problems arose. Teachers in School A prioritised the school journal, phone calls, text messages and the PTMs as key communications with parents. Teachers in School B were especially happy with the new technologies (the school website and the school app) introduced by the school, as well as the traditional methods of communication. The HSCL coordinator in School A has responsibility for promoting communication and partnership with parents, but no similar role exists in School B. The high value both sets of teachers placed on the yearly PTM was clear and correlates to the teacher questionnaire findings which indicated that 53% of teachers surveyed only get to meet parents once a year at the PTM.

8.3.3 Parenting and Learning at Home

Teacher recognition of parenting and learning at home as aspects of school partnership with parents was not clearly identifiable during teacher interviews. However, based on school documentation, parent interviews and parent questionnaires, activities do occur in the schools which pertain to these indicators. Nonetheless, terminology to describe these activities as aspects of partnership was not evident. During the interviews, teachers in both schools mentioned many types of information meetings with parents (incoming first year information, subject choice, TY information).

Six teachers in School A indicated that communication about events and other information could be clearer and that more reminders could be given to parents. Another teacher in School A commented that there has been so much change in post-primary education recently that it can be difficult to discern what information parents need. This teacher expressed an opinion that the school assumes parents know more than they actually do:

> I don't think parents have enough information. I feel like they don't know what's expected at second level anymore and I think if they knew that, maybe they'd know where to point their children. I know not enough information is given. We assume parents know a lot, but do they? (Teacher A7)

Teacher A9 commented on the HSCL classes the school run for parents and how difficult it is to get parents to attend:

> I know we have tried so much over the years to get parents in. Like it's really, really difficult. We've tried it, doing maths homework, doing Irish homework you know. And it's kind of the same little cohort of parents that will come to things and the parents who you'd love to see you don't, which is an ongoing issue. (Teacher A9)

Teachers in School A acknowledged that the parents attending these courses run by the HSCL tended to be the same people who attended other school events and the parent association. This mirrors the current national and international findings on parent involvement in post-primary school as discussed in Chapter 2.

During interviews School B teachers described activities which relate to parenting and learning at home within their school. One teacher described how information meetings are provided at key transition times for post-primary students.

> We have our meetings for various times in their child's life. We'd have incoming 1st years. Then we'd have a 1st year meeting when they're choosing their options because they sample all subjects. There would be a meeting for 3rd year parents to tell them about the TY programme. And then there's 5th and 6th year parents. They have a meeting about the CAO. And then there's obviously the PTM. (Teacher B7)

This view was reiterated by teacher B4 who stated that currently an extensive programme of support meetings is provided to parents and noted that these are "vital for providing information to parents as they help parents understand what decisions have to be made". (Teacher B4)

While parenting and learning at home are two of six key elements of partnership with parents according to the Epstein framework, they are somewhat underrepresented in the case study schools. This is not due to a lack of activities but rather a lack of awareness of their value in supporting partnership with parents. This is not surprising, as the language pertaining to partnership activities would most likely be unfamiliar to teachers as it does not currently feature in CPD. Teachers in both schools described a variety of school information sessions which occur for parents at critical times in the student's post-primary education and showed an awareness of their benefits to both parents and students. Nonetheless, teachers were not familiar with the contribution these activities make to partnership development with parents.

8.3.4 Volunteering

When teachers from both schools were asked about parental involvement and volunteering the parent association was mentioned as the main way parents volunteer in the schools. Teachers in School A described how the HSCL role is connected to the development of positive relationships between school and parents in a DEIS school. Teacher A15 described the parent association in their school:

It has fluctuated. So, at the moment for instance we have a core group of about 18 people which we're delighted with. Most of them up to third year which is good too, because that all bodes well for the future. Sometimes I think it's hard for new people because if there's an established group there…. It's like any group. If you're walking into it on your own, it can be hard to be the new person. (Teacher A15)

Another teacher pointed to how a relationship develops when parents engage with the school, get involved and volunteer and how this is reflected in student success:

I think if the student knows there's a relationship between school and home it's kind of more of a well-rounded relationship, the student knows we are working together, we help them, they help us, like it's not so separated. It benefits them greatly, they try harder, and parents know more about what is going on. (Teacher A5)

This point was reinforced by the comments of two other teachers who also described the benefit to students of parents volunteering and being involved in the post-primary school:

I mean it shows a level of commitment to the school itself, to the kids in the school. It makes communication between teachers and parents easier, and then I think it's nice for the student to see their parent taking an interest and getting involved for them. (Teacher A1)

It shows that their parents have an interest in them and in, you know, them reaching their potential and doing as best as they can. I think it's hugely beneficial. (Teacher A2)

Teachers in School A commented that parents of students with SEN tended to join the parent association and were very aware of what was happening in the school.

The PA does a few things, but it is very low key. It is usually the same people coming in. A good few of our parents from this department [SEN] are involved, they always seem to get involved in the PA. They tell me that it has been very helpful in supporting their child in school. (Teacher A4)

Teachers in School B described the experience of very involved parents both within the parent association and other volunteer activities. Teacher B7 acknowledged the value of

having input from different groups of parents, not just the parent association and how the school are using surveys to get more parent views:

> Parents have their input when we're looking at policies and not just the parent association because you could be hitting the same parents all the time then. So, I know last year we sent out a survey monkey to all parents to get their feedback. So that way you get more people. (Teacher B7)

The variety of fundraising activities which parents volunteer for in School B is diverse and they address varying student needs. Teachers in School B commented that:

> They are always involved in the debs and they do a lot of fundraising. The value of that can't be overlooked in the school. They do a table quiz that's a really worthwhile thing that they do, not just as a fundraiser but the community aspect of it too. (Teacher B1)

Another teacher expanded on this and referred to the expertise of the parent body as a resource to the school. "Parents of various industries and businesses with expertise come in and they do mock interviews for the kids. That sort of thing is helpful. It's great to draw on that expertise in the parent body" (Teacher B2). However, some teachers are more hesitant about the kind of activities parents become involved in and commented on the need for parents to have boundaries:

> I think a certain amount of involvement is good and I'm always very appreciative. However, in a sense you get the kind of embarrassed teenager thing happening as well. I think you need to have a bit more of a boundary they don't need to be here much. That would be my feeling. (Teacher B4)

A teacher in School B acknowledged the difficulty of getting parents to volunteer and the value of the parent association in promoting and increasing parent support:

> I think the parents respond better in one sense to parents inviting them to come on board with things, and the principal's invitation seems to be more effective than that of teachers. (Teacher B8)

Both schools acknowledged the great work undertaken by the parent associations. School A confirmed that it was a small number of parents involved and tended to be the same people each year who participated in graduation, sports day, bingo and fundraising.

School B indicated that they have a larger parent association which run a great number of activities throughout the year, including a 1ˢᵗ year parent mixer, an open evening, mock interviews, a careers evening, a table quiz, fundraising, graduation and other events. The parent association in School B complete a substantial amount of fundraising each year for the school to cover the costs of specific activities or equipment for students. Again, it is the same individuals who participate in fundraising and other activities. Teachers in both School A and School B recognised the value of the activities parents participated in within the schools. Volunteering in both schools revolves around participation of parent associations members in other events. However, School B does keep a list of parents who are unable to join the parent association but are willing to help with occasional events; they also provide surveys by email or link to parents. This is described as a useful way of widening the net to enable more parents to participate in supporting school events.

8.3.5 Decision Making

Parental contribution to decision making was an integral aspect of Epstein's framework. When asked about this aspect of involvement, one School A teacher reflected that all parents are involved in decision making pertaining to their child and their school choices. This is a unique perspective of what decision making at post-primary level entails which can be overlooked. "I suppose they decide with their child which subjects to study as regards the choice subjects, I think they are only involved in decisions about their child's choices" (Teacher A2). Other teachers in School A indicated that the main opportunities for parents to be involved in decisions were via the BoM and that the parent association's involvement in decision making can depend on the effectiveness of the parent association itself:

> They have to be involved in decision making through the BoM you know
> so that's a big one. Other areas are through their parent association but
> then it depends who is in the parent association, who is the driving force
> behind them. (Teacher A12)

Teacher A16 reflected on the nature of parent decisions at BoM level and whether they were truly representative of parents or just an individual point of view. A similar comment by Teacher A7 considered how representative the decision-making process of

the parent association was. This teacher also recognised the difficulties the school faced due to the cultural and socio-economic challenges of the local area:

> I haven't seen too much evidence of that [decision-making] in my time in this school. My impression is that a lot of decisions are just made as part of the parent association, and that's not everybody's voice. But I know everybody gets the opportunity to be part of the parent association. So, I feel like maybe in our area there isn't a culture of parents being involved to that level, and you'd love to change that, and maybe if they saw that they could impact decisions, maybe that would be a step in the right direction. (Teacher A7)

Another teacher in School A also cast doubt on the involvement of parents in decision making in the school, whatever the official policy might say:

> I don't see them…. You see I think there's, there's a dysfunction in most Irish schools in the gap that exists between policy and practice. The policy tends to be something we put on paper and file, and practice tends to be something, whether it's a shared practice or a whole lot of random individual practices, which is pretty intractable in the face of policy changes. So very often we change the aspiration, but not the action. So, no I don't see parents involved in decisions. (Teacher A11)

Conversely, two teachers who work with parents frequently stated that parents might be unsure or afraid of getting involved in decision making. "We're not always dealing with situations where people feel skilled or empowered to engage with the school, and so I think we need to initiate more" (Teacher A11). Teacher A6 expanded upon this view:

> I think they're always consulted. I do. And they're always given the opportunity to voice, but it's probably true to say that a lot of them would lack courage to. Yeah and it's really difficult to bring them in when you have a history of disassociation from school. (Teacher A6)

Another teacher echoed the lack of parental involvement in decision making but noted some steps the school had taken to improve such involvement:

> Not as much as it should be. For instance, one of our new posts is policy development. That person has links with the parents so also has more time to

probably chase up people. So, I would hope that more parents will be involved in that way. Because there are a number of policies that are due for renewal now. (Teacher A15)

School B teachers were very aware of parental involvement in decision-making activities and also acknowledged the work of parents:

Well, they are invited to contribute with policies, and the PA are involved in decision making as far as I know. Our parents are usually great for supporting us. (Teacher B1)

I think it's such an asset when you have parents who are involved. They contribute to decisions we make and get involved in many activities. (Teacher B7)

Teachers who participated in interviews indicated that School B was "finding new ways to encourage parents" (Teacher B7), such as online surveys, the school website and texts with a link to a survey. One teacher, when asked about parental involvement in decision making, indicated that they were not familiar with any details. "Well yes, we have a PA, I don't know much about it, but some school decisions are brought to the PA. What decisions I really could not say" (Teacher B2). Another teacher commented that "All parents have the opportunity to get involved in decisions but only some do. It's the same old story; certain people get involved, many don't" (Teacher B4). Teacher B1 voiced a different opinion that parents were too involved in some decisions and that this was not appropriate:

Sometimes I do feel there is a wee bit too much credence given to a parent's opinion on how the school does things. I think the school also needs to be able to step forward as an institution and say, actually this is how we do it and that if you are not happy with it that's fair, but it's not going to change because it's in the best interest of the institution. (Teacher B1)

Analysis of parent questionnaires revealed that 86% of parents in School A and 89% of parents in School B stated that they did not have the opportunity to be involved in decision making. There was an underlying feeling among teachers in School A that parents do have opportunities to be involved in school decisions but for a variety of reasons don't

become involved. The main way teachers in both schools described parents' involvement in school decision-making processes was via the BoM and parent association. Teachers expressed a view that a limited number of parents participate at this level. Teachers in School B described parents who were very involved in decision making as the same parents who get involved in everything. One teacher expressed the view that parents can have too much influence on decisions in the school. School B also indicated that they are implementing new ways to engage parents in decision making via online surveys.

8.3.6 Collaboration with Community

Teacher questionnaire results indicated that teacher awareness of school collaboration with community was very high in both schools. In total 92% of teachers in School A and 82% of teachers in School B had indicated their awareness of school community involvement. Interviews with teachers offered an opportunity to establish if this was an accurate reflection and to identify the main ways community involvement occurs in these schools.

School A is part of the HSCL scheme, working within the community by inviting people into the school for courses and activities and promoting community action among the students. In School A, one teacher commented on the value of collaboration with the community to the students, in particular students from a disadvantaged area:

> I would think the more open a school is to involving the community, the more open the school building, it almost becomes part of like a community. I think it's telling the kids that we work with, that their community is valued and they're valued as people. (Teacher A8)

School A has links with the local community in ways which support parents, grandparents and students. Teacher A4 stated that school activities include paired reading, bingo, craft fairs, coffee mornings and supporting the local church. These community links also help promote retention and progression of students in the school and develop important links with 3rd level via support programmes such as HEAR (Higher Education Access Route) and DCU access and support programmes for DEIS schools. Some of the community links are to support students with challenges in their lives.

We are involved with Northside Partnership to encourage our students to go on to do primary school teaching. Because a bit of research was done here some couple of years ago now, and 95% of primary school teachers in this area are not from this area. And so children have no role models from their own culture, from their own area. (Teacher A6)

Yeah, like I suppose we would have connections with the likes of TravAct and that would be Traveller specific in terms of giving support. And then we would have connections with agencies like Sphere 17 in terms of young carers. So, we would have a lot of contact with outside agencies. (Teacher A8)

Another insightful comment on the benefits of student community involvement was made by another teacher in School A:

I think they are in their own little bubbles, and they're not seeing anything outside school and home, and doing things with us in the community, they're seeing a wider world out there, and I think that's really important. (Teacher A7)

Questionnaires completed by parents indicated that 89% of parents in School A were unaware of community involvement by the school and thought there was no community involvement at all. Teachers in School A have a higher awareness of collaboration with community than parents. Of the sixteen teachers interviewed in School A, ten were aware of the schools' collaboration with community and its benefits. The other six teachers were a little unsure what was happening with regard to community involvement.

Teachers in School B indicated that their school was involved in the community also. Six of the eight teachers interviewed described various local community activities in which students were involved via a local special school and different sports clubs. Another teacher described the connection to the local parish. "I don't know a huge amount about the wider community, but I do know the connection with the church next door, and that's really important and works well" (Teacher B3). One teacher recognised the importance of community involvement and the social responsibility and awareness it develops in students. This teacher also acknowledged the value of community links to the school. "We don't operate in isolation. I think it's important for the reputation of the school in the wider community that our students get involved locally and support worthwhile

causes" (Teacher B4). This point was expanded upon by another teacher in School B, and this teacher also alluded to the value of the local business community to a school in supporting events and fundraising:

> Community, it's huge. Obviously, there's the aspect of social responsibility and students getting involved with community places like the special needs school. Also there's the PR side of things, that if we send students out, they're representing the school. We have a particular name in the community, a good name in our local community and further afield. We want students to maintain that. (Teacher B7)

One teacher in School B made a very valid point about why they believe community involvement is important to all:

> A school is a vital part of a community, and there should be a relationship, a good relationship, you hope, between the local community and a school, any school, because school is a fundamental part of the local community to be honest. (Teacher B2)

Interviews in School A and School B indicated that knowledge of community involvement was high among teachers in contrast to parents, especially among teachers involved in transition year and in running events. Teachers in School A identified a wide variety of community involvements, ranging from paired reading and parent/grandparent courses to involvement in projects in local support agencies and colleges. Teachers in School B indicated that students were mainly involved in going out into the community, with less opportunities for the community to come into the school. While evidence indicated that some collaboration with community actions did take place in the School B, it was not part of any specific partnership initiative in the schools but rather formed part of the transition year programme.

8.3.7 Parent Voice

As well as examining the six indicators of partnership, I was interested in parent and teacher perceptions of parent voice being heard. Currently, there is much talk around parent rights in education and parents' ability to query or complain about educational issues in schools. Indicators of parent voice being heard was relevant to the concept of

partnership, and therefore teacher interviewees were asked for their opinions. Teachers strongly indicated that the voice of parents was being heard:

> 100% definitely like the members of the parent association are quite vocal, and if they have an issue there's never any problem with them expressing that, and I can bring that to management or to the board and if a parent has an issue, it's always dealt with. It's never swept under the carpet. They're always welcome to come in and meet, whether it be the teacher or myself or management. (Teacher A13)

Another teacher indicated that parents of students with SEN in particular were very well heard:

> Yes, I think so definitely, yeah voice is heard. In our department, we would definitely take on board what they want, especially with the IEPs [Individual Education Plan] if they express concerns. We definitely take it on board and we work on it. (Teacher A4)

Two teachers clearly indicated how, from their perspective as class teachers, they listen to parents and value the information parents provide:

> I've definitely taken on board everything that they've said to me and in the wider sense anybody that I've come into contact that has had dealings with parents I feel like we do take things on board, yeah, and we go from there. (Teacher A7)

Two respondents in School A noted that sometimes parents wanted something that was not possible and that this may make parents feel they are not heard:

> It's definitely heard but I don't know how many people feel that it is you know, if you get me, I think it's definitely heard, I think the school does listen you know but unfortunately you can't fix everything. (Teacher A3)

Also, these teachers indicated that often it is the negative people who come to voice their opinion, not the majority who are happy and satisfied:

> Well, I think they are heard, I think the door is always open for people to come in. Unfortunately, it's always open for people who are coming in with negatives as opposed to positives. It's a shame. It'd be lovely to see if somebody came in

and said 'you did a great job' or you know 'my child is so happy in here, thanks very much' we don't get that it's more you know it's more of a negative thing that people come in. (Teacher A12)

When interviewed, teachers in School B had varied responses regarding parent voice. One teacher stated that parent voice was heard but sometimes parents have very specific requests:

> I think its heard and that's largely in a positive way. I think that we have a very active parents council. They have representation on the BoM, so that's certainly hearing parent voice. I think sometimes, this is my personal point of view, things can arise where people want their children taken out of one class and into another class and I think every school has that, but I think particularly in a middle-class area. I don't know how helpful that is necessarily, changing, it's not really life, you know? (Teacher B4)

Another teacher recognised the efforts management made to ensure parent voice was heard and acted upon:

> I think the principal is good at it yeah. The teachers probably are less aware of it, you know. Yeah, no she is good at listening to parents. I know she goes to all the parent association meetings and she listens to them yeah. I mean I think if they have ideas she does listen to them. I think voice is heard. (Teacher B5)

Yet another interviewee affirmed that School B was very open to "finding ways to encourage parents to use their voice" (Teacher B8). Teachers in School B also recognised that it could be difficult to balance between parent and teacher voice. Two teachers indicated that they felt that sometimes parent voice was heard more, perhaps due to the school being in an affluent area. One commented: "At the end of the day, I suppose decisions have to be made with certain things in mind; so sometimes you just can't have a voice from everybody" (Teacher B5). Another teacher commented: "I did feel that parents and the students were calling the shots more than the teachers" (Teacher B7). One teacher commented on the complexity of balancing the voices and opinions of parents with the best way forward for the whole school:

> Parent voice is heard. Sometimes I think too much perhaps. I realise that no matter what age we have here, they are still their parents' babies, and the parents

want the best for them, and you have to hear their concerns. They are concerned for the future of one; you are concerned for the future of thirty. (Teacher B1)

The issue of parent voice is a complex one, as shown by teacher comments. Teachers in both schools indicated that parent voice is heard but sometimes parents are voicing an opinion in relation to one child while a school must make decisions on the best outcome for hundreds of students. The delicate balance of listening to parents and their opinions and doing what is best for the school can be challenging for school management, especially if parents feel they have a right to be heard and expect particular actions. Teacher comments also highlighted that sometimes parents who are happy say nothing and that some parents can have unrealistic expectations of the school. Opinions on parent voice within School A and School B are varied and demonstrate the multifaceted aspects which have to be considered by school management when planning for partnership with parents.

8.3.9 Partnership: Partners in Education

The diversity of parent and teacher perspectives on partnership within the case study schools was an important issue in this research because partnership can be defined in so many ways. Teacher comments provided an insight into their experience of partnership with parents over several years and contributed to the overall understanding of whether partnership was occurring within the participating schools. When asked to consider if they were in partnership with parents, a variety of views were expressed. Some teachers in School A felt there was no partnership. "I don't think we're in partnership with them because we don't see them that often, you know, and they don't attend the social functions" (Teacher A12). This opinion reflects a traditional view of what partnership is, with teachers connecting it to seeing parents in the school. Teacher A1 had a similar opinion:

I think it's not quite a partnership. I think it could and probably should be more of a partnership than it is. I think we work away and if there's anything major that needs to be addressed, then we kind of get in touch with them, whereas I think maybe it should be more of an ongoing, you know, trade of information between parents and teachers. (Teacher A1)

This comment indicated the inherent value of communication between school and home as an aspect of partnership. This was also the experience of other teachers in School A, who describe their lack of contact with parents but willingness to be a partner:

> I'm kind of leaning towards it's not really much of a partnership, because we only see them once a year at a PTM. So, then I'd only really contact them if there is an issue. So, I suppose there isn't much of a partnership there at the minute. I wouldn't be opposed to it though, to more of a partnership. (Teacher A2).

Emphasised by School A was the fact that parents of students with special needs were in partnership with the school to a higher degree than other parents.

> Yeah, in our department [Learning Support/Resource/SEN] I think we are working well with them, because there are so many links and I suppose we are all working for the one thing, with other students not so much. (Teacher A4).

Two teachers in particular spoke of the difficulties in developing partnership with parents whose own experience of post-primary education was negative or limited. One commented:

> I think the first thing parents need from me in relation to partnership, is to know that I am not out to get their child and I am not out to get them. Basically, we really do want the same thing. We want what is good for the child. I think we strengthen a connection as partners with a shared concern for an individual child's welfare. (Teacher A11)

This comment shows the complex nature of partnership with parents who may be struggling to support a school for a variety of reasons. Another teacher described the partnership as indirect and alluded to the complexity for subject teachers if they had to deal with parents more frequently:

> Indirectly, I think it can be very hard to be directly in partnership with parents all the time. I think to be honest it would be unrealistic to always be in direct partnership with them, but they are always involved in different areas keeping updated with how their children are getting on in school. (Teacher A5)

Teacher A16 summed up the experience of partnership rather succinctly, while acknowledging that some parents are happy for the post-primary school to be the major partner:

> I suppose, traditionally, parents have been well prepared to hand over all of that stressful stuff to schools. Now, I suppose, it also depends, in some sense, on the nature of the school and the extent to which parents want to be stuck in it. I am sure there may be schools in which parents are beating down the door to get in and get involved in stuff. That may be the case, but not here. (Teacher A16)

Teacher A15 raised the issue to a national level and attested to the fact that more could be done by schools in general to promote partnership:

> If you're talking about a genuine definition of true partnership, I don't think Irish schools in general do it. I don't know if many schools in other jurisdictions do it either. If you're talking about a relationship where we work together hopefully to benefit the student, then I think yeah, we do that. No doubt, there are things we could probably do better as well. (Teacher A15)

This teacher demonstrated a knowledge of the difficulties associated with developing partnership with parents. She commented on how no direction was given to post-primary schools and that they try their best with limited resources. Generally, teachers interviewed in School A felt themselves to be in partnership with parents but with some limitations: "It is not an equal partnership, but we have common goals" (Teacher A15).

Within School B, teachers indicated a variety of opinions on partnership. Five teachers emphasised that they were in partnership with parents and one in particular explained:

> Definitely, I would feel, personally, I am in partnership and I would see that I'm equal and that parents are equal, because I'm just here in school with them, whereas they're at home with the students. Obviously, it's a sharing of information, like this is what I know from school point of view, this is what you might know from home point of view, and can we bring what's best together. (Teacher B6)

Another teacher affirmed the partnership relationship by specifying that the parent is the expert on his or her child:

I think it's something like that we're standing in for the parents in some way. We're doing a professional job and our role, obviously, is the education part of it, and we might be experts in subject areas or whatever, but we're not really the experts in other people's children. (Teacher B6)

The value of the parent's perspective on the child was mentioned by another three teachers. One teacher in particular said:

You have to recognise the human element of it, or you are just here for a job, and I don't think that works in teaching. You do have parents to answer to, and rightly so, because you are dealing with their children. So, in that regard, yes, I do feel like a partner. (Teacher B1)

On the contrary, another teacher did not feel the need for partnership:

The only thing that I feel I need from parents is relevant information about the student sitting in front of me. So, if a student has recently had a SEN report done. That is the sort of stuff I need, and I can function very effectively with just that and nothing else. Anything else is a bonus, but it's not necessary. (Teacher B2)

This showed the perspective of a subject teacher whose only interaction with parents was at the yearly PTM or if there was a problem in class with the student. The frequency with which they saw parents was a factor that contributed to their perception of whether or not there was a partnership with parents. Interviewing indicated that partnership was specifically evident to teachers who saw parents more frequently; they felt in partnership with parents due to increased levels of communication and discussion regarding educational progress and school supports. However, subject teachers who only saw parents once a year did not feel the same kind of partnership. Teachers who did feel in partnership with parents also described it as weighted more towards the school, it being the major partner rather than the parent. Two teachers presented the view that parents needed to be involved in their child's education to a degree:

They are major shareholders in education, but not in my teaching at school. Parents need to accept that we are professionals and that may be where the partnership ends with their child and me as the teacher. I don't need 'I know how to run your school and teach' from parents. (Teacher B1)

This is an interesting point as the teachers saw parents as partners but with parameters, the teacher being the expert in the classroom and the parent being the expert on their child. This would be indicative of a partnership model as described by Epstein and Hornby. Another teacher commented on their responsibility to parents:

> Yeah, we're in partnership, you know, you have a huge, the biggest input into children's lives. It's a big responsibility, and I think it is important that, you know, we do communicate with parents, so we know where we're at. (Teacher B4)

One quote demonstrated the unique and complex type of partnership which exists between parents and post-primary schools:

> I suppose when their child is here, we are in loco parentis, so we are in partnership, and then I suppose we're looking at the bigger picture, so a parent is biased in favour of their own child whereas we have the bigger picture. We have the staff, all the other students in the class and the resources that are available, budgets, regulations, all of that kind of thing. So, I suppose, in my opinion, partnership should be weighted more towards the school because they do have the bigger picture. (Teacher B7)

Teacher B6 described their partnership with parents as welcoming and understanding, where the school tries to see the parents' point of view:

> I think it's a welcome, a trust in parents, and I suppose it comes down to relationship. You know, even the way we speak to parents I think is very important. That we respect where they're coming from, do you know? I think sometimes we might feel people, well I don't think I do, but that people can feel threatened by parents, but if you think 'Well look, they just want the best for their child. We want the best for their child.' Now sometimes that's not the same, we don't have the same view of how that's achieved, but I think if you step back and think 'Look, why is this parent being like this?' That's the reason. (Teacher B6)

Teachers in School A and School B presented a range of views on partnership. The majority of teachers indicated that parents and teachers have common goals. Some teachers felt this equated to partnership, but other teachers describe schools as the major

partner. Parents were recognised as the expert on their child, and this was seen as providing valuable information to the school. This research demonstrates that a teacher's role in a school can influence their feeling of partnership. Teachers who are more involved with parents and communicate regularly with them described feeling like a partner, whereas subject teachers who do not have much contact with parents did not have the same experience. Communication was stated to be a key aspect of developing and maintaining partnership, and teachers acknowledged how some parents find it difficult to relate to the school due to their own personal past experiences. A few teachers presented the view that partnership was not needed.

8.4 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter presented teachers' views on partnership with parents within the case study schools. Teachers in both schools often expressed similar views on key aspects of Epstein's partnership framework. The complexity of teacher views indicates the elusive and varied nature of partnership with parents at post-primary level. The six areas of partnership were illustrated and exemplified to varying degrees in both schools. Parenting and learning at home were observed in teacher comments, but their significance to partnership development was not well recognised by teachers. Communication between teachers and parents was identified by teachers as essential for students' progress. Parents' decision making and volunteering within the schools was described as limited, with usually the same parents or parent association involved in these activities. Teachers placed great importance on school and student involvement in the local community, citing the benefits to both the school and the students. Chapter 9 will now draw together the findings from Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 and evaluate representation of Epstein's six indicators of partnership.

Chapter 9 Discussion on Findings

9.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 and 3 introduced the literature associated with partnership with parents. In many ways literature in this area was limited as little research was available pertaining to Irish post-primary schools. Also, national and international literature in general referred to primary and SEN settings. Models of parental involvement provided a variety of opportunities for evaluating partnership in the case study schools, but Epstein's model, in my opinion, was the most relevant and offered the greatest possibility of application in the Irish post-primary context. Therefore, Epstein's framework was utilised during this research as a tool to examine partnership activities in the case study schools. This chapter will critically examine the findings of the parent and teacher questionnaires and interviews. I will discuss the data generated by observations during PTMs and secondary data provided by the case study schools such as school policies and documentation as I determine if findings from Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 are reflective of partnership with parents within the case study schools. I will critically evaluate the quantitative and qualitative findings and determine if the case study schools are enacting partnership with their parents. Simultaneously, I will evaluate whether Epstein's framework is applicable in the schools. I will conclude with a summary of my findings.

9.2 Partnership: Partners in Education

An essential aspect of this research was ascertaining whether parents and teachers regarded themselves as partners in the child's education.   Chapters 2 and 3 presented the benefits to students when parents and schools work in partnership.   I was interested in what parents considered partnership to be, if parents wished to be involved in their child's school and what an effective partnership between parents and post-primary schools might look like. In Chapter 2, Section 2.5, I provided my definition of partnership for the purpose of this research:

> a relationship based upon a shared common goal of education for the student, where schools and parents recognise the opinions and perspectives of each other and consider them when making decisions or developing policy. It is when schools are responsive to the concerns and needs of parents and involve them as active community members.

I used this definition in my assessment of the case study schools while measuring school actions and activities against Epstein's six indicators of partnership.

Questionnaire findings indicated that parents from both schools had similar perceptions of partnership. Despite 83% of parents feeling that they needed to be involved in post-primary education, only 53% felt like a partner with their child's school. Almost a quarter of parents in both schools did not feel like a partner. These figures demonstrate that parents think they need to be involved but are unsatisfied with their level of involvement. Comments in questionnaires and interviews indicated several reasons for this, such as problems not being addressed by the school, the school not engaging in partnership, no guidance given on how to be a partner and reluctance on parents' part due to other commitments. The description of how class, ethnicity and life contexts can create barriers to partnership with schools given by Hornby (2001) would correlate with the views expressed in these parents' comments. Hornby also alluded to the attitudes of teachers and how they can promote partnership with parents or hinder it. Most teachers in School A and School B acknowledged the need for parents to be involved in the school, while over half of teachers felt themselves to be in partnership with parents. How do we account for the apparent disparity between parents' desire to be involved and the actuality? Perhaps there is an issue around clarity. Do parents and teachers know what it means to be in partnership? Neither school had clear plans for partnership development. This is reflective of the fact that Irish post-primary schools do not have any specification or guidance for partnership as evidenced in Chapter 2. In primary education, areas of partnership are more evident, but in post-primary school parents are disassociated from class teachers and may be unaware of what they can do to help their children. Hornby & Lafaele (2010) discuss the impact student age has on partnership and the fact that the lowest level of partnership is displayed at post-primary level. The natural independence which develops in teenagers could also contribute to reduced partnership between parents and post-primary schools. This would correlate with OECD (2006) findings and research carried out by Byrne and Smyth (2010). Despite the schools having different catchment areas and contrasting economic backgrounds, there was a marked similarity in expressed views and shared experiences relating to partnership indicators.

Parent rights to consultation and involvement in their child's education are clearly articulated in Irish legislations and educational policies (Constitution, 1937; Education Act, 1998; SSE, 2016). Management in both schools indicated a commitment to

partnership and communication. A section on parents within School A's DEIS plan expresses the school's commitment to partnership with parents. The HSCL coordinator works with targeted parents to support specific students and also engages with the broader parent population for home visits in first year and at PTMs. Data from School A suggests that partnership activities are effective for 53% of the parent population surveyed. However, the school needs to address why the remaining 47% of parents who participated in this research and who wish to be involved are not having a similar experience. Some suggestions to consider are indicated by the need parents expressed for more communication, enhanced opportunities to volunteer and increased participation in decision making. School B refers to partnership in some of the school policies, but no specific details are given as to what this entails.   This lack of clarity and direction could be contributing to parents' feeling of insufficient partnership in this school. How schools define partnership is a key component to how that partnership is evident to parents, and to the opportunities for partnership included in school planning. In School B, 52% of parents felt in partnership with the school compared with 84% wanting to be involved with the school. Parents in School B clearly articulated their desire for improved communication regarding school events and student achievements, as well as more involvement in decision making.

Evidence suggests that planning for partnership is limited, especially in School B. The case study schools should clearly identify what partnership with parents means for their school. They could also clearly identify partnership activities, as some parents may believe that partnership is something new and extra rather than recognising the ways school and home work together each day to support students, for example by promoting good attendance, supporting homework, accessing additional school supports, communicating and addressing concerns. If there is not a clear understanding by schools of what partnership with parents is, it is nearly impossible for a school to plan to support this partnership with parents. A clear statement of what partnership with the school entails would benefit both schools, especially as a recurrent theme among parents is that they are unsure what partnership is. Though the Education Bill (2019) has not yet become law, a school statement of partnership with parents could provide clarity to all the school community and could highlight for both parents and teachers their responsibilities to one another. This would tie in with the Parent Student Charter when it becomes legislation and help schools prepare for its implementation.

Two schools were used within the case study in order to consider partnership in contrasting settings. As described in Chapters 1 and 5, there are differences between the schools' demographics as well as in terms of student progression and retention. I did not engage in categorising the types of parents evident in the case study schools; this was not an aim of the research and would have required a different approach to questionnaires and interviews. My focus was individual parents' experience of partnership. I expected to see sharp differences between parents and their opinions on partnership with their child's school. However, what materialised was a similarity between parents in their experience of partnership. Questionnaires indicated that parents had similar experiences regardless of the school, and interviews confirmed this. Parents from both schools desired increased communication in specific areas. Parents in School A and School B had similar expectations for their child to be happy, supported, and challenged. Parents in School B also articulated the expectation of an excellent academic schooling. The notable difference between the schools was that parents in School A presented as more content with their current relationship with the school, whereas parents from School B demonstrated a greater desire to be consulted, heard and involved. This could be attributed to a variety of factors, including educated parents from middle-class background having higher expectations of their voice being heard, which would correlate with OECD (2013a) research as discussed in Chapter 2. Also, while it is recognised that the parents who chose to participate in interviews could be representative of an articulate group with specific views, the questionnaire results demonstrate a similarity to interview responses.

9.3 Discussion of findings

Epstein's six indicators of partnership have been used in this research to evaluate partnership in the case study schools. As presented in Chapter 3 these are the six indicators of partnership which schools can engage in with parents to promote partnership (Epstein, 2016, 2018):

- Parenting
- Learning at Home
- Communication
- Volunteering
- Decision Making
- Collaborating with Community

In the following sections I will critically discuss my findings for each school under these specific headings. This framework helped me examine practices in the schools and determine if examples of partnership were evident. As explained in Chapter 3, I decided on this framework as it offered a wider understanding of partnership with parents than other models which I deemed to be quite limited in scope. Epstein (2016) states that partnership with parents in her model is not confined to parents coming into school to help at events or attending a parent association meeting. Epstein's understanding of partnership and the six indicators recognise there are a variety of opportunities for parents to support their child and the school. While engaging in the fieldwork for this research the area of parental expectations arose and contributed to my understanding of the indicator collaboration with community. The frequency with which this topic arose suggests that it would be useful to examine the area briefly before moving through each of Epstein's indicators and critically examining how they are represented in the case study schools.

9.4 Parent Expectations

During interviews, parents and teachers in both schools shared their expectation of the schools and the hopes they had for their child. Parental expectations provided a wealth of information on how parents chose a post-primary school for their child and identified various factors which they considered important. Parental expectations articulated during interview indicated that parents had chosen the case study school specifically for their child based on curriculum available, school reputation and school supports. This correlated with findings by Rafferty and Kilbride (2007) who indicated that parents seek information from people with experience of a school and take advantage of local networks to gain additional information when considering a school for their child. Parents in School B also referenced the academic reputation of the school as a key factor. Parent comments provided me with an insight into the kinds of information parents want about a school so they can make an informed choice. Parents interviewed demonstrated a good general knowledge of the case study schools such as the subjects offered and extracurricular opportunities. An area of major interest to parents was support systems available (such as learning support, career guidance and counselling). Some of the parents interviewed were past pupils of the schools and felt they had 'insider' information

on the inner working of the school and what to expect. Similar views were expressed by parents who already had a child in the school; they felt their experience with the school enabled them to make an informed choice for their next child. Findings in Byrne and Smyth (2010) support this view, with middle class-parents in particular indicating that "some groups of parents appear to have greater insider knowledge of the educational system, using information acquired through social networks to select the best school" (p. 59). Findings indicate that parents had expectations of the school based on their own experiences. Parents revealed that the more information they had about the school, its activities not only within the classroom but within the local area, the better able they were to make an informed choice about a school for their child. Research conducted by Smyth et al. (2004) supports this view, with reputation of school and school facilities recognised as critical to parental choice of post-primary school.

The benefits of a positive school reputation were evident in parent comments which indicated that people in the local community connected the schools with specific attributes. Fifty-five per cent (n=11) of all parents interviewed mentioned that they had "heard something" about the school from another parent or a neighbour in the community which encouraged them to consider the school. This confirms findings that parents "are often influenced by the views of neighbours and friends and seek out what ever kind of local knowledge of a school is available" (Raferty & Kilbride, 2007, p. 67). Based on parental comments, School A was reputed to provide excellent supports for students' academic success and wellbeing, while School B was reputed to excel academically with extremely high numbers achieving places in university. Epstein states that "schools vary in how much they know and share about their communities and how much they draw on community resources to enhance and enrich the curriculum and other experiences of students" (Epstein, 2016, p. 132). This was evident in the findings, and parental expectations demonstrated the value of a school developing a relationship with its local community and highlighted how the surrounding community can support a school. It could be argued that the connection between parental expectations and community collaboration could be used by the schools to develop greater partnership between the school, parents and the local community, while also supporting a positive discourse in relation to the school. As a school leader I would naturally consider the information we provide to prospective parents, but this research has heightened my awareness of the range of information needed by parents in a variety of formats. The link between

information available about a school, parent expectations and collaboration with community was unexpected and would be an area worth considering in more depth in a further study.

9.5 Parenting and Learning at Home

I now turn to the first two indicators of partnership in Epstein's framework: parenting and learning at home. Drawing together the findings from the observations, school documentation, questionnaires and interviews facilitated a critical analysis of representation of these partnership indicators in School A and School B. As described in Chapter 6, 7 and 8, these two areas advise parents on supporting children as students and provide information and advice which can enhance parents' ability to help their child with decisions related to educational choices (Epstein, 2009). Findings demonstrate that these two indicators have relevance to Irish post-primary schools. This research indicates that though the two case study schools differ in catchment area, parents' economic status and educational background, there are many similarities in how the schools engage with parents and their experiences of these partnership indicators. This could suggest that the structures of post-primary education in Ireland in relation to parenting and learning at home activities lead to a similar experience in spite of the diversity of parents and students.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, parenting and learning at home are two areas of partnership which are not explicitly stated or discussed in most Irish post-primary schools. Findings in this research indicate that these indicators are indeed present in the case study schools via a range of yearly school activities. However, it is the recognition of the value these activities have in developing partnership which is lacking. Though many events and actions which promote parenting and learning at home occur in the case study schools there is a lack of recognition of their purpose and importance by both teachers and parents. Parenting and learning at home activities which occur in the case study schools do not actively promote partnership in a planned or strategic manner. This is a missed opportunity for School A and School B. With some additional focused planning, the current systems of parental supports could be extended and prove even more beneficial to both parents and students. Epstein (2013) proposes a transparent programme of planned parent information sessions combined with a variety of resources which could help address this. It would also benefit parents if the schools provided information in

additional formats, such as webinars, for those parents who cannot attend these sessions. Traditional methods (in-person meetings and notes sent home with students) have their place but widening the methods of communication and embracing new communication technologies would enable more parents to interact with each school and promote enhanced parenting and learning at home opportunities for families (Olmstead, 2013). These actions would be beneficial to school planning and align partnership activities with improving student outcomes. Creating a clear connection between school events and DES requirements for SSE and LAOS could highlight the importance of parenting and learning activities and increase the profile of school information meetings to parents. It would also support the view that parents have an inalienable right as primary educators and promote the goal that a school should have a clear policy as regards productive and effective parental participation (Byrne & Smyth, 2010).

Epstein and Associates (2016) are not alone in valuing activities related to parenting and learning at home. Byrne and Smyth (2010), Hornby (2011) and Tusla (2018, 2019) reiterate this view. Though Irish post-primary schools do not formally utilise the terms parenting and learning at home as indicators of partnership with parents, adopting these terms could enable post-primary schools to provide a targeted approach to developing enhanced partnership with parents. These indicators could provide a framework for building partnership practices with parents. As indicated by the case study schools, some elements of parenting and learning at home already occur but lack the explicit recognition of their connection to student outcomes and partnership with parents. Evidence from this research indicates that the case study schools could enhance their work in the areas of parenting and learning at home in line with Epstein's recommendations. By building upon the current strong foundation of school activities, both schools could provide a more explicit statement about the purpose of each event/activity and how it benefits students directly. This could enable parents to provide increased support for their child's education and would prepare post-primary schools in Ireland for their obligations to parents when the Education Bill (2019) is enacted and change the historical rhetoric on partnership with parents in Ireland to an active strategy with which post-primary schools engage. In the next sections, I will summarise critically the key discussion points under the four key aspects of parenting and learning at home which were evident in the case study schools: provision of information and information sessions, homework and study, school reports and school documentation.

9.5.1 Provision of Information and Information Sessions

Examples of parenting and learning at home were apparent in both schools. Documentation indicated a wide variety of information sessions as part of their yearly calendar of events for parents. School A connected many of these information sessions to the PTMs, while School B ran separate information meetings in the evening. Parent questionnaires provided extensive insight into the types of information provided by the schools, and overall, 72% (77% School A and 68% School B) of parents indicated that they were happy with information provided, while 20% (17% School A and 22% School B) of parents would have liked more information. These findings suggest a fairly large number of parents require more information on a variety of topics from both schools. Research by Byrne and Smyth (2010) found that in an Irish context, parents provided a significant amount of help and advice to their child on school decisions; therefore, the case study schools should consider how to provide the required additional information to this group of parents.

The interviews in both schools reflected what could be viewed as the positive impact school information sessions had on parents. The parents expressed their appreciation of these 'valuable events' and described them as extremely beneficial to themselves and their child. This corresponds with research conducted by deFur (2012) and Sawyer (2015) who both described the benefits to students when parents are involved in their child's school. DeFur describes the positive difference in educational outcomes, while Sawyer alludes to the powerful message conveyed to student by parents that their school is valued. Parents and teachers in School A indicated that enough information was given. Contrastingly, in School B teachers described parents as having sufficient information, while parents pointed out a lack of information from the school. A similarity between School A and School B was the lack of awareness among teachers of the benefits of information sessions to parents or that teachers could have a role in supporting these sessions. Todd and Higgins (1998) discussed the possibility that teachers erect barriers to partnership due to reduced understanding of the support parents can provide and a fear of their professional status being diminished. This led me to consider if the importance of the information sessions was being reinforced by teachers to students when reminding them of the upcoming event. Developing teacher awareness of the importance of information sessions with parents and asking teachers to promote parental attendance

could support increased awareness among students of the value of their parents attending such events.

Evidence and documentation from the case study schools indicates that both schools rely heavily on in-person information sessions which are given within the school and letters sent home to parents via students, with little information available on school websites. Increased recognition by the case study schools of the benefits of supporting parents with an array of information sources would enable parents to access details on school information not only at a school meeting, but via podcast, websites, YouTube videos or online notices. This could also help address the low attendance by some parents at school events/talks as described by teachers in School A and the resulting lack of knowledge or awareness. It would also facilitate parents who cannot attend the school in person. Increased sources of information are key to providing parents with a variety of means of accessing school information (Epstein, 2016; Hornby & Blackwell 2018). Therefore, advertising of parents' information sources should also be more planned and high profile, targeting those hard-to-reach parents. Such actions would also support identified DES and government policy of promoting partnership with parents at post-primary level (DEF, 1991; DES, 1995).

9.5.2 Homework and Study

Epstein (2018) describes the benefits of increased parent knowledge regarding homework and study practices as key to increasing their awareness of their child as a learner. School information is key to a parent knowing how to help their child plan their study or revision. That is not to say parents need to know how to do the topic/curriculum their child is doing; it is just necessary for parents to be aware of what they should do to support homework, study, revision or if a problem arises (Lazar & Slostad, 1999). According to documentation and comments by the respective school management, sufficient information to support homework and study was provided by reports, PTMs, information sessions and school documentation in both schools. However, the findings indicate that this view is not supported by parents from either school, or indeed by teachers in School A. The findings discussed in Chapter 6 and 7 clearly indicate that parents and teachers want more detailed guidance on the ways to support homework and study. The implication of these findings is that school management requires a more focused plan to support parents understanding of homework and study within the schools. A homework

and study policy could clarify for parents and staff the amount and frequency of homework, study techniques for specific subjects and supporting resources. Another critical consideration is the role teachers play in providing parents with supports in this area. It could be argued that both teacher professional time (40 minutes per week) and Croke Park hours (33 hours per year) could be used for the purpose of developing suitable guidance on homework and study for parents.

9.5.3 School Reports

School reports vis-à-vis students are intended to provide parents with an insight into the current progress of their child; the DES, NCCA and JCT recommend that assessment for learning feedback is provided to help students improve. Findings in Chapter 5 reveal that 43% of parents found the quality of reports lacking, with parents in School B articulating the greatest dissatisfaction. This would indicate that school reports need to be modified to provide more useful information to parents. In contrast, 59% of teachers saw reports as very helpful to parents. The most problematic area of reports referred to in remarks made by parents was the generic comment, which meant a student could receive a report full of comments, such as "working well", "excellent student", or "more work needed". These types of comments are not beneficial to students or parents as they do not offer advice on how improvements can be made, as is recommended by DES. This type of generic comment has been replaced with formative feedback since the introduction of the New Junior Cycle. Teacher CPD in Assessment for Learning (AFL) and formative feedback could promote enhanced teacher comments and would likely lead to increased parental satisfaction with reports. Removing the generic drop-down options from report comments would be an easy way to begin a process of more detailed student-centred reports. It must be acknowledged that AFL and formative feedback is more time-consuming than a generic comment, but all DES and NCCA guidelines indicate that this is best practice. NCCA Reporting Guidelines (2018) provide advice to teachers on how to provide AFL feedback to students in a concise manner, and CPD for Junior Cycle has addressed this at both school and subject cluster level. Byrne and Smyth (2010) argue convincingly that information is necessary for parents to assist their child succeed in education. This could be applicable to the information provided in biannual school

reports which account for two of three key communications with parents each school year.

9.5.4 School Documentation

School documentation such as the school calendar indicated information talks for parents on topics such as mental health, online safety and school curriculum choices, but in general the literature from School A and School B did not specify what talks were given to which parents and how priority topics such as study skills or wellbeing are revisited. Based on the importance of reports, information sessions and PTMs, I would have expected to see more references to these key parent events within school planning, policies and documentation. Documentation provided by School A does briefly allude to these events without any detail, while the documentation provided by School B does not mention them at all. This suggests that while activities related to parenting and learning at home activities are a key part of the school calendar, they are not an aspect of recorded school planning. This can be seen a missed opportunity to connect the work the schools are doing in supporting parents to planning partnership activities which are linked to improved student outcomes.

Observations in School A provided me with an understanding of the follow-up procedures in place when a parent did not attend a PTM. School A has an unwritten policy of inviting those parents to another PTM where they can meet some of their child's teachers. I did not discern any strategies in school documentation for School B which considered how to inform parents who could not attend events in the schools or procedures for ensuring maximum targeted communication with all parents. However, School B did demonstrate engagement in self-evaluation as regards students reporting. Parents were provided with a feedback form following school reports which allowed parents to comment on results. This information did not appear in school documentation but was mentioned by parents in interview and questionnaires and is noteworthy as it reflects that School B was interested in parents' opinions and sought feedback on student learning. This process should form part of School B's policy documents as it directly supports SSE.

9.5.5 Final Comments on Parenting and Learning at Home

Based on the evidence presented in Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8, parenting and learning at home activities as described by Epstein (2013, 2016) are evident in both case study schools. However, inconsistencies occur when methods of communication utilised by the schools do not reach their target audience, as when parents cannot attend a school meeting/information session or when students do not bring home information. The schools do not have contingency plans to support these parents, and it could be argued that in these instances parents are unfairly penalised. While the schools consider that they are providing plenty of information, if the parents do not receive the information, I suggest each school needs to intensify the ways they provide information to parents and also acknowledge the parents who do not engage with the school within planning and incorporate some innovative methods to inform these parents. "As educators we have a responsibility to explore ways of responding to needs through a partnership model. This implies that we respect difference, understand and accept new models of family and plan interventions and solutions that are inclusive" (DES, 2006a, p. 149).

School A has some examples of planning for partnership; however, School B has none in this area. This is not unexpected. As outlined in Chapter 2, Ireland has no directive or specific policy pertaining to partnership with parents at post-primary level. DeFur (2012) suggests that post-primary education does not prioritise partnership with parents, and it could be said that the lack of school planning documentation pertaining to developing partnership with parents in School B supports this view. It would be advisable for both schools to develop a multi-pronged approach to providing information to parents, to use their school website as a resource, and to ensure information is up to date and readily available to parents. This would be a simple yet effective action which would address the discrepancies evident between the information the school perceives parents have and information parents feel they need. Actions associated with Epstein's parenting and learning at home indicators were evident in the case study schools, but understanding of their connection to developing partnership with parents was not evident. I believe that parenting and learning at home are two partnership indicators which Irish post-primary schools could embrace with relative ease as their associated actions already exist, as exemplified by the case study schools. What is required is CPD on partnership for post-primary school staff, followed by significant school planning for partnership. If these areas were developed, it is very possible that partnership with parents in the case study schools would be enhanced. This supposition is valid as there is an obvious correlation

between the parenting and learning at home indicators and the areas in which parents want the schools to improve.

9.6 Communication

Epstein and Associates (2009, 2018) have described effective forms of communication regarding school activities and student progress as a key indicator of partnership with parents. PTMs, formal and informal meetings, language translators, useful notices/information leaflets, information on school policies, programmes, transitions, and curricular and extracurricular activities are referred to as vital to good parent-school communication. Research participants in both schools indicated that methods of communication with parents were sufficient, with parents in School A indicating a slightly higher satisfaction. Parents in School A identified text messages as especially helpful, noting that the reliability of their children delivering flyers home was greatly enhanced when a text was also sent. Parents in School B appreciated the TY update letter and described it as an example of good communication. Parents in School B also indicated that increased social media presence would be valuable.

Evidence from parent questionnaires and interviews in School B demonstrated a desire for increased information on what was happening in the schools as well as pertaining to their own child. Research by Hornby (2011) and Byrne and Smyth (2010) supports parents' view that such information gives them valuable insight and opportunities to talk to and engage with their child in conversations about school. Byrne and Smyth (2010) also note the importance of the annual PTM as a key communication opportunity. Over half of parent respondents in this research visit the school once a year for the PTM which is regarded as vitally important by school management, and which is the main method of communication with parents. The importance of PTMs is reinforced by parent and teacher questionnaire responses and interviews. Based on figures provided by the schools and observed at PTMs, attendance rates at these meetings are very good and provide the schools with opportunities to engage with parents in person. School B had a particularly high average attendance rate of 91%, whereas average attendance in School A was 75%. That difference would be expected given the school contexts, as discussed in Chapter 1. Despite having a lower attendance rate than School B, attendance at PTMs in School A is regarded as good, as it has improved over the past years due to HSCL supports

encouraging parental participation. School A takes advantage of this by running a short information session before the PTM on specific areas of interest to that group of parents, such CAO advice for 6th year parents or work experience arrangements for TY students. It could be argued that School A recognised an opportunity to optimise communication with parents and used strategic planning to disseminate useful information to parents, while also showing awareness of using parents' time efficiently.

Notably, teachers in School A recognised the need to be welcoming at meetings, as they can be 'scary and intimidating' for parents. Such factors are not considered in Epstein's framework, but Hornby (2011) and Rodriguez et al. (2014) advocate that they should be considered in planning for partnership. Teachers in the participating schools indicated that some parents could have had a negative experience of schooling themselves: a feeling of inferiority and of not believing they can be of value to their child's education or a feeling that they have had enough bad news. Olivos (2006) supports the view that some parents are confident in their approach to their children's schooling while others are more hesitant but that traditional strategies may unintentionally ignore or negate their realities. As teachers in School A revealed, the parents they most want to see are the ones who do not come to meetings. They explained that some parents avoid PTMs because they expect them to be a series of negative comments. School A demonstrated an understanding of how parents' negative experiences can affect attendance at school events, and the evidence indicates that they plan to mitigate against this. In doing so, they would be in line with the approach proposed by Todd and Higgins (1998) and Ferlazzo (2011) where home-school relations are flexible, schools are aware of a family's narrative, and they develop support for parents who may be hesitant to attend school events.

School A described an improving attendance rate at PTMs, but if this traditional meeting is not working for a specific group of students and their parents as stated by teachers, it suggests the school needs to change its practices. It was found that School A's HSCL coordinator does have some procedures in place to mitigate lack of attendance at PTMs. Teacher participants in School A expressed the view that new methods to target disengaged parents who do not attend PTMs and increased access to communication via website and social media would also be beneficial. Another possibility suggested by parents and teachers in School A during interview was to have an alternative meeting with the year head or class tutor providing feedback from all other teachers. This would

reduce the number of people a parent must meet and create a less intimidating situation for the parent. School B has reduced problems in this area with parents engaging in PTMs or contacting the school if they cannot attend and making alternative arrangements. Parent participants in School B remarked that they would benefit from enhanced use of electronic forms of communication (e.g. the school website, social media, and the school app) as well as increased communication regarding school activities.

9.6.1 Final Comments on Communication

Byrne and Smyth (2010) found that communication regarding a child's progress is vital to parents' ability to support their child's post-primary educational journey. This can be difficult, firstly because some children in post-primary are less likely to share information with parents, and secondly because some parents believe post-primary education is best left in the hands of students and teachers (Swayer, 2015). My findings in this research indicate the importance of frequent communication between schools and parents, and the high value parents place on such communication. Parents in both schools remarked on how helpful communication from the school was and emphasised that increased communication on all school issues would be of immense value. Epstein (2009) found that keeping parents advised on what is happening in school develops relationships and feelings of community which are beneficial to all students, parents, and teachers. Therefore, increased communication could help develop an understanding of a shared purpose and responsibilities between home and school, while also promoting partnership.

Evidence elicited during this research indicated that in general School A parents are happy with how the school communicates regarding individual student issues. The majority of School B parents expressed a similar satisfaction; however, a small number indicated a desire for their requests to be prioritised and more details on teacher absences and performance to be provided. This is in line with the OECD (2013a) findings that parents from more affluent settings have higher expectations and therefore may place additional pressure on schools and school management. Findings pertaining to communication indicate that the case study schools are following DES guidance on promoting communication with parents and establishing links between home and school (DES, 1991). These findings are also reflective of partnership actions as recognised by

Epstein's framework (Epstein, 2015). While findings do exhibit a variety of communication methods within School A and School B, participant responses demonstrate the need for more frequent communication with parents about school events and clearly illustrate the value parents place on being kept informed on issues pertinent to their child and his/her school. The level of communication required by parents would require school management to set in place protocols for frequent communication with parents.

9.7 Volunteering

National and international research indicates that parent participation in school activities at post-primary level is declining across Europe (deFur, 2012; OECD, 2006, 2020). Parent questionnaires indicated that the main area of volunteering for parents within both schools was attending and supporting school events and the parent association. Areas such as volunteering in school, discussing curriculum, fundraising and participating in BoM reflected low levels of participation within School A, while greater participation was evident in School B. Questionnaire responses and interviews revealed that the parents who do not participate in volunteering are either too busy and do not have time or have child-minding commitments which mean they cannot come into the school to volunteer. The parent profile differs between the two schools, yet a similar reduction in school volunteering was displayed. As discussed in Chapter 2, OECD research in 2019, 2013a, 2013b and 2006 highlighted that parental volunteering is not a significant aspect of post-primary education and this is reflected in the case study schools.

Research in the schools also indicates that it is the same limited number of people who participate in volunteering activities. This correlates with OECD (2013a & 2013b) findings which indicated that parents who are highly involved in one activity in school are also very likely to be involved in other school activities. As stated in Chapter 2, Rodrigues et al. (2014) argued that parents with greater confidence and self-efficacy tend to be more involved in their child's education. Also, OECD (2006) indicated that social class, education and poverty strongly influence the level of parent participation in school. This would also be indicative of HP Pobal Deprivation Index (2016) which stated that parents from the catchment area of School B are more likely to have completed 3rd level education than those in School A. Therefore, it could be argued that parents from School B are more likely to volunteer for school activities due to increased confidence and self-

efficacy skills. However, it should be noted that although there is greater parent participation in School B than in School A, it is still limited. I will now summarise the key aspects of volunteering in the case study schools: attending events and fundraising, parent association, and other possible areas of involvement.

9.7.1 Attending Events and Fundraising

Parents from both schools indicated that attending school events was the most common way they became involved in the schools. Both schools had similar levels of attendance at school events, demonstrating parents' desire to support their child by attending events they are involved in. However, involvement in other activities differed. School B parents saw involvement in fundraising as a key aspect of parent contribution to the school with significant amounts of money raised each year. Evidence from School A, on the other hand, suggested that few parents there become involved in fundraising.

9.7.2 Parent Association

Participation in the parent association within School A was confined to the same small group of eight people. Parent interviews and questionnaires indicated that the low numbers associated with volunteering as described in Chapter 5 were attributable to parents being unavailable during the school day to participate or to their lack of interest in being involved. School B indicated that parent association meetings were well attended with between 15 and 25 parents at each meeting. However, attendance at subcommittee meetings for policy review was lower with only three to five parents in attendance. School A tends to run parent volunteering opportunities during the school day, while School B has opportunities both during the school day and evenings. Teachers in both schools expressed the view that the parent association was a major area of involvement for parents, which contrasts significantly with parent views. This could be due to assumptions being made by teachers about the number of parents who participate in the parent association without any real information. No facts or figures relating to the parent associations were documented by either school. Neither school nor parent association has any information readily available to parents regarding opportunities to volunteer or the benefits of such volunteering to the school. Information derived from questionnaires and interviews suggest that members of the parent association in School A would be aware of opportunities to volunteer but that other parents would not. The

parent association in School B does have a list of parents who are not members of the parent association but who would be willing to help out when needed. However, secondary data from School B did not indicate this information or share how the general parent body was made aware of this opportunity to become involved in the parent association or the volunteer list.

9.7.3 Other Possible Areas of Involvement

When parents were asked to consider other possible areas of involvement in school activities, many indicated that they were too busy, reflecting the perception that volunteer involvement in post-primary school requires a substantial time commitment. The secondary data from both schools indicated that there were limited opportunities to contribute without being on the premises. Conversely, parents may not have wanted to become involved in their child's school, or the schools may not want parents to be involved. Traditionally in Irish education, parents coming into the school was the main way parents participated in supporting school life. This was a more reasonable premise in times when one parent worked, and one stayed home with the children. Teachers and parents involved in this research noted that family structures have changed and that single parent, grandparent and extended families are increasingly common, along with the fact that in many cases both parents are working. According to Sawyer (2015), schools must adapt to diversity in parents by having a variety of strategies to encourage parent engagement in a respectful way. If parents are unavailable to come into the school, that does not necessarily signify a lack of interest.

When teachers were asked about other ways they would like parents to be involved in the school, 79% of teachers said none. This would correlate with a finding in the literature review that teachers may not feel the need to work in partnership with parents (Lazar & Slostad, 1999 & Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2003). Parents themselves had a similar response to teachers with only 6% of parents answering the question and the majority of those stating that they were too busy to volunteer in the school. On the surface this could be taken as a lack of interest by parents surveyed in school participation, or it could be indicative of a deeper issue regarding involvement as described by OECD where parents do not wish to be involved as they feel their involvement will not amount to anything: "It remains to be analysed whether declining involvement leads to declining influence, or whether involvement is declining because influence is limited" (OECD, 2006, p. 89).

9.7.4 Final Comments on Volunteering

The data generated during this research indicates that volunteering as an indicator of partnership within the case study schools is limited. Volunteering did not present as an aspect of school planning, more an ad hoc process when help was needed at an event. When parent input was required for policy development, management in both schools indicated that members of the parent association completed this task. OECD (2006) indicates that the profile of parents who participate in parent associations is not representative of the general population, yet this is the method used in both schools.

Epstein's focus on this partnership indicator reflects an aspect of educational priority that is not evident in the case study schools. Activities which Epstein incorporates within this indicator included classroom volunteers, parent telephone trees, parent patrols to support activities and parent training. These activities demonstrate the investment of resources which occurs in partnership with parents in the USA. As a member of senior management, I am aware that to run such activities a significant amount of staff time would need to be invested. Though I am cognisant of the benefits, teacher time must be allocated to class contact with students in line with DES requirements. Currently non-DEIS post-primary schools in Ireland could not support volunteering in the way Epstein's framework envisions it. Even within DEIS schools who participate in the HSCL scheme, the focus on supporting parents does not extend to volunteering.

Research studies (Hornby, 2011 & Mac Giolla Phadraig, 2010) and findings for this research demonstrate the difficulties post-primary schools would face if they were to focus on this area of partnership. As LAOS and SSE guidelines require parent participation, the case study schools do have a responsibility to elicit parent volunteers for policy development and school evaluation purposes. However, a focus on volunteering with a view to implementing Epstein's framework would require long-term planning to adapt school culture whereby volunteering becomes a more enticing prospect for parents (Epstein & Sheldon, 2019). It is also worth considering how much parental volunteering a post-primary school requires. What is the purpose of volunteering and how does it contribute to the overall success of students? In the past, fundraising was the main area of volunteering to help schools who were financially struggling, and this is still a very necessary area of parental support for many schools. Evidence indicates that parents did not recognise many opportunities for volunteering with the schools.

Therefore, School A and School B would benefit from considering parent views as regards partnership activities and then design volunteering opportunities which appeal to a wider group of parents, at various times, utilising different skills and via different mediums, such as in-person, virtually, or by means of surveys.

9.8 Decision Making

Decision making within Epstein's partnership framework includes a process whereby parents have an input into school policies which affect their child and schools demonstrate an awareness of parent voice (Epstein & Associates, 2016). Volunteering and decision making have many similarities, and opportunities to volunteer can overlap with decision making in the schools. During my research, the questionnaires and interviews sought to establish how parents were included in school decisions as this was a key component of Epstein's partnership framework. When surveyed on involvement in decision making, over 85% of parents in both schools indicated they were not involved. This is an overwhelming percentage of parents who do not believe they have had an opportunity in decision making regarding school issues. As parental involvement in decision making is a key aspect of SSE in Ireland, this is a concerning statistic. DES circulars 0040/2012 and 0040/2016 set out the requirements for post-primary schools in their continuing engagement in self-evaluation. SSE guidelines state that eliciting the views of parents is an aspect of evaluating how a school is operating. Parents should be given multiple opportunities to give their opinion, and schools can do this in various ways enabling parents to give feedback (DES, 2016c).

As referenced in Section 9.7.3 above, declining involvement could be due to recognition of lack of influence. Hornby (2011) describes barriers to parental involvement which include individual parent factors as well as school and societal factors. Similarly, LaBahn (1995) suggests that parents have many reasons for non-participation in activities in post-primary schools. He suggests that parents may feel unwelcome, unwanted and unappreciated. This perspective was evident in School B where some interviewed parents (N=5) felt that their input and opinions would not have any effect on school decisions and thus did not feel there was any point in getting involved. As described in Chapter 7, these parents from School B described a sense of apathy and lack of influence as regards volunteering decision making. These parents described policies being brought to them for 'rubber stamping' without any real engagement or discussion. Their view was that

their opinions would have no influence on decisions made and therefore did not volunteer for such activities. These opinions could be reflective of the lack of planning by the school for including parents in decision making. Such comments also suggest the need to build trust and transparency around decisions where parents' opinions have been sought. It is also worth noting that this view may be limited to these particular parents and is not necessarily the primary view of parents. The other parents interviewed in School B commented on a lack of opportunities but expressed a willingness to volunteer if invited to do so. Engagement with parents as described by Epstein and Associates (2009 & 2018) requires consideration and planning by the schools to develop a clear understanding of how parents can be of support and the parameters of such involvement. I propose that the lack of understanding of what partnership between school and parents means leads to misunderstandings and possibly to unrealistic expectations as to the kind of influence parents can have on a school. Evidence indicates that clearer communication is needed to demonstrate to parents that their contributions to the school are valued.

The questionnaire data indicated that teacher views on decision making varied between both schools. Teachers in School A indicated that parents were not involved in decision making at all, whereas teachers in School B indicated that 96% of parents were involved in decision making. Teachers in School A described parents as lacking in confidence and courage that their contribution would be beneficial to the school and thus not taking advantage of opportunities offered to them. This correlates with research carried out by OECD (2006, 2020), Rodriguez et al. (2014) and with factors related to the HP Pobal deprivation index as previously described. Interviews indicated that School B teachers felt parents were very involved in school decision, with one teacher expressing the opinion that "too much credence was given to parent opinion". This comment could reflect a historic attitude that discouraged parental involvement in their child's school. Another School B teacher commented during interview that parents are frequently involved in decision making pertaining to their child and their school choices. This is an interesting consideration of what counts as decision making at post-primary level which can be overlooked and bears consideration. Parents are involved in numerous school decisions along with their child at post-primary level. While parents actively supporting their child's school decisions is evident under Epstein's parenting indicator, it is not included within the decision-making indicator. It could be argued that this teacher is highlighting a possibility to widen the understanding of decision making as it pertains to

partnership between parents and schools. If the case study schools articulated this clearly, it could empower parents to realise their contribution to decision making.

There is a distinct view evident from the participating schools that parent decision making is connected to participation in parent associations or subcommittee policy groups. This may be related to the language of DES documentation which in general refers to parental involvement in decision making in relation to input on school policies by parent associations or similar (DES, 1998, 2016a, 2016c). This could be considered a restricted view of what partnership in decision making is. It negates the extensive input of parents in their child's choices regarding subject and other school choices during post-primary education. Using a broader understanding of decision making could support and promote enhanced partnership between parents and schools. The management in both schools indicated that parent associations are used as a conduit for feedback on a variety of school policies and decisions. While the parent association is a convenient and accessible pool of parents, depending on this for feedback on school decisions limits feedback to a small number and does not generate school-wide awareness of opportunities available to parents (OECD, 2006). This could account for the large proportion of parents saying they are not involved in decision making in the case study schools. Conversely this could reflect the trust parents have in schools, where they do not feel they need to be involved (OECD, 2006). Indeed, a school would face a difficult situation if every parent wanted to be involved in school decisions. Not every decision is for parents, but those that parents can contribute to should be acknowledged, and a system of planned engagement with the parent body should be designed to elicit as many parent responses as possible. If parents choose not to engage, that is their decision and their right, but the school will have given parents the opportunity.

An aspect of decision making not addressed in this research that was mentioned by parents and teachers is feedback on decisions made by schools. When a school asks for the opinion of parents, it is advisable to explain outcomes via feedback. This helps build transparency and support further engagement with parents. HSCL policy states 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 and each of which is unique" (DES, 2006a, p18). School consideration of how they include parents' contributions to decision making and feedback on decisions made could support a positive open approach to partnership (OECD, 2006).

9.8.1 Final Comments on Decision Making

The requirement of parent participation in policy development (DES, 2016a) and school evaluation processes (DES, 2016c) means that post-primary schools are obliged to develop opportunities for parents to contribute to these processes, but whether this represents volunteering as indicative of Epstein's framework is inconclusive. It could be argued that this reflects minimum involvement of parents in decision making in order to fulfil DES requirements rather than a real partnership activity. While parent participation in decision making in the case study schools was evaluated as an indicator of partnership based on Epstein's framework, this research did not examine schools' perception of involving parents in school decisions. Historically Irish schools have not included parents in decision making (as described in Chapter 2). It is reasonable to assume that this tradition may still exist and that inclusion of parents in decision making is relatively new to post-primary schools due to the introduction of SSE guidelines in 2016. It is evident that the case study schools need to enhance parental involvement in decision making and devise a strategy for developing awareness among parents of how giving their opinion can support school development and planning.

There is a close correlation between Epstein's areas of decision making and volunteering. Many of the same factors which impact on parent participation are at play, such as changing economic times, both parents working and childcare issues etc. Schools need to be inventive and develop ways for parents' opinions to be heard and included in school decision making where appropriate (DES, 2016c). This is a challenge that schools must meet. Increased use of technology could help by providing parents with links to surveys, for instance. Both schools need to plan an approach to seeking parental opinions in such a way that all parents have sufficient opportunities to engage with decision-making processes, not just members of the parent association. A long-term plan for parental engagement in decision making would be of value and could be incorporated into the school DEIS or SIP plan as well as the SSE process. This would enhance awareness among parents of decision-making opportunities. It would then be up to the individual parents whether they participated in additional decision-making processes with the schools.

9.9 Collaborating with Community

Epstein and Sheldon (2019) note that school, family and community all influence a child and that by working together they can realise a common goal of improving student success. Epstein's vision of community includes highlighting local resources and integration of local services via the school. The two-way directionality of community involvement at the core of this indicator could possibly be a new concept for Irish post-primary schools.   Findings of this research indicate that collaboration with the community was stronger in School A with the HSCL coordinator running a variety of community activities and local agencies supporting the school. School B demonstrated student engagement in the local community as part of a TY programme, but little evidence of planning or two-way collaboration was evident. Parent questionnaires in both cases indicated that there was very limited knowledge of the schools' community involvement, whilst the teacher questionnaires indicate greater knowledge of involvement.   In general, it was the parents of students who had completed transition year who were aware of the local organisations the schools were involved with. Both schools engage in a wide variety of commendable community initiatives where TY students act as volunteers in community organisations. School A described their involvement in community initiatives such as Jigsaw, CAMHS, University Access programmes and local youth support groups. The HSCL coordinator and SCP coordinator were the key personnel in maintaining these community links. During interviews with staff, School B indicated their involvement with local sports clubs, a school for students with SEN and organisations which support the elderly. While this demonstrates the partnership indicator collaboration with community, the lack of reference to these actions in school planning and documentation suggests that these actions are not part of a planned partnership process but rather activities for transition year students to participate in.

9.10 Final Comments on Collaboration with Community

Epstein makes a distinction between community and parents. Her framework refers to community in the context of services available to support parents and students. It does not reflect what we in Ireland would traditionally refer to as 'the school community' of parents, students and teachers. Epstein's framework appears to be based on the premiss

that schools have an established connection to their local community as regards integrated resources and services available. This is not the case in Ireland, where post-primary schools while established within a community are not necessarily active community partners beyond their remit of education. There was some evidence of the two-way collaboration indicative of this indicator in School A , but in general both schools showed no significant awareness of collaboration with community as an aspect of partnership within the schools. This is not unexpected as collaboration with community as described by Epstein is not reflected in DES guidance to post-primary schools. DEIS schools do have some guidance from Tusla for HSCL coordinators in this area, but recognition of collaboration with community as a way of developing partnership is not clearly identified. Irish post-primary schools do not have guidance in this area, and therefore any reflection of the indicator collaboration with community could be described as unintentional. Nevertheless, some actions currently exist in the case study schools which reflect aspects of this indicator and could be built upon in the future.

Epstein includes collaboration with community as an indicator of partnership, but other models of partnership do not. The literature review in Chapters 2 and 3 indicated that Hornby's model of partnership focuses on parents and teachers whilst the HSCL model focuses on parents while utilising supports in the community. The HSCL scheme does include the community and the supports it can provide to parents and students but not the two-way collaboration as represented by Epstein. The HSCL coordinator may connect parents with local community supports but does not engage in integration of local services within the school as Epstein's framework does. HSCL coordinators also work with a target group of parents to support their children's engagement in school, rather than with all parents in the school. Examination of the new Education Bill (2019) did not indicate any reference to community collaboration as an aspect of partnership for schools and parents. It appears that currently such collaboration is not a recognised priority in Irish education.

In order to develop this area of partnership, both schools would benefit from creating new ways of informing students, parents, teachers and those within the local community about collaboration activities occurring within the schools. Evidence indicates that informing the school community of involvement in such activities helps to build a strong rooted connection to the local community, and this could be of benefit to the case study schools and their students (DES, 2006a; Epstein, 2016). While according to Epstein and

Associates (2018) this partnership indicator has benefits to both students and parents it is difficult for Irish post-primary schools to promote. School A has a natural advantage with the HSCL scheme in operation and a coordinator who has a role in developing community links. School B is very constrained in its ability to promote this indicator without DES investment of appropriate staffing or time allocation. In my opinion, of all partnership indicators this one is the least likely to occur in a planned way in Irish post-primary schools. While other indicators have a clear benefit to parents and students, collaborating with community is not yet proven to support partnership in an Irish context and is not referenced in Irish governmental policy or alluded to in such recent research such as Byrne and Smyth(2010). It could be argued that if the other five indicators were embedded in school practice this indicator would then be a worthwhile investment of school resources. However, given the current position of partnership in the case study schools, activities which are currently emergent should be focused on before assessing the relevance of this indicator to Irish post-primary schools.

9.11 Parent Voice

In the context of this research the consideration of parent voice was limited to the experience of parents and teachers within the case study schools and their opinion on whether parent voice is heard or not within the case study schools. The issue of parent voice is a complex and compelling one as parents are usually voicing an opinion in relation to one child while a school must make decisions in the best interest of that one student while being cognisant of the implications for all students. The delicate balance of listening to parents and doing what is best for the school can be challenging for school management, especially if parents feel they have a right to be heard and expect a specific outcome.

The questionnaire results indicate that both schools have good communication methods in place but require more frequent communication. A higher percentage of School A parents felt they were 'heard' (55%) in comparison to School B (37%). Parents feeling heard in School A could either indicate the effect of school supports such as the HSCL programme or reflect the fact that parents did not need or want to voice any particular concern or opinion. The demographic of the schools could also be in play here, with parents of School B having very high expectations for their child with a high rate of transfer to 3rd level education. OECD research indicated that similar parents express a

high level of pressure on schools to ensure academic achievements (OECD, 2006, 2013a 2013b). This finding in School B could also be related to the school not providing sufficient support or information, so leaving the parent feeling unheard. A significant number of parents felt unheard in both schools, and the schools should consider why this is so. It would be advisable for School B in particular, to consider why almost 30% of respondents did not feel heard and another 34% only felt heard sometimes.

School A teachers recognised the difficulties parents may experience in using their voice and exhibited a deep understanding of factors which can affect their students and parents. School A has some procedures in place via the HSCL coordinator to support parents with specific issues related to their child. One parent in School A commented on their connection to the school and the relationship this had built. This parent felt her voice would be heard because she is known to the school and had developed a positive connection to the school. This is both reassuring and concerning as the positive connection to the school had allowed this parent to feel comfortable to approach the school regarding specific issues. However, is the opposite also true? Do parents who have a reduced connection to the school feel they would not be heard? It is reasonable to suggest therefore that the case study schools should develop in so far as possible a positive connection with the general parent body. The research evidence for this study has indicated that regular and detailed informational updates to parents could help develop a stronger connection between school and parent, so focusing on this area could also enhance parents' perception of the school 'hearing their voice'.

Parents of School B appear to have a greater sense of how their voice should be accommodated in the school. This could be related to the fact that it is in a more affluent area, that many parents have 3rd level qualifications or that they have a sense that they "know best for their child". Three parents interviewed in School B mentioned staffing and staff leave as an area they wanted more information on. Lack of awareness of teacher's leave being a private matter not of public record was evident. Parent concerns and teachers' right to privacy and sick leave etc. can be difficult territory for management to navigate, especially in the current climate where teacher substitutes are very difficult to come by and schools across the country cannot fill vacancies. Some school issues are not parent issues. For example, school staffing is under their remit of the BoM, and staff leave is set by the Department of Education. This area of school management is beyond

the remit of parents, but this research does show that parents want prompt information on issues which impact their child's education.

The introduction of the Education Bill (2019) will legislate for increased awareness of the importance of the parent voice in post-primary schools. The case study schools would benefit from considering recommendations by Hanafin and Lynch (2002) that parent voices should be prioritised as a matter of constitutional right. All indicators in this research reflect that parents are supportive of the schools and sympathetic to the difficulties they encounter but require regular communication on school activities and events. They also require communication regarding problems which may arise in school in a timely fashion.

9.12 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has critically discussed the findings from questionnaires, interviews, observation and secondary data in the case study schools. This research has focused on parents' experience of partnership in two schools by considering Epstein's framework for partnership. Epstein's indicators of partnership were evident to varying degrees in the schools.

The indicators parenting and learning at home were evident in both the case study schools but require planning and clear links to developing partnership with parents and enhancing student outcomes. Epstein's communication indicator was also evident in the schools, but parents (especially those in School B) desired a wider variety of communication. Volunteering does occur in the schools but is limited to the parent associations and the same few of people getting involved in multiple activities. School B had a higher level of engagement in this area. Decision-making opportunities for parents in both schools are very limited. The majority of parents did not believe they had any involvement in any decisions in the schools. Collaboration with community was stronger in School A than School B. However, this indicator was not evident as represented by Epstein's framework. School A did have examples of two-way collaboration which could be built upon to develop this indicator further. While School A demonstrated a greater commitment to collaboration with community in both planning and activities, knowledge of this among parents was not evident. School B's engagement in community activities was mainly related to TY activities with no perceptible evidence of partnership planning

or two-way collaboration. Of Epstein's six indicators, collaboration with community appeared to be the one which could prove most challenging for Irish post-primary schools as they do not have integrated resources and services with the local community. Evaluating the presence of partnership in School A and School B by using Epstein's framework has allowed me to conclude that overall School A demonstrate a moderate level of partnership with parents while School B had limited evidence of partnership.

Findings demonstrate the relevance and possible application of Epstein's framework in an Irish context and how post-primary schools could adopt the six indicators of partnership as part of school planning and to develop partnership. Chapter 10 will return to the research questions in light of the findings discussed in this chapter and provide a final commentary on the relevance of Epstein's partnership framework in Irish post-primary schools. A summary of findings discussed in this chapter is provided below and, along with the recommendations in Chapter 10, will be helpful to the participating schools if they decide to prioritise partnership with parents in school planning.

9.12.1 Summary of Discussion on Findings

The summary below presents the eight major findings of this research and associated minor findings which have been discussed in this chapter.

1. Similarity of experience in the schools

The case study schools reflected a similarity as regards parents' perception of partnership. Findings indicate that despite a majority of parents' desire to be involved in their child's post-primary school, this was not a reality.

❖ There was limited evidence of partnership displayed in the schools despite a commitment to partnership by management in both schools.
❖ Evidence indicates lack of a common understanding by the parents and teachers of what partnership is.
❖ Limited planning for partnership connected to student outcomes was evident.

2. Epstein's Framework

The benefit of utilising Epstein's partnership framework and types of involvement as indicators of partnership was applicable to the Irish context.

3. Parenting and Learning at Home

Parenting and learning at home activities such as school information sessions had a positive impact on parents.

- ❖ Teachers in both schools displayed a lack of awareness of the benefits of school information sessions to parents or that teachers could have a role in supporting these sessions.
- ❖ Parents indicated a need for increased information on homework and study skills.
- ❖ The use of generic comment banks for school reports was described as problematic by parents as they do not provide any useful advice for improvements.

4. Communication

Frequent communication between school and parents is important and parents place a high value on such communication.

- ❖ The case study schools rely heavily on in-person information sessions which are given within the school with little information available on school websites or via other methods for parents who cannot attend.
- ❖ Parents and teachers expressed the need for more detailed guidance on the ways to support homework and study.
- ❖ The quality of reports was found lacking by some parents in both schools, with parents in School B articulating the greatest dissatisfaction. School reports need to be modified to provide more useful information and advice to parents and students.
- ❖ PTMs are of key importance and preparation and planning of these meetings is essential. Support personnel welcoming and advising parents on arrival was important.

5. Volunteering

Data from both schools indicated that the number of parents who engaged in volunteering was limited.

- ❖ The main area of volunteering for parents within the case study schools was attending and supporting school events and the parent association.
- ❖ Parents did not recognise other opportunities for volunteering with the schools.
- ❖ It is the same limited number of people who participated in volunteering activities and the parent associations.

6. Decision Making

The majority of parents in both schools indicated they were not involved in decision making.

- ❖ The management in both schools indicated their schools use of the parent associations as a conduit for feedback on a variety of school policies and decisions.

7. Community

There was very limited knowledge of the schools' community involvement among parents.

- ❖ Limited evidence was demonstrated of the two-way collaboration indicative of Epstein's partnership framework indicator: collaboration with community.

8. Technology

The use of technology was identified as a method to improve communication with parents.

- ❖ Technology could be used to enhance participation of parents in partnership activities and to offer opinions in decision making.

Chapter 10 Conclusions and Recommendations

10.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the conclusions and recommendations to be drawn from my research. I will begin by returning to my research questions to consider if they were answered by this research. Next, I will offer a final commentary on the value of Epstein's framework in the context of the two Irish post-primary schools examined. Then, based on the research findings, I will identify specific recommendations for how the case study schools can support improved partnership with parents. I will conclude by identifying potential areas for research which could further enhance partnership with parents in post-primary education within Ireland and providing my final comments.

10.2 Returning to the Research Questions

This research focused on using Epstein's framework to evaluate partnership in the context of two Irish post-primary schools. Research questions were determined which could establish the level of partnership present in the case study schools, if any, and the extent to which partnership was planned to support student outcomes. An extensive literature review indicated that partnership research is mainly focused on primary schools and SEN settings. Limited research was available on post-primary education, especially within Ireland. The literature review also indicated that while rhetoric on partnership was evident in recent Irish legislation there is a distinct lack of guidance from the DES for post-primary schools in Ireland on what measures schools should implemented to develop and maintain partnership with parents. The review also determined that despite a plethora of evidence demonstrating the benefits to students of partnership with parents, some teachers remain unconvinced of the need for partnership.

My initial research question was to determine what conceptual models of partnership were present in post-primary education. Views on models of parental involvement range from protective, which segregate parents and schools; to expert, such that parents' role is confined to receiving information; to partnership models where parents and schools work together, with teachers as experts in education and parents are experts on their child. No specific model of partnership is currently employed Irish post-primary schools. This research focused on the partnership model of parental involvement which had a variety of frameworks which I could have used to evaluate partnership in the case study

schools. Hornby presents a model which he contends provides a continuum of parental needs and contributions, with competencies for teacher expertise. This model requires teachers to have the necessary expertise to promote partnership with parents. Hornby does not address the issue of how, when and by whom teachers will be trained or the significant time required by teachers to engage in this model. This model, as discussed in Chapter 3, was not suitable as its focus is on primary and special school setting and it does not indicate how teachers at post-primary level who work with hundreds of students could engage in partnership activities with all these parents. The HSCL model of partnership is currently a strategy in Irish education within DEIS schools, for improving learning outcomes for targeted students by focusing on their parents via a range of interventions, supports and strategies. It could be argued that it is not a school-wide programme where strategies are designed to promote partnership with all parents in a school context. As I was interested in a partnership model which would be applicable to all parents the HSCL model was not suitable.

Epstein's model of partnership broadens the concept of partnership and describes six key areas where partnership between schools and parents can be enhanced. These six indicators link with many regular school activities in Irish post-primary schools. I chose Epstein's model of partnership as it provides a very useful organisational framework which was invaluable in providing a structure for analysis of the current position of partnership with parents in the case study schools. The scope of activities within the six indicators enabled me to observe how the spheres of influence, which are at the core of Epstein's model, are impacted by parent school activities. Clearly within the two case study schools, two-way communication increased the zones of interaction between parents and the schools. Other school activities showed the possibility of similar interaction but was yet to be realised. While this partnership model is utilised across the USA, for me there remain unanswered questions regarding lack of current research, more detailed methodologies of existing research and details on supporting parents and/or students who do not engage. Also, a missing element in this partnership model for me was the lack of recognition of hard-to-reach parents and barriers to partnership which parents may face. Epstein's research findings did not allude to any parents who did not engage or reference any strategies for including non-traditional families. While completing this research it became evident to me that parent history and philosophy in relation to engagement with post-primary schools was not addressed by Epstein's model.

Despite this, I found Epstein's model of partnership and associated framework useful in evaluating partnership in an Irish context.

Hornby's model alluded to the types of barriers which parents may face regarding partnership with schools as do other models such as Hoover-Dempsey and Sadler's which focuses on parents' perspective on partnership. Epstein's model could be enhanced by incorporating aspects of these models, thus providing a deeper reflection upon parents' philosophical stance on engagement with schools and how this differs across parent type with the schools. Despite these limitations, my research has concluded that the structure of Epstein's partnership framework provides very useful guidelines for developing partnership activities as it focuses school planning on areas which actively promote communication and collaboration between home and school. Based on utilisation of Epstein's model in the USA and the evidence provided by participants in this study, this targeted approach can support partnership development which helps improve student outcomes.

The second research question examined the role of partnership with parents in the context of Irish post-primary education. While closely linked to the first research question, it also focused on current actions in the participating case study schools. The literature review illustrated that the role of partnership with parents in Irish education has been limited as described by Coolahan (1988 & 2002), O'Buachalla (1988) and Byrne and Smyth (2010). With the establishment of primary education in 1831, the role of parents was replaced by the authority of the State and Church so that the role of parents in education was minimised. The introduction of parent representatives on BoMs and parent representative organisations such as the NPCp and NPCpp has increased the role of parents in Irish education somewhat. Specifically, within the case study schools, the role of partnership is generally confined to such areas as fundraising and volunteering to help with school events, with a limited number of parent association members participating in policy group discussions or other school review processes.

Introduction of educational legislation in Ireland (Education Act, 1998, EPSEN, 2004) has highlighted the growing interest in developing partnership between parents and their children's schools. Despite the interest in partnership with parents expressed in recent literature, there is a distinct lack of guidance for schools on what should be done to develop and maintain partnership with parents at post-primary level or on the role of such

partnership. The only directives from the DES relating to partnership pertains to SSE processes, policy development and engagement with parents of students with SEN. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that developing partnership with all parents in post-primary schools has not been an educational goal in Irish policy, despite the rhetoric in this area. Actions speak louder than words, and little action has been evident. Mandating schools to involve parents in school reviews or policy development does not equate to developing partnership. A lack of direction from the DES has left post-primary schools in Ireland without clarity regarding partnership with parents. Secondary data from the schools did not indicate any connection between partnership planning and aspirations for improved student outcomes which, according to Epstein, is the key purpose of partnership with parents. This view is supported by evidence generated during this research which demonstrates that while management in the case study schools place a value on partnership, there are limited partnership activities planned with the purpose of improving student outcomes. The case study schools have engaged in the required consultation with parents on school policies and reviews, but this is not indicative of partnership, as in most instances the views of parents are sought following the development of the policy before ratification by the BoM. As discussed, utilisation of parent associations to elicit parent views is not representative of the general parent body or indicative of partnership. The schools' lack of a clear understanding of what partnership with parents actually means and its purpose is evident in the findings of this research. It is very hard to plan for partnership development in a school when management, parents and teachers all have different views on what partnership is and its goals. Bringing clarity to what partnership means for each school would allow them to then move forward with planning which is connected to their goals.

School A, working within the remit of the HSCL scheme, demonstrated a moderate level of planning for partnership. Targets related to partnership development mainly relate to getting parents into activities in the school. However, if partnership with parents is indeed an educational priority, School A would need to develop a programme of partnership for all parents within the DEIS plan; this programme should incorporate opportunities for partnership activities which do not require attendance in the school. In particular, increased opportunities for participation in decision making is needed. As an educator I recognise that this is a difficult task. However, School A already has some planning in place to develop partnership with parents, and this could be expanded upon

to develop a more strategic approach to partnership with the general parent population as well as targeted parents within the HSCL scheme. Similarly, School B had articulated its commitment to partnership with parents but lacks the strategic planning necessary to progress this. Limited evidence of partnership was evident in findings during this research. Without a specific requirement by the DES for schools to develop a recognised role for partnership development as part of school policy, it will remain something schools aspire to in an ad hoc manner. As this research indicates, partnership with parents in multifaceted and requires considered and precise plans which will need to be reviewed and amended. It remains to be seen how the Education Bill 2019 will support increased engagement between schools and parents.

My third and fourth research questions consider how and why partnership occurs in the case study schools, its effectiveness, if any, and how Epstein's framework is applicable. The fifth research question examines how senior management are involved in partnership and how effective this is. I considered these three questions under the lens of Epstein's model. Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 described the research data generated in relation to these questions and provided an insight as to how partnership is occurring within the case study schools. Readers gain a picture of what the schools do on a daily basis and how this connects to Epstein's indicators. Both schools have numerous activities which support valuable aspects of partnership with parents in the schools, but the difficulty lies in recognition of what partnership is and how it is connected to student outcomes. The literature review in Chapter 2 indicated that in Ireland a positive rhetoric on partnership with parents is now evident but concrete actions were missing (Parkes, 2010 & Walsh, 2016). It is a similar situation in the case study schools, with partnership mentioned in some policies and an understanding that it is a good thing to promote with parents. The principal and deputy principal in both schools demonstrated a commitment to partnership and an understanding of the benefits it can bring to the schools and students. However, in general an absence of focus and direction has resulted in lack of clarity as to how and why partnership should be pursued.

Research evidence in School A has indicated that though school managers indicate a willingness for such partnership, in most areas it is not a reality given that parent participation in school decision making, policy development and collaboration are at low levels. This may be reflective of the school context situated in an area of social disadvantage, parent disinterest in or possibly parent distrust of what the school is doing,

or lack of interest. While Epstein's model could enhance school activities by providing greater variety of opportunities for partnership, it does not address parents who do not engage due to social disadvantage or previous negative experiences. This area needs to be considered by School A prior to partnership planning, and the HSCL coordinator could be utilised as a resource to speak with such parents and gain their opinion as to what they would like partnership with the school to entail, bearing in mind that some parents may not want any partnership. While in School B higher levels of engagement are evident, it is still a small proportion of the parent population who contribute their views, opinions and time. Adapting Epstein's framework for developing more opportunities for partnership with parents could significantly raise the number of parents who engage with the school and raise satisfaction levels with school communication.

Epstein's framework is used to view school activities and develop a deeper understanding of how partnership is approached in the case study schools. Comments from both schools indicated a historical view that partnership was linked to parents' contribution to help at events or how often a parent comes into school. This premise does not allow other ways for parents to engage in partnership activities with schools. Parents may have valid reasons why they cannot come into a school, and if schools do not widen their concept of what entails partnership the prospect of "a shared common goal of education for the student, where schools and parents recognise the opinions and perspectives of each other and consider them when developing policy or making decisions" becomes less likely. The value of utilising Epstein's framework for partnership is that it provides clear actions for schools to engage in which are precise and evident to parents as ways that the school is trying to build partnership. Each indicator has merit in an Irish context and together they provide a structured framework for guiding partnership development between parents and schools. Mac Giolla Phádraig (2003) and Byrne and Smyth (2010) state that the overriding evidence is that parents and schools working together is of benefit to students. Therefore, it is in the interest of the students for the schools to find a clear way to engage in partnership with parents, while adhering to the constraints of their school designation and resources available.

As described in Chapter 3, Epstein's framework has proven benefits across many schools and states in the USA. As a school leader and based on the evidence of this research, I can see an application for this framework in Irish post-primary schools and my own school. The six partnership indicators could be viewed as a continuum where schools

develop a planned programme of partnership which is applicable to their specific context. Communication, and parenting and learning at home are the indicators which currently exist in Irish post-primary school and which could be expanded with relative ease to promote a level of partnership which positively contributes to student outcomes. The key to this would be an enhanced understanding of partnership: what it is, how it is promoted and how it is connected to student outcomes. As a specific partnership model is not currently used in Irish post-primary schools, I believe that an introductory approach using Epstein's framework based on the development of one or two specific indicators could be implemented with minimum drain on school resources. Viewing the model as a continuum would then allow for additional indicators to be implemented when resources allow or as progress is made.

10.3 Value of Epstein's Partnership Framework in the Case Study Schools

According to Epstein's model of partnership, schools should approach the development of a programme for partnership based upon predetermined school goals which are connected to enhancing student outcomes. This approach to partnership is to be purposeful, multidimensional and part of school planning, and the connection to student outcomes is key to the planning of relevant partnership activities. Leadership support and guidance are essential for successful partnership, as is review and evaluation of planned activities. Epstein contends that establishing partnership between school and parents develops a sense of mutual responsibility and should be an integral aspect of school planning.

This approach to partnership is quite different from the ad hoc approach evident in the case study schools where parents are invited to participate in a variety of activities as needed, such as fundraising, helping at events, or participating in review of a policy when it is sent to the parent association. Epstein and Sheldon (2019) state that NNPS research has shown that partnership is more successful when schools have clear intentions and goals. Based on this premise, the schools need to identify practices within Epstein's framework which support their partnership goals. This would change how these schools approach partnership. It would no longer be about asking what activities parents can become involved in but refocusing to ask which activities within the partnership framework will support school goals for students and how are parents included in this. Epstein's partnership framework then becomes a tool to help school management design

goal orientated purposeful partnership. In the USA, access to federal funding makes this an easier task for school management. Currently there are no resources allocated by the DES for the promotion and support of partnership with parents outside of DEIS schools. While principals and deputy principals in both schools are supportive of partnership, they need to consider the goals of such partnership in their school and plan activities which are directly linked to these goals.

Basic to Epstein's partnership model is the idea of overlapping spheres of influence which indicate how parents, schools and community can work together to support students. Actions can either draw these spheres of influence together or push them apart as described in Chapter 3. As discussed in Chapter 2, Kellaghan (2004), Hornby (2010), duFur (2012) and Epstein (2016) state that parents make a valuable contribution to the success of their child in school. Epstein states that history and family experience contribute to this process of overlapping spheres but does not clearly explain how utilising the six areas of involvement can mitigate against negative history or experiences with education. This research has highlighted for me that developing greater communication with parents, especially those who do not engage may help to develop a stronger connection between home and school while inviting parents to participate in different activities can show parents that their contribution and opinions are valued by a school.

School A demonstrated a planned intention to develop partnership and has the HSCL scheme as a support to this process, as alluded to in their DEIS plan. A significant number of actions which connect to partnership indicators as described by Epstein were evident in School A; however, a lack of planning in the areas of volunteering and decision making was evident. The specifics of how partnership can be developed should be considered and broadened beyond parent courses and the expectation that parents attend events in the school. This would expand the possibilities for partnership development with parents. School B exhibited a number of partnership indicators as identified by Epstein; however, it must be acknowledged that these were not part of any cohesive strategy for partnership. The strong support of the parent association in School B as evident in this research could help in developing enhanced partnership activities in areas such as decision making and collaboration with community.

Epstein presents the six indicators of partnership as equal measures of partnership, but I would argue that currently some indicators are of more importance to Irish post-primary schools than others. Consideration of the evidence within the literature review which indicated that partnership has not been a priority in Irish post-primary schools leads me to propose that current circumstances in Irish education are well situated for the development of a cohesive partnership strategy. Schools such as School A, who are actively planning for partnership with parents in an Irish context, could begin by prioritising indicators such as parenting, learning at home and communication in a bid to develop the cultural capital that could lead to enhanced partnership in volunteering, decision making and collaborating with community. School B could begin by examining current school policies and ascertaining how partnership with parents which supports student outcomes is reflected.

Communication was the strongest partnership indicator for both schools, though even there some improvements could be made. Clearly evident from this research is the view that communication is the key to good relationships with parents. This does not only mean communication pertaining to their own child but also extensive information about the school, events, achievements, plans and arising issues. Parenting and learning at home were the next two indicators which demonstrated the breadth of activities the schools engage in to support students and parents. Epstein (2016) denotes these two key indicators as vital to partnership. Both schools participate in activities within these categories, but a lack of awareness of the potential for these activities to build partnerships was evident. Based on the evidence from the questionnaires, interviews and additional observations, both schools would benefit from developing a clear list of resources which support parents' engagement in their child's education. Decision-making opportunities for parents were extremely limited in both schools, and opportunities to draw parents into decision-making processes were not utilised. Volunteering opportunities were again limited to traditional activities with the parent associations, rather than being innovative and inclusive of all parents. Despite the case study schools being quite different to each other, similarity was evident in parent experience of partnership. Over 50% of parent participants identified themselves as partners with the schools, while 83% indicated that they wanted to be involved with the schools, reflecting a disparity between aspirations and actualisation of partnership.

The community aspect of this partnership model has proven to be elusive in the case study schools. As discussed in Chapter 3, community refers to local services and resources which can support parents and students, some of which are accessible through the school. Epstein and Sheldon (2019) described community as a key aspect of the partnership model which motivates students and allows then to experience success. The difficulty which arose during this research was that partnership with community had a different focus in the case study schools. Community was mainly utilised for work experience and voluntary work. While these actions are part of Epstein's indicators, they only account for a minor aspect of it. I can see the merits of developing community partnership and developing awareness of local services which can offer support to parents and students. However, I cannot align this with a current role within the schools; this would be an extra "job" for a school member of staff and thus would require DES investment. Even within School A which has a HSCL coordinator this role would be onerous, and it is unlikely that the staff member would have the time to do it. Actions which the case study schools can engage in are determined by their yearly allocation and resources, and I believe for schools to engage in community as proposed by Epstein would require enhanced resources from the DES. Access to funding to support development of partnership would be most beneficial to schools and could be a post in a school similar to the ex-quota post of programme coordinator.

It was evident that many parents and teachers do not understand what it means to be involved in partnership in a post-primary school. Based on the literature review, this is not unexpected as developing partnership is not an educational priority in Irish post-primary education. It could be argued that the schools themselves lack direction as to what partnership with parents is and how to promote it, as the DES does not provide any guidance. Traditionally partnership meant coming into the school to run an event, serve tea or raise money. Now post-primary schools need to consider if they are providing a wide array of partnership opportunities to parents. Epstein's framework provides a clear structure to developing a plan for these partnership opportunities. Evidence from the case study schools indicates that the six indicators are applicable in an Irish context and could be developed in a more strategic manner. The difficulty I believe lies in the recognition of these partnership activities and the verbalisation of the role of partnership at post-primary level. A key aspect of a partnership model is the recognition of shared responsibility between schools and parents. School A and School B need to explicitly

inform parents about partnership with their school: what it is, what it involves, what they as parents are doing which support the school and how the school supports parents and students. Following this, the case study schools would benefit from CPD for staff on the benefits of partnership and subsequently focus on developing a strategic plan for partnership enhancement.

10.4 Reflecting Upon The Research Process

Initially I had proposed to conduct action research in a school where I was working as a HSCL coordinator, but when I moved school this option was no longer viable. I adapted my research to my new situation and focused on a case study approach. I found the questionnaire data very helpful in developing a broad understanding of partnership activities in the schools; however, the interview process provided richer contextual insight into school actions and parents' response to this. As a reflective researcher I was happy that I chose a case study approach as I found it manageable but more importantly very relevant to my new work context. The schools had many things in common with my own school such as catchment area, social demographic and resources.

This research was always about my professional practice: how I could improve actions in my school to support enhanced student outcomes via partnership with parents. My educational practice has modified since this research began due to my increased awareness of the value of communication as a tool for promoting partnership with parents. I always kept in touch with the parents of my students as a subject teacher, and my various roles helped this, but as a member of senior management contact with parents was on an as needed basis. I decided to set aside time each week to write to parents with a weekly update. Some weeks it has proved very difficult to find the time, but I am persevering as the response has been incredibly positive. I believe it is making a real difference in our school and is worth the time commitment. I have also developed a greater appreciation of the value of school reports, and I certainly have a different perspective on them now compared to before this research. As a teacher I often saw them as a chore to be done, missed the drop-down menu of generic comments when it was removed and was guilty of rushing to fill them in at the last moment. I recognised many of my feelings about reports among school staff comments and have realised that there is some work to do to help staff realise the true value of reports and how beneficial they are to parents. I believe this research has enabled me to be more aware of parents'

perspective on the actions my school takes, and this has helped me to be clearer in my communication with parents.

This research has also highlighted for me the need for leadership as regards partnership development. Evidence from this research shows that teachers can be supportive of partnership but are not best placed to lead partnership. As described by Hornby (2010) this must come from school management who at a planning level commit to developing partnership with purposeful goals linked to improved student outcomes. Teachers can of course support this, but management must set the tone for how parents are valued in a school. I have used many of the findings in this research to develop a planned programme of communication within my own school and to develop a clear programme for parenting and learning at home partnership actions. We invested a significant amount of time developing parent communication systems and regular updates for parents which now are proving invaluable. Not only have we a good communication system with parents but due to our frequent contact we have built up a significant level of trust and support among parents. We plan to build upon this to incorporate the remaining indicators within our school planning in a gradual manner. Evaluation of our progress will form part of our school SSE and contribute to future actions to support partnership with parents. In terms of LAOS, we are working to move our school practices to the area of highly effective practices.

As regards Epstein's partnership framework, this research has highlighted its value in an Irish post-primary context. Findings from questionnaires and interviews in the case study schools demonstrate that the six areas of involvement are indeed of value. The first five indicators of partnership could be subsumed with existing school practices as the case study schools indicate. Initially I had my reservations about community as an indicator of partnership and how developing this could be within a school's remit. It seemed a huge undertaking to develop and maintain such links, but this research has illustrated that in fact this work is already underway in schools in a limited fashion. This community link is already in place for the case study schools. What is needed is for benefits of this 'partnership' to be recognised, developed, and to incorporate resources from within the local community which could support parents and students into school planning. Examination of community involvement within the case study schools illuminated potential areas for development of increased two-way collaboration between each school and their local community, which could be of direct benefits to students and parents.

10.5 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

As a member of school management, I was aware that development of recommendations for the case study schools to enhance partnership with parents has to align with post-primary planning guidelines. SSE and LAOS form the basis of how Irish post-primary schools address planning and development. Utilising these frameworks as a method for categorising recommendations ensures that management in the case study schools and indeed any other interested school can incorporate the recommendations into the annual school development and planning process.

Recommendations developed during this research pertain to actions the case study schools could implement to develop the process of partnership with parents in their schools. These recommendations build on current activities within the schools which are linked to partnership with parents. As discussed, utilising Epstein's partnership framework as a continuum would allow the schools to engage in focused planning for increased opportunities for partnership with parents which are linked to student outcomes. Recommendations are divided into four key areas: Policy, Planning /Actions, Training/CPD, and Review. These areas reflect the SSE process for schools and support the LAOS framework of domains and standards for effective practice.

1. **Policy**

❖ Develop a clear school policy statement on partnership with parents which would inform parents/staff/students what partnership is and how it is supported in the school. This will enable a school to work towards highly effective practice as described in LAOS.

❖ Develop a parent communication policy which details when regular contact with parents will occur and how information will be disseminated to parents. Increase the use of platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and the school website to improve communication.

❖ Provide a schedule of activities involving parents and provide an explicit statement of why these activities are important and how students will benefit from parents' engagement in them.

2. Planning / Actions

❖ Inform parents how their opinions and suggestions can inform SSE and LAOS processes in school as part of the SIP/DEIS plan.

❖ Seek opinions from parents other than the parent association when engaging in SSE, for example by using online surveys for all parents.

❖ Develop contingency plans to support parents who cannot attend school meetings.

❖ Use Epstein's framework to engage in strategic planning to further develop activities within the areas of partnership which the school has prioritised.

❖ Increase community public relations, supporting a positive discourse in relation to the school.

❖ Provide a bank of resources for parents on the school website, so that those who cannot attend school events have access to the information provided. These resources should be advertised regularly to parents.

❖ Provide detailed guidance on homework and study for parents of each year group, including the development of a homework policy.

3. Training/CPD

❖ Provide CPD to staff in the school to develop a greater awareness of what partnership with parents is and to develop the skills necessary to support partnership.

❖ Provide CPD to staff in the area of AFL to provide enhanced school reports, which offer AFL feedback to students rather than generic comments from a drop-down list.

❖ Incorporate school planning for homework and study supports into teacher professional time/Croke park hours or other planning times available to staff.

4. Review

❖ Using Epstein's partnership model and the SSE process, schools should evaluate current partnership with parents to establish current practices and their effectiveness.

❖ Prioritise areas of involvement for partnership. Epstein's framework could be utilised as a continuum for a school to develop a targeted approach to developing specific partnership activities in chosen areas.

❖ Consider parents' views as regards partnership activities and subsequently design opportunities which may appeal to a wider group of parents.

❖ Provide feedback on outcomes after parents' views have been sought in order to build transparency and support for future engagement.

10.6 Potential Areas for Future Research

While completing this research I recognised some related areas where further research would be of benefit. Four specific areas struck me as having value and which could expand research in the area of partnership with parents in Irish post-primary school.

❖ Similar research in a different type of school such as an ETB or community school is needed to establish if the similarity of parent experiences is specific to this research.

❖ Research on what kind of CPD or initial teacher training staff experienced on developing partnership with parent skills and based on this, design and provide a supplemental programme of CPD for staff to develop a greater awareness of supporting partnership.

❖ The link between information available about a school, parent expectations and collaboration with community would be an area worth considering in more depth in a further study.

❖ School-based research into a community of practice whereby Epstein's framework was used over the course of a number of years to develop partnership practices would significantly add to the information on partnership in Irish post-primary schools.

10.7   Final Comments

My view of partnership with parents has changed during the course of my research. I was always of the opinion that working with parents enhanced my ability to support my students, but now I have a deeper understanding of how the structures of a school can distance parents. I know communication is important, but this research has highlighted to me that a wide variety of information about what is happening in school not only for the specific child, but the class and year group helps parents to have school conversations with their child. The weekly parent updates my school introduced this year have had a great effect and will be continued next year. We plan to focus on four indicators: parenting, learning at home, communication and decision making. These will be incorporated into our SIP and SSE process and will inform how we approach the introduction of the new Education Bill (2019).

Participation in the Doctorate in Education has improved my understanding of research methodology and the process for drawing all aspects of a thesis together. I have had the opportunity to meet many parents and teachers who were so generous with their time and views on partnership. I have a fresh perspective on the school-parent dynamic and am more conscious of how my decisions as a school leader can affect partnership with parents. My actions can draw parents closer to our school community or push them further away. I hope that as my school continues to apply aspects of Epstein's framework we will develop an open and transparent partnership with our parents which support improved outcomes for our students.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Hornby Parent Involvement Interview Schedule

Policy Formation

- *Does the school have a separate written policy on parent involvement?* Does the policy clearly specify parents' rights and responsibilities and is it included in material distributed to all parents and teachers?
- *Have parents been involved in the formulation of this policy?* For example, have the PTA or parents on the Board of Trustees (BoT) had input into the policy design process?
- *What monitoring procedures are in place to ensure that the policy is implemented?* For example, how is feedback obtained from parents?
- *Is there an active PTA or equivalent at the school?* What proportions of parents participate in PTA activities?
- *How are parents' views sought about school policies or procedures?* For example, are questionnaire surveys used?
- *Is there a room set aside for parents' use?* Do parents use a spare classroom, or can the staffroom be used by parents during lesson times?
- *What means are there for encouraging parents to become members of the PTA or BoT?* Who identifies parents that could contribute to the school in capacities such as membership of the PTA or BoT?

Acting as a Resource

- *In what kinds of activities does the school welcome help from parents?* Are parents used to listening to children read or to assist in teaching or in preparing classroom materials?
- *Who is responsible for ensuring that parents with a particular talent for leadership are identified and encouraged to put their abilities to use?* Do all teachers know they can do this?
- *How are parents informed about the ways in which they can help at the school?* For example, is there a parents' handbook or a regular newsletter?
- *How is voluntary help from parents organized within the school?* For example, is a particular member of staff assigned to coordinate the help or is it seen as the responsibility of each teacher?

Collaborating with Teachers

- *How are the results of school assessments communicated to parents?* Are individual parent-teacher meetings held and if so, how often?
- *How do parents contribute to the assessment of their child's needs?* For example, by being asked for their observations or by completing proformas or developing mental checklists.

- *What input do parents have in deciding the goals and teaching priorities for their children?* For example, do parents discuss with teachers the emphasis which should be placed on developing academic skills or social skills, as part of personal and social education curricula.
- *How are parents encouraged to reinforce school programs at home?* For example, are they expected to participate in a paired reading scheme?
- *Are parents given a choice about the level of their involvement at home with their children?* Is there discussion with parents beforehand so that they are not pressured into participating in projects that they cannot afford the time or energy to carry out?

Sharing Information on Children

- *How is information on children's special needs, medical conditions, and relevant family circumstances gathered from parents?* For example, through home visits, parent-teacher meetings, or contacts with previous schools?
- *How is relevant information from parents disseminated to all members of staff who work with their children?* What systems are used to record, and communicate to teachers, information about such things as children's special needs and the medication they require?
- *What use is made of parents' insights on their children?* For example, parents' knowledge of their children's strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, or how they respond to different approaches.

Channels of Communication

- *How does the school pass on information to parents about their rights and responsibilities and about school organization?* For example, is this information sent out in handbooks specifically aimed at parents or by holding meetings in which school policies are discussed?
- *Does the school have balanced procedures for contacting parents?* That is parents contacted to inform them of their children's achievements as well as their difficulties, or are they only contacted when there is a problem?
- *Does a member of staff visit families before pupils start to attend the school?* Are home visits scheduled when children are changing schools, moving from primary to secondary school, or being reintegrated following a period in a small school?
- *What guidelines are available for parents on visiting the school to talk about concerns with their children's teachers?* For example, do they have to go through the principal, make an appointment directly with the teacher, or just call in whenever they can.
- *What channels of communication are there between parents and teachers?* As is, can parents choose to phone, write notes to teachers, make an appointment to see teachers, or drop in to the school when necessary?

Liaison with School Staff

- *What is the frequency and purpose of parent-teacher meetings?* For example, are parents invited to attend termly or yearly meetings to review their children's progress?
- *Do parents regularly receive home visits?* Are home visits made at least once a year, or only when there is a problem? Are visits made by class teachers or senior members of staff? Is there flexibility in the time of day used so that both parents can be present?
- *What kinds of formal reports are sent home and how often?* Are reports sent home termly or yearly?
- *Are home-school diaries used with some children?* For example, are they used for children with SEN or for those with behavioural difficulties? Are the diaries used daily or weekly?

Parent Education

- *Are parents invited into the school to observe teaching in progress?* For example, are they invited to observe either their own child or other children in the school?
- *When are teachers available to provide guidance to parents?* Do teachers make home visits in order to provide guidance to parents or does this only occur in parent-teacher meetings at school?
- *Are parent workshops organized by the school?* For example, are there workshops for parents of children with reading difficulties or behaviour problems?
- *Are parents informed about opportunities for parent education in the community?* How is information about parenting courses made available to parents?

Parent Support

- *How are parents given opportunities to discuss their concerns on a one-to-one basis?* For example, is this done on home visits or specially scheduled parent-teacher meetings at school?
- *Are opportunities provided for parents to share their concerns with other parents?* For example, are parents introduced to other parents of children with similar difficulties or given opportunity of attending parent workshops?
- *Do teachers know where to refer parents for supportive counselling?* Is there an awareness of services and groups within the local community that can provide supportive counselling such as social workers or self-help groups?
- *Are parents encouraged to participate in support groups and parent organisations outside the school?* For example, Parent-to-Parent services.

Encouraging Parents into School

- *What activities are used to ensure that all parents establish contact with the school?*
- Open days/nights
- New parents' evenings

- School performances
- Talks by well-known invited speakers
- Exhibitions of work by the pupils
- School fairs
- School/class barbeques
- Others
- *What is done to overcome barriers to parent involvement?* That is, to make parents feel more comfortable about coming into school.

Involving Diverse Parents

- *What adaptations does the school use to work effectively with diverse parents?* That is, those with children with SEN or gifted children, as well as those parents from different ethnic groups and/or language backgrounds
- *How are parents of children with special needs involved in developing their child's individual Educational Plan?* For example, do they attend all the meetings and have a chance to discuss their child with any outside specialists involved?
- *How are parents of gifted children involved in planning extension programs for them?* For example, are parent-teacher meetings used for this?
- *How is parental involvement in reviews of their children's progress optimized?* For example, by obtaining their observations in writing beforehand and being active members of the review team.
- *What is done to work effectively with parents from different cultures or those whose main language is not English?* For example, how are translators and interpreters used?

Professional Development for Teachers

- *What training do teachers get on how to work effectively with parents?* Is this done in preservice or in-service courses?
- *Are parents involved in professional development sessions with teachers?* For example, have parents of children with SEN or gifted children been invited to talk about their experiences, expectations, needs and possible contributions?

Appendix 2 HSCL Annual Planning Blank Logic Model

Blank Logic Model – HSCL Annual Planning

Situation/ Need									
DEIS Themes (in order of priority)									
Inputs	Outputs		Short Term Outcomes (1 year)	Medium Term Outcomes (3 years)	Long Term Outcomes (5 years)
	Activities	Measurables			

Appendix 3 HSCL Monthly Record Sheet

Parents:

_____

_____

Principal and Staff:

_____

_____

Literacy/Numeracy/Science:

_____

_____

_____

Integration/Community:

_____

_____

_____

Cluster:

_____

_____

Appendix 4 HSCL Weekly Planning Grid

1.	Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation	7.	Courses and Classes-Parents
2.	Home Visits	8.	Policy Formation
3.	Parents Involved in Literacy/Numeracy/Science Visitors/Parents Supporting Parents	9.	Parents as Educational Home
4.	Local Education Committee	10.	Integration with other agencies
5.	Staff Development	11.	Cluster meetings
6.	Meeting with Principal	12.	CPD

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
09.00-10.00					
10.00-11.00					
11.00-12.30					
13.30-14.30					
14.30-15.30					

Appendix 5 Epstein's Sample Practices of Six Types of Involvement

Type 1 Parenting	Type 2 Communicating	Type 3 Volunteering	Type 4 Learning at Home	Type 5 Decision Making	Type 6 Collaborating With the Community
Help all families establish home environments to support children as students	Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and their children's progress	Recruit and organize parent help and support	Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning	Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives	Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development

Sample Practices

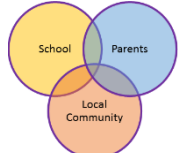| Type 1 Parenting	Type 2 Communicating	Type 3 Volunteering	Type 4 Learning at Home	Type 5 Decision Making	Type 6 Collaborating With the Community
Suggestions for home conditions that support learning at each grade level	Conferences with every parent at least once a year, with follow-ups as needed	School and classroom volunteer program to help teachers, administrators, students, and other parents	Information for families on knowledge and skills required for students in all subjects at each grade	Active PTA/PTO or other parent organizations, advisory councils, or committees (e.g., curriculum, safety, personnel) for parent leadership and participation	Information for students and families on community health, cultural, recreational, social support, and other programs or services
Workshops, videotapes, computerized phone messages on parenting for each age and grade level	Language translators assist families, as needed	Parent room or family center for volunteer work, meetings, resources for families	Information on homework policies and how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home	Independent advocacy groups to lobby and work for school reform and improvements	Information on community activities that link to learning skills and talents, including summer programs for students
Parent education and other courses or training for parents (e.g., GED, college credit, family literacy)	Weekly or monthly folders of student work sent home for review and comments	Annual postcard survey to identify all available talents, times, and locations of volunteers	Information on how to assist students to improve skills on various class and school assessments	District level councils and committees for family and community involvement	Service integration through partnerships involving school; civic, counseling, cultural, health, recreation, and other agencies and organizations; and businesses
Family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition, and other services	Parent-student pickup of report cards, with conferences on improving grades	Class parent, telephone tree, or other structures to provide all families with needed information	Regular schedule of homework that requires students to discuss and interact with families on what they are learning in class	Information on school or local elections for school representatives	Service to the community by students, families, and schools (e.g., recycling, art, music, drama, and other activities for seniors or others)
Home visits at transition points to preschool and to elementary, middle, and high school; neighborhood meetings to help families understand schools and to help schools understand families	Regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, information on the school Web site, and other communications	Parent patrols or other activities to aid safety and operation of school programs	Calendars with activities for parents and students to do at home or in the community	Networks to link all families with parent representatives	Participation of alumni in school programs for students and as mentors for planning for college and work
	Clear information on choosing schools or courses, programs, and activities within schools		Family math, science, and reading activities at school		
	Clear information on all school policies, programs, reforms, and transitions		Summer learning packets or activities		
	Information for parents on Internet safety		Family participation in setting student goals each year and in planning for college or work		

Appendix 6 Epstein's Challenges and Redefinition of Common Activities

Type 1 Parenting	Type 2 Communicating	Type 3 Volunteering	Type 4 Learning at Home	Type 5 Decision Making	Type 6 Collaborating With the Community
Challenges					
Provide information to all families who want it or who need it, not just to the few who can attend workshops or meetings at the school building Enable families to share information about culture, background, and children's talents and needs Make sure that all information for families is clear, usable, and linked to children's success in school	Review the readability, clarity, form, and frequency of all memos, notices, and other print and nonprint communications Consider parents who do not speak English well, do not read well, or need large type Review the quality of major communications (e.g., the schedule, content, and structure of conferences, newsletters, report cards, and others) Establish clear two-way channels for communications from home to school and from school to home	Recruit volunteers widely so that *all* families know that their time and talents are welcome Make flexible schedules for volunteers, assemblies, and events to enable employed parents to participate Organize volunteer work; provide training; match time and talent with school, teacher, and student needs; and recognize efforts so that participants are productive	Design and organize a regular schedule of interactive homework (e.g., weekly or bimonthly) that gives *students* responsibility for discussing important things they are learning and that helps families stay aware of the content of their children's classwork Coordinate family-linked homework activities, if students have several teachers Involve families with their children in all important curriculum-related decisions Provide timely information to students and families on credits required for high school graduation, credits earned, and steps for planning postsecondary education	Include parent leaders from all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other groups in the school Offer training to enable leaders to serve as representatives of other families, with input from and return of information to all parents Include students (along with parents) in decision making groups	Solve turf problems of responsibilities, funds, staff, and locations for collaborative activities Inform families of community programs for students, such as mentoring, tutoring, and business partnerships Assure equity of opportunities for students and families to participate in community programs or to obtain services Match community contributions with school goals; integrate child and family services with education
Redefinitions					
"Workshop" to mean more than a meeting about a topic held at the school building at a particular time; "workshop" also may mean making information about a topic available in a variety of forms that can be viewed, heard, or read anywhere, anytime	"Communications about school programs and student progress" to mean: two-way, three-way, and many-way channels of communication that connect schools, families, students, and the community	"Volunteer" to mean anyone who supports school programs and students' activities in any way, at any place, and at any time—not just during the school day and at the school building—and those who are audiences for student events, sports, activities, and performances	"Homework" to mean not only work done alone, but also interactive activities shared with others at home or in the community, linking schoolwork to real life "Help" at home to mean encouraging, listening, reacting, praising, guiding, monitoring, and discussing—not "teaching" school subjects	"Decision making" to mean a process of partnership, of shared views and actions toward shared goals, not a power struggle between conflicting ideas "Parent leader" to mean a real representative, with opportunities and support to hear from and communicate with other families	"Community" to mean not only the neighborhoods where students' homes and schools are located but also neighborhoods that influence student learning and development "Community" rated not only by low or high social or economic qualities but also by strengths and talents to support students, families, and schools "Community" means all who are interested in and affected by the quality of education, not just families with children in the schools

Appendix 7 Epstein's Expected Results from Six Types of Involvement

Type 1 Parenting	Type 2 Communicating	Type 3 Volunteering	Type 4 Learning at Home	Type 5 Decision Making	Type 6 Collaborating With the Community
Results for Students					
Awareness of family supervision; respect for parents	Awareness of own progress and of actions needed to maintain or improve grades	Skill in communicating with adults	Gains in skills, abilities, and test scores linked to homework and classwork	Awareness of representation of families in school decisions	Increased skills and talents through enriched curricular and extracurricular experiences
Positive personal qualities, habits, beliefs, and values, as taught by family	Understanding of school policies on behavior, attendance, and other areas of student conduct	Increased learning of skills for which students receive tutoring or targeted attention from volunteers	Homework completion	Understanding that student rights are protected	Awareness of careers and options for future education and work
Balance between time spent on chores, on other activities, and on homework	Informed decisions about courses and programs	Awareness of many skills, talents, occupations, and contributions of parents and other volunteers	Positive attitude toward schoolwork	Specific benefits linked to policies enacted by parent organizations and experienced by students	Specific benefits linked to programs, services, resources, and opportunities that connect students with community
Good or improved attendance	Awareness of own role in partnerships, serving as courier and communicator		View of parent as more similar to teacher, and home as more similar to school		
Awareness of importance of school			Self-concept of ability as learner		
Results for Parents					
Understanding of and confidence about parenting, child and adolescent development, and changes in home conditions for learning as children proceed through school	Understanding of school programs and policies	Understanding of teacher's job, increased comfort in school, and carryover of school activities at home	Knowledge of how to support, encourage, and help student at home each year	Input into policies that affect child's education	Knowledge and use of local resources by family and child to increase skills and talents or to obtain needed services
Awareness of own and others' challenges in parenting	Monitoring and awareness of student progress	Self-confidence about ability to work in school and with children, or to take steps to improve own education	Discussions of school, classwork, and homework	Feeling of ownership of school	Interactions with other families in community activities
Feeling of support from school and other parents	Effective responses to student problems	Awareness that families are welcome and valued at school	Understanding of instructional program each year and of what child is learning in each subject	Awareness of parents' voices in school decisions	Awareness of school's role in the community and of community's contributions to the school
	Interactions with teachers and eased communications with school and teachers	Gains in specific skills of volunteer work	Appreciation of teaching skills	Shared experiences and connections with other families	
			Awareness of child as a learner	Awareness of school, district, and state policies	
Results for Teachers					
Understanding of families' backgrounds, cultures, concerns, goals, needs, and views of their children	Increased diversity and use of communications with families and awareness of own ability to communicate clearly	Readiness to involve families in new ways, including those who do not volunteer at school	Better design of homework assignments	Awareness of parent perspectives as a factor in policy development and decisions	Awareness of community resources to enrich curriculum and instruction
Respect for families' strengths and efforts	Appreciation and use of parent network for communications	Awareness of parent talents and interests in school and children	Respect of family time	View of equal status of family representatives on committees and in leadership roles	Openness to and skill in using mentors, business partners, community volunteers, and others to assist students and augment teaching practice
Understanding of student diversity	Increased ability to elicit and understand family views on children's programs and progress	Greater individual attention to students, with help from volunteers	Recognition of equal helpfulness of single parent, dual income, and less formally educated families in motivating and reinforcing student learning		Ability to make knowledgeable, helpful referrals of children and families to needed services
Awareness of own skills to share information on child development			Satisfaction with family involvement and support		

Appendix 8 Parent Questionnaire

	Parent Questionnaire on Partnership with Parents in Post Primary Schools	

Please answer all questions

Q1 What year is your daughter in?

1st Year	O	Transition Year	O
2nd Year	O	5th Year	O
3rd Year	O	6th Year	O

Q2 How does the school communicate with you? Tick all that apply

Text Messages	O	Yearly Parent Teacher Meeting	O
Phone Call	O	Appointment with subject teacher	O
Email	O	Appointment with year head	O
Letters	O	Appointment with Deputy Principal	O
Reports	O	Appointment with Principal	O
Using Website	O	Flyers with information on events in school	O

Other:

_____

Q3 What kind of information does the school provide you with? Tick all that apply

Subject Choice Information	O
School Policies	O

Anti-Bullying information   O

Information on Transition Year   O

CAO information   O

Dealing with social media and your child   O

Information on School trips   O

Exam information   O

Other:

_____

Q4 Is there other information you would like to get from the school?

Yes   O   No   O

If Yes, what kind of information would you like to get?

_____

Q5 Do you think the school's methods of contact are good enough?

Yes   O   No   O

If no, what else is needed?

_____

_____

Q6 How often do you visit the school?

Weekly   O

Monthly   O

Once a term   O

Once a Year   O

Never   O

Other: _____

Q7 What is the main reason you would visit the school?

_____

Q8 As a parent, how do you contact the school? Tick all that apply

Phone Call	O	Appointment with subject teacher	O
Email	O	Appointment with year head	O
Letters	O	Appointment with Deputy Principal	O
Journal	O	Appointment with Principal	O

Other _____

Q9 How helpful do you find school reports?

Not helpful   O   O   O   O   O   **Very helpful**

Explain:

_____

Q10 As a parent what kind of activities do you become involved in at this school?
    Tick all that apply

Attending school shows/event	O
Volunteering to help with school activity e.g. school musical	O
Volunteering to help with school activity in the classroom e.g. job skills,	O
Being involved in the Parents' Association	O
On the Board of Management	O
Helping with sports trips	O

Discussing school policies   O

Fundraising   O

Decisions about curriculum   O

Other:
_____

Q11 In what other ways would YOU like to be involved in the school?

_____

_____

Q12 Are you involved in decision making with the school?

Yes   O   No   O   Don't Know   O

Explain

_____

_____

_____

Q13 Is the school involved in the local community?

Yes   O   No   O   Don't Know   O

If yes, How?

_____

_____

Q14 Does the school provide you with information which helps you support your child with her homework and study at home?

No information   O   O   O   O   O   A lot of information

Comment:

_____

Q15 Do you think your voice as a parent is heard by the school?

Not heard at all   O   O   O   O   O   Listened to always

Comment:

_____

Q16 Do you see yourself as a partner with the school, in your child's education?

Not a partner   O   O   O   O   O   Partner with school

Comment:

_____

Q17 Do you think parents need to be involved in the school?
     Yes   O   No   O

Explain your answer

_____

Q18   Basic information about parent/guardian

    a) Are you: Male   O   Female   O

    b) Age group: <30   O   30-40 O   41-50 O   51 plus   O

Appendix 9 Teacher Questionnaire

	Teacher Questionnaire on Partnership with Parents in Post Primary Schools	
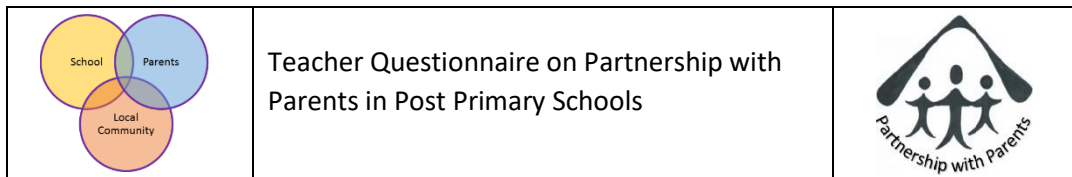
Please answer all questions

Q1 What year groups do you teach this year?

1st Year	O	Transition Year	O
2nd Year	O	5th Year	O
3rd Year	O	6th Year	O

Q2 How does the school communicate with parents? Tick all that apply

Text Messages	O	Yearly Parent Teacher Meeting	O
Phone Call	O	Appointment with subject teacher	O
Email	O	Appointment with year head	O
Letters	O	Appointment with Deputy Principal	O
Reports	O	Appointment with Principal	O
Using Website	O	Flyers with information on events in school	O

Other:
_____

Q3 What kind of information does the school provide parents with? Tick all that apply

Subject Choice Information	O
School Policies	O

Anti-Bullying information   O

Information on Transition Year   O

CAO information   O

Dealing with social media and your child   O

Information on School trips   O

Exam information   O

Other:

_____

Q4 Is there other information you would like parents to get from the school?

    Yes   O   No   O

If Yes, what kind of information would you like parents to get?

_____

Q5 In your opinion, do you think the school's methods of contacting parents are good enough?

    Yes   O   No   O

If no, what else is needed?

_____

Q6 How often do you usually meet with the parents of your students?

    Weekly   O

    Monthly   O

    Once a term   O

    Once a Year   O

    Never   O

    Other: _____

Q7 What is the main reason you would meet parents?

_____

Q8 As a teacher, what is your preferred method of communicating with parents? Tick all that apply

Phone Call   O   Appointment   O

Email   O   Journal   O

Letter   O

Other _____

Q9 Do you think school reports are helpful to parents?

Not helpful   O   O   O   O   O   **Very helpful**

Explain:

_____

Q10 What kind of activities do parents become involved in at this school? Tick all that apply

Attending school shows/event   O

Volunteering to help with school activity e.g. school musical   O

Volunteering to help with school activity in the classroom e.g. job skills,   O

Being involved in the Parents' Association   O

On the Board of Management   O

Helping with sports trips   O

Discussing school policies   O

Fundraising   O

Decisions about curriculum   O

Other:
_____

Q11 Are there any other ways YOU would like parents to be involved in the school/classroom?

_____

_____

Q12 Is the school involved in the local community?
    Yes   O   No   O   Don't Know   O

If yes, How?
_____

Q13 Does the school provide parents with information which helps them support their child with her homework and study at home?

No information   O   O   O   O   O   A lot of information

Comment:
_____

Q14 Do you think parent voice is heard by the school?

Not heard at all   O   O   O   O   O   Listened to always

Comment:
_____

Q15 Do you see yourself in partnership with parents?

Not a partner   O   O   O   O   O   Partner with school

Comment:

_____

Q16 Do you think parents need to be involved in the school?

     Yes   O   No   O

Explain your answer

_____

Q17   Basic information about teacher

   a) Are you: Male   O   Female   O

   b) Please tick all which apply:

      Form Teacher   O
      Year head   O
      A post holder   O
      B post holder   O

   c) Number of years teaching:
      1-10   O   11-20 O   21- 30 O   30 plus   O

Appendix 10 Research Information Sheet for Parents
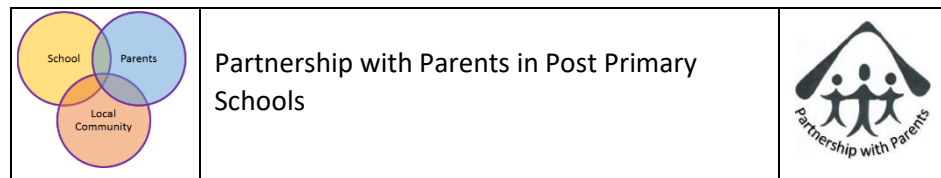
	Partnership with Parents in Post Primary Schools	

As part of a Doctorate Degree in Trinity College Dublin (TCD), I am researching partnership with parents in post primary schools.

The working title of my thesis is "Partnership with Parents in Post Primary Schools".

The overall aim of this research is to investigate partnership with parents in your child's school to establish what type of partnership occurs and its purpose. Research findings will help me to develop recommendations for promoting improved partnership between this school and parents.

You have been approached to participate in this research as you are a parent of a student in a school which is part of this research. Would you be willing to be interviewed about your experience of partnership with School A/School B?

Your participation is entirely voluntary.

If you are willing to be interviewed, please contact me by phone/email or you can fill out the Interview Interest Form and place in the envelope provided.

No individual participant will be identified in the research and only anonymised quotes will be used. This interview will be *audio-recorded/video-recorded* to ensure an accurate record I will be responsible for overseeing the transcription and the anonymity of the interview data. All information collected as part of the study will be stored securely on password protected computers. You can decide to withdraw from the study at any point. You can contact me to request this.

As little research has been carried out on partnership with parents at post primary level, the results of this study will help to improve knowledge in this area and to develop policies for partnership with parents.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact me on 08X XXXXXXX or by email: dunwoodyresearch@gmail.com

Anna Dunwoody B.Ed. D.C.R.E. MA. M.Ed.   Postgraduate Researcher, School of Education, TCD

Appendix 11 Research Information Sheet for Teachers
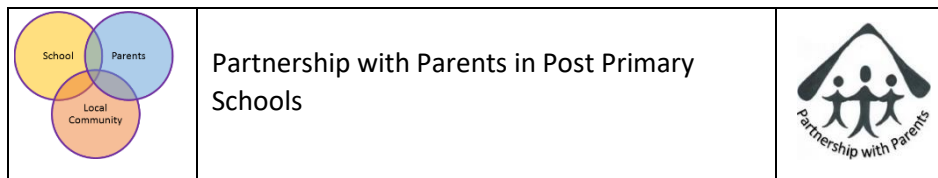
	Partnership with Parents in Post Primary Schools	

As part of a Doctorate Degree in Trinity College Dublin (TCD), I am researching partnership with parents in post primary schools.

The working title of my thesis is "Partnership with Parents in Post Primary Schools".

The overall aim of this research is to investigate partnership with parents in post primary schools to establish what type of partnership occurs and its purpose.

You have been approached to participate in this research as you are a teacher in a school which is part of this research project. Would you be willing to be interviewed about your experience of partnership with parents?

Your participation is entirely voluntary.

If you are willing to be interviewed, please contact me by phone/email or you can fill out the Interview Interest Form and place in the envelope provided.

No individual participant will be identified in the research and only anonymised quotes will be used. This interview will be *audio-recorded/video-recorded* to ensure an accurate record. I will be responsible for overseeing the transcription and the anonymity of the interview data. All information collected as part of the study will be stored securely on password protected computers. You can decide to withdraw from the study at any point. You can contact me to request this.

As little research has been carried out on partnership with parents at post primary level, the results of this study will help to improve knowledge in this area and to develop policies for partnership with parents.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact me on 08X XXXXXXX or by email: dunwoodyresearch@gmail.com

Anna Dunwoody B.Ed. D.C.R.E. MA. M.Ed.   Postgraduate Researcher, School of Education, TCD.

Appendix 12 Interview Volunteer Form

| | Partnership with Parents in Post Primary Schools | |
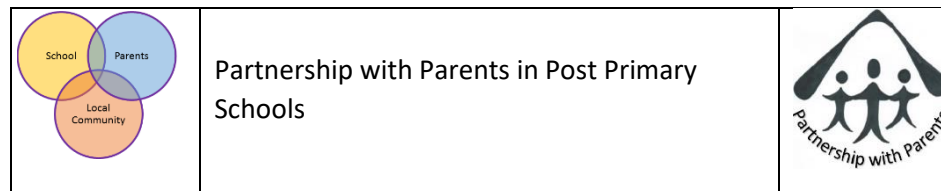
Would you be willing to be interviewed about partnership with parents in this school?

If interested fill in your contact details below.

Name:

_____

Contact Number:

_____

Email:

_____

Anna Dunwoody B.Ed. D.C.R.E. MA. M.Ed.

Postgraduate Researcher, School of Education, TCD.

Email: dunwoodyresearch@gmail.com   Mobile: 08X XXXXXXX

Appendix 13 Interview Guides

Interview Guide: Parent Questions

My definition of partnership: a relationship based upon a shared common goal of education for the student, where schools and parents recognise the opinions and perspectives of each other and consider them when developing policy or making decisions. It is when schools are responsive to the concerns and needs of parents and involve them as active community members.

Being involved refers to when a parent/guardian participated in school involvement by one of the 6 types of parental involvement: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at home, Decision Making, and Collaborating with the community.

As a parent, what expectations do you have of the school?

Do parents need to be involved with the school?

In what ways would you like to be involved in the school?

Are there benefits to being involved with the school?

What kind of contact do you have with the school?

How does the school communicate with you?

Do you find this to be a good way of communicating with you?

Do you have any suggestions for the school around communication and the methods used to contact you?

What kind of information does the school provide you with?

Is there information that you would like to get?

Is your voice as a parent heard?

What kind of activities do parents become involved in at the school?   (social, educational/curriculum related/fundraising)

Are you involved in any decision making with the school?

Is the school involved in the wider community?

Do you feel like a partner with the school, regarding your child's education? Why/Why not?

Interview Guide: Teacher Questions

My definition of partnership: a relationship based upon a shared common goal of education for the student, where schools and parents recognise the opinions and perspectives of each other and consider them when developing policy or making decisions. It is when schools are responsive to the concerns and needs of parents and involve them as active community members.

Being involved refers to when a parent/guardian participated in school involvement by one of the 6 types of parental involvement: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at home, Decision Making, and Collaborating with the community.

As a teacher what expectations do you have of parents?

Do parents need to be involved with the school?

In what ways would you like parents to be involved in the school?

What kind of contact do you have with parents?

How does the school communicate with parents?

What kind of information does the school provide parents with?

Do you think parents voice is heard?

What kind of activities do parents become involved in at the school? (social, educational/curriculum related/fundraising)

Is the school involved in the wider community?

Do you think partnership between schools and parents is important?

Do you feel like a partner with the school and the parents?

Appendix 14 Ethical Approval

((MYzone))

Anna Dunwoody <dunwooda@tcd.ie>

Approval Anna Dunwoody 4th November 2016
4 messages

Phdrsrch <PHDRSRCH@tcd.ie>
To: Anna Dunwoody <DUNWOODA@tcd.ie>

4 November 2016 at 12:37

Approval Anna Dunwoody   4th November 2016

Dear Anna,

The School of Education's Ethics Committee has received and considered your application for approval of your PhD research project.

It is the decision of the Committee that no additional information is needed regarding your application. Therefore, approval is granted for your research, on the condition that it is carried out as indicated on your application. Should there be a change in the design of your research project, you will need to re-apply again for approval from the School of Education's Ethics Committee.

You are required to include a copy of this letter as an appendix to your thesis.

If you have any queries regarding this decision, please contact the Chair of the School of Education's Ethics Committee and Director of Research, Dr Stephen James Minton (mintonst@tcd.ie).

We wish you all the very best with your research project.

Kind regards,

Fiona McKibben

Research Officer at the School of Education

on behalf of Professor Stephen James Minton

Director of Research

3088 School of Education Arts Building

Trinity College Dublin, The University of Dublin

Dublin 2, Ireland.

Tel | + 353 1 8963583

Appendix 15 Consent Form

	Partnership with Parents in Post Primary Schools	
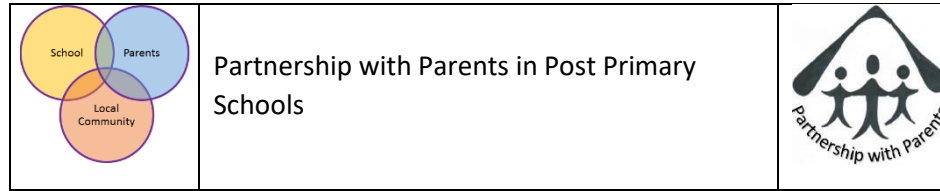
I am volunteering to take part in an Interview with the researcher to discuss partnership between schools and parents.

I understand that it is OK to stop taking part in this research at any time and that I do not have to say why.

I understand that the research will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner.

I understand that the researcher will be audio recording my voice during the interviews.

I understand that all data gathered during the research will be confidential and stored securely.

I understand that the researcher might include quotes in reports, when she is talking at conferences or in research papers and I give my permission for them to do so.

I understand that they will not use my name and any quotes will be anonymous.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Anna Dunwoody B.Ed. D.C.R.E. MA. M.Ed.

Postgraduate Researcher, School of Education, TCD.

Appendix 16 Diagrams of School Set up for PTM
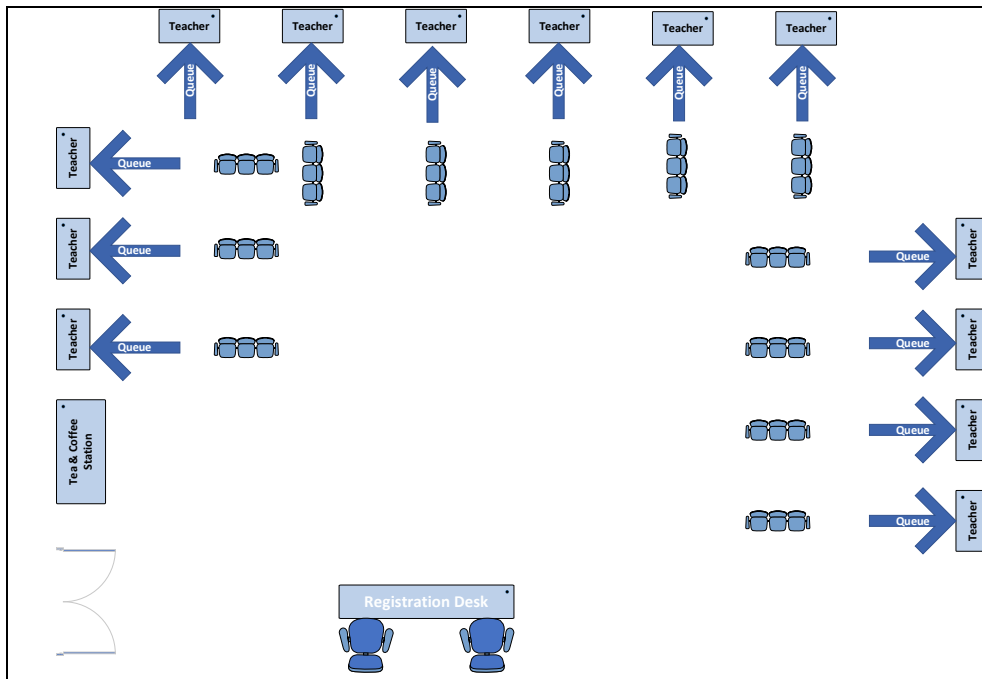
School A
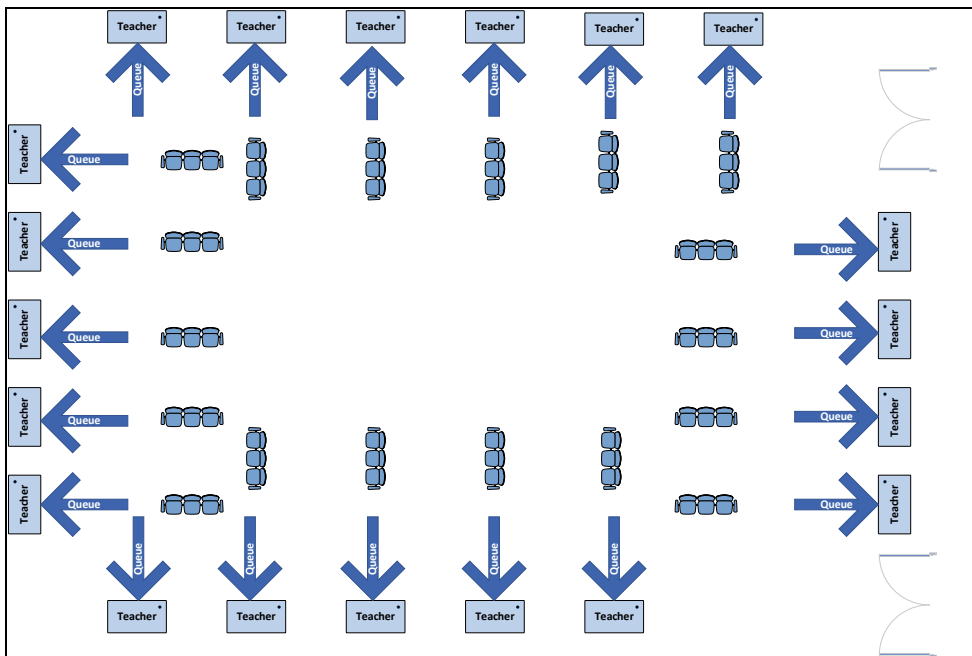
School B

Appendix 17 Parent Questionnaire Data

Table 1: Area of partnership framework and related questions on Parent Questionnaires

	Parent Questionnaire
General Information	Q1, Q18
Parenting/Learning at home	Q3, Q4, Q9, Q14
Communicating	Q2, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8
Volunteering	Q10, Q11
Decision making	Q12, Q15, Q16, Q17
Collaborating with community	Q13

General Information:

Table 2: Q1 What year is your daughter in? (%)

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
School A	23	6	20	17	12	22
School B	14	18	19	17	17	15
Total	19	12	19	17	15	18

Table 3: Q18   a)   Gender (%)

	Female	Male
School A	86	14
School B	76	24
Total	81	19

Table 4: Q18 b) Age (%)

Age	30-40	41-50	51 plus
School A	37	50	13
School B	6	60	34
Total	20	55	25

Table 5: Q3 What kind of information does the school provide you with? (%)

Information Provided	School A	School B	Total
Subject Choice	57	79	69
School Policies	71	85	79
Anti-Bullying information	57	83	72
Information on School trips	75	78	77
Information on Transition Year	47	57	52
Exam information	47	54	50
CAO information	39	39	39
Dealing with social media	42	48	45

Table 6: Q4 Is there other information you would like to get from the school? (%)

Other information	No Answer	No	Yes
School A	6	77	17
School B	10	68	22
Overall Total	8	72	20

Table 7: Q4a If Yes, what kind of information would you like to get? (n)

Parents listed the following as other information they would like to receive:

Kind of information	Type of other information required (74)
Student progress	14
Recent Development/News	14
Study/Subject information	12
Extra-Curricular	10
Policy	5
Social Media	4
School Website	3

Table 8: Q9 How helpful do you find school reports? (%)

	Not Helpful	A Little Helpful	Very Helpful
School A	2	23	75
School B	4	53	43
Overall Total	3	40	57

Table 9: Q14 Does the school provide you with information which helps you support your child with homework and study at home? (%)

	No information	Some information	A lot of information
School A	24	39	37
School B	45	29	26
Overall Total	36	33	31

Communication:

Table 10: Q2 How does the school communicate with you? (%)

Type of Contact	School A	School B	Total
Text Messages	88	95	92
Yearly PTM	53	77	66
Letters	33	72	55
Reports	37	63	51
Phone Call	34	21	26
Flyers with information on events in school	17	37	28
Website	5	22	14
Year Head	12	16	14
Subject Teacher	4	11	7
Principal	5	9	7
Deputy Principal	3	8	6
Email	2	7	5
Other	3	2	2

Table 11: Q5 Do you think the school's methods of contact are enough? (%)

	No Response	No	Yes
School A	3	7	90
School B	4	14	82
Total	4	11	85

Table 12: Q6 How often do you visit the school? (%)

Frequency of visit/s	School A	School B	Total
As Needed	12	6	9
Weekly	2	1	2
Monthly	10	6	8
Once a term	25	30	28
Once a year	48	57	53
Twice a year	1	0	1
Never	1	1	1

Table 13: Q7 What is the main reason you would visit the school? (%)

Reason for visit	School A	School B	Total
PTM	65	77	72
Meeting with Staff	11	11	11
Student Progress	8	4	6
Parent Association	2	4	3
Collect/Drop Off	1	2	2
Events	1	2	1
BOM	1	0	1
No Reply	12	1	6

Table 14: Q8 As a parent, how do you contact the school?

Type of Contact	School A	School B	Total
Phone Call	92	91	92
Journal	42	35	38

Type of Contact	School A	School B	Total
Letters	11	16	14
Appointment with Year Head	12	11	11
Appointment with Subject Teacher	7	11	9
Appointment with DP	1	4	3
Appointment with Principal	8	6	7
Email	3	6	5
Other How Contact	0	4	2

Volunteering

Tables 15: Q10 As a parent what kind of activities do you become involved in at this school? (%)

Activities	School A	School B	Total
Attending School Show/Event	75	76	76
Fundraising	15	32	25
Volunteering in school	4	27	16
Parents' Association	5	28	18
Decisions about Curriculum	2	6	4
Discussing School Policies	4	7	6
BoM	2	13	8
Helping with Sports Trips	3	12	8
Other	7	7	7

Table 16: Q11 In what other ways would you like to be involved in the school? (%)

54 of the 379 parents indicated additional areas they would like to be involved within the schools.

	School A (16)	School B (38)	Total (54)
None	38	13	20
Extracurricular	19	8	11
Library	13	3	6
Decision Making	6	5	6
Mock Interviews	0	5	4
Selection of teachers	0	5	4
Parent Association	0	5	4
Board of Management	0	3	2
Exchange	0	3	2
Environment	2	0	2

Decision Making

Table 17: Q12 Are you involved in any decision making within the school? (%)

	No Response	**No**	**Yes**
School A	8	86	6
School B	6	88	6
Total	7	87	6

Table 18: Q15 Do you think your voice is heard by the school? (%)

	Not heard at all	**Sometimes heard**	**Always listened to**
School A	14	31	55
School B	29	34	37
Total	22	33	45

Table 19: Q16 Do you see yourself as a partner with the school, in your child's education? (%)

	Not a partner	Occasionally a partner	A partner with school
School A	26	18	56
School B	23	25	52
Total	25	22	53

Table 20: Q17 Do you think parents need to be involved in the school? (%)

	No Response	No	Yes
School A	8	10	82
School B	10	6	84
Total	9	8	83

Collaborating with community

Table 21: Q13 Is the school involved in the wider community? (%)

	No Response	Don't Know	No	Yes
School A	9	52	8	31
School B	10	42	12	36
Total	10	46	10	34

Appendix 18 Teacher Questionnaire Data

Table 1: Area of partnership framework and related questions

	Teacher Questionnaire
General Information	Q1, Q17
Parenting/ Learning	Q3, Q4, Q9, Q13
Communicating	Q2, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8
Volunteering	Q10, Q11
Decision making	Q14, Q15, Q16
Collaborating with community	Q12

<u>**General Information**</u>

Table 2: Q1 What year groups do you teach/work with? (%)

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
School A	91	82	73	82	82	77
School B	67	50	67	59	50	50
Total	82	71	71	74	71	68

Table 3: Q17 a) Gender (%)

	Female	Male
School A	100%	0%
School B	91	9
Total	94	6

Table 4: Q17 b) Post Held (%)

	Form Teacher	Year Head	AP1	AP2	None
School A	9	4	18	5	64
School B	17	0	8	17	58
Total	12	3	15	9	62

Table 5: Q17 c) Years Teaching/ Working in School (%)

	1-10	11-20	21-30	30 plus
School A	25	50	0	25
School B	0.0%	36	36	28
Total	9	41	24	26

Parenting / Learning at Home

Table 6: Q3 What kind of information does the school provide parents with? (%)

	School A	School B	Total
Subject Choice Information	100	100	100
Information on Transition Year	96	100	97
Information on School Trips	100	92	97
Exam Information	96	92	94
School Policies	91	83	88
CAO information	91	83	88
Anti-Bullying information	86	67	79
Dealing with social media and your child	59	42	56
Other: Summer Camp	9	0	6

	School A	School B	Total
Other: Special Education	9	8	9

Table 7: Q4 Is there any other information you would like parents to get from the school? (%)

	Yes	No
School A	23	77
School B	8	92
Total	18	82

Table 8: Q9 Do you think school reports are helpful to parents? (%)

	Not Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Very Helpful
School A	5	31	64
School B	0	50	50
Total	3	38	59

Table 9: Q13 Does the school provide parents with information which helps them support their child with her homework and study at home? (%)

	No Information	Some Information	A lot of Information
School A	25	50	25
School B	27	50	23
Total	26	50	24

Communicating

Table 10: Q2 How does the school communicate with parents? (%)

	School A	School B	Total
Phone	96	100	97
Letters	96	92	94.
Text Messages	91	100	94
Reports	86	92	88
Yearly PT Meeting	82	92	85
Flyers with information on events in school	77	75	77
App with DP	73	75	74
Year Head	73	75	74
App with Principal	73	67	71
Websites	73	42	62
App with Subject Teacher	55	58	56
Email	5	75	29
Other: Journal	14	8	12
Newsletter	5	0	3

Table 11: Q5 In your opinion, do you think the school's methods of contacting parents are good enough? (%)

	Yes	No
School A	86	14
School B	100	0
Total	91	9

Table 12: Q6 How often do you usually meet the parents of your students? (%)

	Monthly	Once a term	Once a Year	Weekly
School A	5	23	68	4
School B	17	17	58	8
Total	9	20	65	6

Table 13: Q7 What is your main reason for meeting parents? (%)

	School A	School B	Total
Yearly PT Meeting	82	17	53
Discussion on Progress	9	33	21
School Activities	5	0	9
SEN Concerns	5	33	18
Attendance	0	17	9

Table 14: Q8 What is your preferred method of contacting parents? (%)

	School A	School B	Total
Phone Call	100	77	85
Appointment	50	50	50
Journal	50	27	35
Email	0	32	21
Letter	17	32	27
Home Visit	8	0	3
Other: Informal Meeting	0	5	3

Volunteering

Table 15: Q10 What kind of activities do parents become involved in at this school? (%)

	School A	School B	Total
Attending school shows/events	100	100	100
Parent Association	91	92	92
Board of Management (BoM)	83	86	85
Fundraising	50	96	79
Policy discussions	25	46	38
Decisions about Curriculum	0	96	79
Helping with sports trips	17	55	41
Volunteering to help with activity e.g., Musical	17	50	38
Volunteering to help in the classroom	0	0	0
Other: Mock Interviews	0	33	12
Decisions about Curriculum	0	96	79
Other: Mock Interviews	0	33	12

Table 16: Q11 In what other ways would you like parents to be involved in the school? (%)

	School A	School B	Total
None	91	58	79
Parent as expert	9	0	6
Supporting Trip/Events	0	8	3
Checking journals/homework	0	17	6

Decision Making

Table 17: Q14 Do you think parent voice is being heard in the school? (%)

	Not heard at all	Occasionally heard	Always listened to
School A	9	9	82
School B	8	34	58
Total	9	17	74

Table 18: Q15 Do you see yourself in partnership with the parents? (%)

	Not a partner	Occasionally a partner	A partner with school
School A	23	18	59
School B	0	50	50
Total	15	29	56

Table 19: Q16 Do you think parents need to be involved in the school? (%)

	No	Yes
School A	9	91
School B	0	100
Total	6	94

Collaborating with community

Table 20: Q12 Is the school involved in the wider community? (%)

	Don't know	No	Yes
School A	14	4	82
School B	8	0	92
Total	12	3	85

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