FAMILY, SCHOOL, COMMUNITY EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP
<< ACADEMIC REPORT >>

TOGETHER
Teachers · Families · Communities

WRITTEN BY >>
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This publication is dedicated to the children in the five primary schools that were involved in the FSCEP project from 2005-2009. The FSCEP project sought to bring enhanced learning opportunities to these children through working in partnership with them, their teachers, their parents and their communities. We wish them every success in their educational journeys and in their lives ahead.

"We felt happy because our parents came to see what we do in class" [1]

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[1] Participating child's quote (BC2).

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<< ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS >>

2. The FSCEP management committee met approximately every six weeks. The FSCEP project management committee comprised of the FSCEP project team, representation from PAUL Partnership and two principals from the participating Limerick FSCEP project schools. Also, on a twice yearly basis the five principals attended FSCEP project management meetings.

3. The FSCEP project was supported by an Advisory Committee. They met, on average, twice a year in the early years. The members of the Advisory Committee included representatives from the INTO, the Health Service Executive (HSE), PAUL Partnership, Barnardos, HSCL Scheme, National Parents Council Primary (NPC), Youthreach and the Department of Education and Science (DES).

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION >>

The Family School Community Educational Partnership (FSCEP) project was a four-year educational partnership initiative that worked with five primary schools, all of which self-selected to be part of this project. The FSCEP project set out to nurture effective educational partnership relationships between the home, school and community. In doing so, it acknowledged the pre-existing work being done by the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) coordinators and sought to bring an added support and dimension to this work. The rationale for working in partnership is rooted in the recognition that significant benefits accrue to the child when the key stakeholders in the child's life work together. These benefits are discussed at length within the literature review, the research findings, and the conclusions and recommendations section.

The FSCEP project enacted partnership practice on many levels. Mary Immaculate College (MIC) worked in close partnership with the schools throughout the four years of the project. Within MIC, the Targeting Educational Disadvantage (TED) project, the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU), the Learner Support Unit (LSU), the Finance Department and the Research Office all collaborated to support and advise this initiative.

At the design phase of the FSCEP project a number of rural and urban schools were consulted about their interest and availability to be involved with the initiative. It was originally envisaged that the FSCEP project would work with seven schools, however funding limitations dictated that five was the maximum that the FSCEP project could realistically work with. Schools were approached, meetings were held with principals and presentations were made to entire staff groups. School staffs voted whether or not to commit to the FSCEP project and five schools self-selected. There were three urban schools that were based in Limerick City and are all part of the Primary Liaison with University Services (PLUS) network, an initiative within the TED project. All three schools were located in RAPID areas. The other two rural schools were based in west Clare and both were located within CLÁR areas.

It is important to note, at this stage, that in order to protect the anonymity of the participants and the confidentiality of the data shared throughout the research, the school titles administered in Section 4: The School Profile i.e. School A, School B etc., do not correspond with the research codes e.g. BT9 etc. bequeathed in Sections 5 and 6 to support the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data. Neither do these codes correspond with the codes used in the external evaluation.

PROJECT PERSONNEL AND ADMINISTRATION >>

In 2005 the FSCEP project employed a Partnership Development Coordinator whose remit was to work closely with the five schools and with the management personnel in MIC. Furthermore, the Partnership Development Coordinator undertook substantial research duties throughout the four-year period. This person remained with the project for the four year duration of the FSCEP project. During the first two years of the FSCEP project two Partnership Support Workers were employed to work on a part-time basis with the schools, one was based in west Clare and the other in Limerick city. Reduced funding during the final two years of the FSCEP project did not allow for the continuation of those roles, however, the schools were supported to engage facilitators on a programme-by-programme basis subject to the schools' successful application for funding.

This report is an example of partnership in action. We wish to acknowledge the contribution of John Galvin, Partnership Development Coordinator, who in collaboration with the FSCEP project management team, gathered and analysed the data, and acted as one of the authors of this report. We wish to acknowledge the contribution of Dr. Ann Higgins who wrote the literature review section and contributed to editing and writing this report and we also wish to acknowledge Karen Mahony, TED Coordinator, for her substantial contribution in writing and editing this report. We also wish to acknowledge the members of the FSCEP management committee who reviewed the research

documentation and made significant contributions; Ms. Yvonne Lane, PAUL Partnership, Dr. Caroline Healy, LSU, and the principals from the five participating schools (in alphabetical order) Christina Deely, Sheila Gavin, Patrick McInerney, Sr. Mary McMahon (former Principal), Frances Quaid and Marian Tobin.

Furthermore, we wish to acknowledge the support of Eucharia McCarthy, Director of the Curriculum Development Unit, Professor Claire Lyons, Developmental Psychologist and Head of Department of Learning, Society and Religious Education, Dr. Angela Canny, Department of Learning, Society and Religious Education, and Ruth Bourke, TED project who reviewed the report. We wish to acknowledge the work of the various members of the management teams over the duration of the FSCEP project. We wish to thank Caroline Considine, Úna Quigley and Rory McGann, members of the TED project who supported the FSCEP project at various stages. We wish to acknowledge Fiona O'Connor, also a member of the TED team for proofreading this report.

The research findings from this work were also disseminated through presentation of findings by Dr. Sandra Ryan and John Galvin at the 2006 BIACE at Queen's University, Belfast. Dr. Ryan also organised a 'Why Not Me Colloquium' in Mary Immaculate College in June 2007 at which presentations were made by Dr. Sandra Ryan and John Galvin, along with teachers, parents and children from the participating Limerick schools. This publication is available from the CDU of MIC.

FSCEP PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES >>

The original aims and objectives of the FSCEP project were:

1. To support schools (located in RAPID and CLÁR areas), families and communities to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours to work together in partnership to address the learning needs of their children;

2. To cohesively bring together the work of a number of sectors by forming a multi-agency partnership and promoting an effective and efficient use of expertise and resources;

3. To improve standards in schools by developing an effective system-wide project that will develop children's and parents' literacy and numeracy, abilities in the creative arts, sports skills and other social skills;

4. To develop an holistic and integrated systems-level approach in dealing with educational disadvantage that will inform changes in areas that interface with school processes and structures e.g. in teaching styles, cultural development, school organisation, curriculum development and other areas;

5. To enable schools and families in disadvantaged contexts to recognise their reciprocal influences on children's learning;

6. To provide opportunities and supports for school staff, pupils and families to meet in contexts that promote shared understanding of partnership;

7. To improve children's attendance and attainment in school;

8. To develop and disseminate a model of good practice along with the outcomes of the programme, in contexts and ways that will make them accessible to policy-makers, researchers, practitioners and ultimately communities, families and young people.

REPORT STRUCTURE >>

This document contains two separate reports: (i) an academic research report, written and edited by members of the FSCEP project team and management and (ii) an external evaluation report commissioned by the FSCEP project and executed by Dr. Marie Hainsworth. The current report i.e. the academic report, contains seven sections in total. The current section, section one, provides a brief overview of the FSCEP project, its origins and rationale, and the original aims and objectives of the project. Section two is a comprehensive review of relevant literature and policy developments, which provides a rationale for undertaking this work and focuses on partnership on the one hand and the building of social capital on the other. These strands of research are meshed throughout section two, as well as throughout the report to show the link between home-school-family-community relations and educational achievement.

The third section contains the methodological framework, within which the project was administered over its four year life-time. The systems employed for the handling and analysis of data are also contained within this section. Section four contains summary profiles of the five schools that participated in the FSCEP project, as well as a brief overview of the unique communities within which the participating schools operate. Sections five and six are presentations of the vast amount of data that was gathered over the four-year period (section five presents and analyses the quantitative data and section six introduces the reader to the richer qualitative data). The final section, section seven, draws the research together, providing a set of conclusions and recommendations for the future, as determined by the research findings. This academic report, as indicated above is followed by the external evaluators report. Both reports are supported by bibliographies.

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LITERATURE REVIEW
AUTHOR: DR. ANN HIGGINS >>

AUTHOR: DR. ANN HIGGINS >>

INTRODUCTION >>

The objectives of the education system which the Department of Education and Science (DES) identify, speak firstly to the aspiration that individuals will reach their 'full potential and live fulfilled lives' and secondly that they will be able to contribute to 'Ireland's social and economic development' (2005:15). Our education system therefore is charged with the interrelated roles of supporting the individual and, by association, enabling that person to contribute to Irish society.

The driving force behind the FSCEP project is the belief that all children have the right to achieve their full potential. Associated literature highlights the central role that the relationship between the family, school and community plays in enabling all children to reach that goal. Consequently, the FSCEP project set out to nurture effective partnership relationships as a strategic mechanism by which the key stakeholders in the child's life, namely, their parents, teachers and members of their communities, could forge effective partnerships to support and enable children's learning.

EDUCATION >>

> Education matters because it is intrinsically valuable, allowing children and young people to develop intellectually, socially, and morally. It also matters because, in Ireland, as in many other countries, education is a powerful predictor of adult life chances. Inequality in educational outcomes means that some groups do not reach their potential and experience restricted opportunities across several aspects of their lives.
>
> *(Smyth and McCoy, 2009: 1).*

There is a deeply political dimension to understanding the function of education, and consequently the types of educational provision that the State should provide. Education is not a stand-alone entity. It is intrinsically linked to how we view the needs and rights of the individual and the society in which he or she grows and develops. Indeed, Conaty's contention, cited in the DES publication, *'The Home School Community Liaison Scheme in Ireland, From Vision to Best Practice'* is that 'education is not something centered in the home or the school, but rather is to be seen as an ellipse in which there are two foci, the home and the school. This ellipse itself remains centered in the community' (2006: 5). Nor is education neutral, since 'Through educating people we help to make them what they are' (Tormey and Haran, 2003: 33). According to Eisler, educational provision in the present has implications for the society we wish to create in the future:

> **What will the world be like for our children and grandchildren? The answer largely depends on our vision for education and our commitment to putting our vision into action (Eisler, 2009: 134).**

Higgins also explores the role of education, and proposes it can be understood at 'individual, family and societal levels' (2008: 59), and with reference to Greene, recognises the on-going educational debate between the role of education in enabling 'children to reach their human potential' (ibid: 58) and preparing them to 'meet national, economic and technical needs' (Greene, 1995: 9). According to Wescott Dodd and Konzal, the school is 'faced with the challenges of preparing the young to live in a future we cannot predict with any certainly but one: Change will be constant' (Wescott Dodd and Konzal, 2002: 3). Drudy and Lynch acknowledge that the school plays its part in the 'socialisation of the young and the transmission of culture' (Drudy and Lynch, 1993: 26). These authors also highlight the powerful political role played by education in terms of social mobility and control. This is done through the selection process in which individuals are selected 'for different types of occupation through its assessment and certification. In this way it [education] not only allocates people to different positions within the economic system but also controls the levels of social mobility' (ibid: 26).

Powell proposes an ecological dimension to the role of the school, and posits that the school has a function of 'strengthening the family's child-rearing

competence' (Powell, 1991: 308). Furthermore, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) recognises the 'transformational potential which the school holds to contribute to a more equal and just society' (Higgins, 2008: 59), stating that '… education holds within it the potential to make a significant contribution towards the transformation of society …' (INTO, 1994: iv). Kellaghan et al. recognise the political brief of education if 'equality of participation or achievement is to be attained' (Kelleghan at al., 1995: 2). Furthermore, Sylva recognises 'the latent transformational potential of education and believes that schools have the capacity to prevent educational disadvantage by developing appropriate skills and attitudes in children' (Sylva, 2000: 60). They can achieve this by facilitating children to 'develop the skills and attitudes which propel them to their eventual life destinations' (Sylva, 2000: 121).

Finally, Greene's 'perspectives framework', namely the choice to 'see big or see small' provides us with a way of looking at education. Basically, according to Greene, in choosing to see small 'we choose to see from a detached viewpoint, to watch behaviours from the perspective of a system, to be concerned with trends and tendencies rather than the intentionality and concreteness of everyday life' (Greene, 1995: 10). In seeing big we choose not to view 'other human beings as mere objects or chess pieces and view them in their integrity and particularity instead' (Greene, 1995: 10). At a practical level, seeing big brings the teacher close to the people she/he works with and creates the context in which empathy and creativity can flourish. This echoes strongly with Freire's vision that 'our relationships with the learners demands that we respect them and demands equally that we be aware of the concrete conditions of their world, the conditions that shape them' (Freire, 2005: 102).

Any discussion on education brings with it a complex array of questions about the appropriate type of educational provision, the role of education, its hidden transformational potential, the political dimension, the resourcing of education, the link between educational provision and a just society. All these are pertinent questions. All are complex. In this literature review we specifically look at how educational partnership between stakeholders at local level can facilitate and nurture children's

learning. We provide a rationale for adopting this approach and recognise the barriers as well as the benefits to working in this way. In adopting a partnership approach to education we are indeed recognising the latent potential of parents and community members to become potent and powerful agents in all children's learning. Svi Shapiro tells us that 'education is after all that sphere where reason, reflection, imagination, and the capacity to act with thoughtfulness and creativity are stirred and nurtured' (Svi Shapiro, 2009: 12).

Ultimately in choosing to work in partnership we are choosing to see children in context, to work for a more equal society through enhanced educational outcomes, and to 'see big'. Educators, be they parents, teachers, or community members take the brave step to be in that relationship. Ultimately we see big and we think big!

DEFINITION OF PARTNERSHIP >>

The DES set up the HSCL scheme in 1990 and adopted Pugh and De'Ath's definition of partnership as its guiding philosophy. Pugh and De'Ath define partnership as a working relationship 'characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect, and the willingness to negotiate ... a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability' (Pugh and De'Ath, 1989: 68). This definition was also adopted by the FSCEP project. According to Higgins (2008) there are a number of congruent definitions of partnership (Kellaghan et al., 1993; Vincent, 1996; Lareau, 2000) 'with a number of core attributes which resonate across the literature' (Higgins, 2008: 92). 'These include attention to power relations, respect, sharing of information, and finally empathetic practice' (ibid: 92).

RATIONALE FOR WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP >>

Policy Context

> We know (too) that many of our people do not reach their full potential in our education system and, as a result,

**cannot benefit from full participation
in our society and economy**

(Hanafin, 2005: 3)

Minister Mary Hanafin, Minister for Education and Science, Ireland (September 2004 - May 2008), outlines the reality that not all children reach their potential within our educational system. This results in a loss to the individual and to the society in which he or she is growing and developing. The solutions, like the factors that create this inequality, are complex, multi-layered and integrated.

The rationale for working in partnership to achieve equality of educational outcomes within a context of social and economic disadvantage has been embedded within Irish educational policy for almost two decades. The DES has put a number of programmes and initiatives in place to address imbalance, culminating with the publication of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative in 2005. The purpose of this action plan was 'to identify and assist those children and young people most in need of support under the measures it will introduce' (DES, 2005: 16). Schools being supported by the DEIS programme are categorised into DEIS Band 1 and DEIS Band 2, depending on the levels of disadvantage being experienced. It was envisaged that the plan would 'strengthen supports for parental and family involvement and for teachers, school, and communities' (DES, 2005: 16). Fundamentally, DEIS recognised the complexity of addressing the barriers to equality of educational outcomes for children:

> **Many of the barriers to educational progress of young children and young people are caused by issues outside the educational system. These barriers can be financial, family and health related, social/communal, cultural and geographic or a combination of any of these. The challenges for the educational system is to work, in partnership with others, to overcome as many of these barriers as possible in a way that is learner-centered, systematic and effective in terms of educational outcomes**
>
> **(DES, 2005: 16)**

As early as 1991, the DES named working in partnership as 'an essential strategy of educational policy and practice', stating, 'partnership for parents in education is a stated policy aim of the Government' (DES, 24/91:1). Subsequently, the DES publication, *Charting our Education Future, White Paper on Education (1993)* stated that:

> **Relationships between the school and the home are of fundamental importance and this has been increasingly stressed in Irish educational debate. There is continuing evidence of a desire on the part of parents and teachers to develop and foster constructive co-operation. As part of national education policy it is essential, therefore, to adopt a range of measures aimed at fostering active parental partnership in schools.**
>
> **(DES, 1995: 139)**

In 2006, Hanafin again stated the benefits of working in partnership 'we know that the development of strong links between the home and the community will help foster higher goals and expectations and encourage achievement' (Hanafin, 2006: 1). In 2000, the National Children's Strategy listed partnership as one of the operational principles through which the strategy would be rolled out, stating that:

> **Measures should be taken in partnership within and between relevant players be it the State, the voluntary/community sector and families; services for children should be delivered in a co-ordinated, coherent and effective manner through integrated needs analysis, policy planning and service delivery.**
>
> **(DH&C, 2000: 10)**

Furthermore, the Primary branch of the National Parents' Council (NPC) advocate partnership practice stating that 'partnership between home and school is important because with positive and active partnership the child gets the best that primary education can offer' (NPC, 2004: 4). They list the benefits to working in partnership thus:

- We know from research that children do better, behave better and are happier at school where parents and teachers work closely together and when parents are able to give their children support at home;

- Teachers can do a better job where they are supported by and working closely with parents;

- Parents can do a better job when they have the support of other parents;

- All parents together play their part in planning for the best possible education for children in their school.

(NPC, 2004: 4).

Finally, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation is unequivocal in their belief that the school must:

> … ensure that parents have the opportunity to learn about and become familiar with how and what their children learn in class. They need to know that their active participation is both welcome and needed and that it can make a significant contribution to their children's welfare (INTO, 1994: 99).

Listening to the voice of the child is central to the development of effective policy and practice, and has influenced Irish child-related social policy throughout the 1990s. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12 states that:

> States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (United Nations, 1989: Article 12).

The National Children's Office (NCO) was established in 2001 under the auspices of the Department of Health and Children (DH&C). The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) was established in 2005. It is managed by the DH&C and incorporates aspects of the DES, Department of Social and Family Affairs (DS&FA) and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR). Following the establishment of the OMCYA, the administration of the NCO and therefore responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the National Children's Strategy (DH&C, 2000) was assigned to that office. The National Children's Strategy envisages:

> 'An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential. (DH&C, 2000: 4)

The three national goals of the ten year strategy are:

- Goal 1 - Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

- Goal 2 - Children's lives will be better understood; their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services.

- Goal 3 - Children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development (DH&C, 2000: 11).

Working in partnership as a means to promote equality of educational outcomes is therefore embedded within Government policy through the DES, the DH&C, the NPC (Primary branch), and the INTO Policy. However, it is also embedded within international policy through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989).

Educational Disadvantage

While the principles of working in partnership can be embraced as an effective mechanism to support

children's learning in a global sense, it has particular resonance within contexts where children experience educational disadvantage. Educational disadvantage is defined by the 1998 Education Act as 'the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools' (DES 1998: 32). This definition does not locate the causes of educational disadvantage within the individual, but rather within the social and economic structures within which that individual grows and develops. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, described later, this is understood as the Exosystem.

In her foreword to the DEIS strategy, Hanafin posits that 'educational disadvantage is complex and multi-faceted and that we need to design our response accordingly' (Hanafin 2005: 3). The DES publication *Ready to Learn, White Paper on Early Childhood Education*, attests to the complex causes of educational disadvantage which include 'financial hardship, parental unemployment, low levels of parental (particularly maternal) education, location and family size' (DES, 1999: 97).

The language around educational disadvantage is evolving, as is our understanding of it. Minister Mary Hanafin, Minister for Education and Science, Ireland (September 2004 - May 2008), in the foreword to *DEIS, an Action Plan for Educational Inclusion* in 2005 spoke of actions for 'educational inclusion' (DES, 2005: 1), thus creating a shift of emphasis in the language of negativity which traditionally surrounded schools and people living and working in educational disadvantaged contexts. Downes and Gilligan, challenge the use of terminology which might stigmatise people and ask 'whether the very term 'educational disadvantage' is still an appropriate metaphor for what we aspire to create, namely, a life-long organic education system that encourages everyone in our

society to achieve their full potential' (Downes and Gilligan, 2007: 464). Spring draws attention to the impact of the deficit language of educational disadvantage (Spring, 2007: 4). She draws on the action plan produced by the 2002 Forum on Primary Education, *Primary Education: Ending Disadvantage* (Gilligan, 2003) to highlight the embedded issues including 'the absence of a broadly agreed definition, the relative position of the term, the multi-layered effect of educational disadvantage on the individual and the negative implications of applying this deficit understanding to educational disadvantage' (Spring, 2007: 4). Gilligan believes that our poor understanding of educational disadvantage 'has 'brought little change over the years to the levels of disadvantage experienced by specific communities, social classes and social groupings' (Gilligan, 2002: 143).

Tormey rejects the traditional medical model, which views educational disadvantage 'as a disease' which resides in the individual, he argues that educational disadvantage is brought about by 'a series of active processes' (Tormey, 1999: 29). Tormey identifies discontinuity between the home and school environments as one of the processes by which children are disadvantaged (ibid: 42).

Discontinuity between home and school is identified as one of the foundation stones of educational disadvantage (Kellaghan et al., 1993; Tormey, 1999; Cregan, 2007). McAllister Swap believes that children may be systematically disadvantaged by a school system where 'children with backgrounds that are racially, linguistically, or culturally different from their teachers' may experience discontinuity in values between home and school or may lose self–esteem as they see little of their own history and culture represented and taught in the curriculum' (McAllister Swap, 1993: 16). This discontinuity is not without a price, as 'the discontinuity of worlds and lack of acknowledgement of the child's lived experiences

Literature Review |

beyond the school can and does contribute to the child's disenchantment with school and failure to succeed within the educational system' (Higgins, 2008: 38). For example, in *Whiddin to the Gauras,* a research study of the Irish Traveller community by Traveller researchers, the discontinuity of experience for children between their home and school lives emerged as a key theme within the research findings, 'the school world did not appear to be connected with the Traveller child's world' (Gormally, 2005: 125).

Poor educational attainment has life-long inter-generational implications. According to Higgins, 'accredited learning acts as a gateway to employment and further educational opportunities' (Higgins, 2008: C-19). Furthermore, Nolan et al. contend that 'the education system in the absence of counter measures, can reproduce inequalities and poverty. The education system has a key role to play in providing a route out of poverty' (Nolan et al., 1998: xxi). Basically, the level of educational attainment has a close relationship to employment opportunities, and there is a significant link between job opportunities and income. Kellaghan et al. citing several sources, contend that:

> **There is considerable evidence to support the view that students who leave school having taken no public examination or having obtained poor results on a junior cycle examination are poorly placed in the labour force (Kelleghan et al., 1995: 44).**

Educational attainment or the lack of it has inter-generational implications; it not only impacts directly on the person concerned but also on their broader family unit and the community. Kellaghan et al., citing Bourdieu and Passeron, posit that:

> **Levels of parental education would seem to be particularly relevant to children's school performance since it can be argued that it is the best socio-economic indicator of the cultural capital that a family can provide for children (Kellaghan et al., 1995: 34).**

In Daly and Leonard's study parents reflected on their own early school leaving and poor educational attainment, and linked educational attainment to greater employability and life satisfaction: 'Parents wanted their children to succeed in terms of gaining a good education and a good job' (Daly and Leonard, 2002: 114). Smyth and McCoy in their recent Irish study found that 'education is highly predictive of individual life-chances in Ireland and a Leaving Certificate qualification has become the 'minimum' to secure access to further education/training and high quality employment' (Smyth and McCoy, 2009: 2). Again within an Irish context, Kellaghan et al. link the family's lack of economic resources to the child's ability to 'benefit fully from educational provision' (Kellaghan et al., 1995: 30). Furthermore, the OECD publication *'Parents as Partners in Schooling'* highlights the consequences of economic strain, focusing on the inter-generational dimension of low attainment, and its impact on the capacity of parents to fulfil their supportive role and ultimately their constitutional brief:

> **Poverty and unemployment make the parents' task more difficult - and economic pressures may still be intense when parents are employed. Low wages or fear of losing a job may lead to overwork – and when both parents are working, they may be too tired to support their children emotionally or educationally (OECD, 1997: 25).**

Living in poverty impacts on the quality of a person's life and their lifelong prospects (Rabrenovic, 1995; Seaman et al., 2005). According to Olsen and Fuller 'poverty dims the future and creates stress and anxiety in the present. It limits opportunities and prospects' (Olsen and Fuller, 2003: 277). Weinger also highlights the long-term effects of poverty. She contends that 'childhood poverty also may lead to lower wages and productivity during adulthood by subtly lowering an individual's basic skills, and ability to learn on the job …' (Weinger, 1998: 321).

Daly and Leonard, in their study on the effects of poverty, identified three possible risks faced by children living in poverty in Ireland. Firstly the risk of 'exclusion from the social world of their

peers' (Daly and Leonard, 2002: 202), secondly the risk of either 'leaving school early or not achieving their full potential' (ibid: 202), and finally the risk of 'growing up in a harsh environment and of turning to drugs, joy-riding and, additionally for girls, (early) lone motherhood' (ibid: 202). Boldt's research linked poverty to early school leaving, citing examples of children leaving the school system to go on 'courses' which offer them an allowance' (Boldt, 1994: 23). Boldt found that such an allowance was used to 'buy jeans and runners and go to the discos', and the young people's decision to leave school is closely related to the economic status of their families who are often 'in debt and can barely afford to pay for uniforms and books' (ibid: 23). Le Compte and Dworkin found that 'researchers have long identified the relationship between the degree of poverty experienced by children and their tendency to drop out of school' (Le Compte and Dworkin, 1991: 60).

TOWARDS AN ECOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION >>

The FSCEP project recognised that a child grows and develops within and across the three ecologies of their home, school and communities.

Bronfenbrenner sees the ecological environment akin to nested structures, each inside the next 'like a set of Russian dolls' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 3). These three environments were conceptualised by Bronfenbrenner as the Microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 22). The FSCEP project also recognised that the relationship between these ecologies plays an important part in the child's development. This inter-relationship is conceptualised by Bronfenbrenner as the Mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 25). This was manifested within the FSCEP project by supporting the development of effective partnership practice across ecologies. There are three further systems within Bronfenbrenner's model. The Exosystem, which refers to 'one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 25). This layer can be conceptualised as an understanding of how the education, housing and social welfare systems impact on people's lives (Higgins, 2008: 25). The Macrosystem draws attention to differences in culture, and the Chronosystem recognises the dimension of time, both at a structural and individual level.

The child therefore grows and learns within and across environments, cultures and structures, all of which are located within a particular timeframe. The factors, therefore, which interact to enable the child's learning are complex. In fact each child has a unique set of home, school and community experiences, since every home, school and community is different. Each child brings a unique set of strengths and challenges to the learning environment. The aim of the FSCEP project was to maximise the factors within and across the ecologies of home, school and community, which would bring added value to the child's learning.

There is a very strong rationale for adopting a partnership approach as a mechanism to enhance educational achievement. According to Henderson and Berla 'the evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life' (Henderson and Berla, 1994: 1). Davies identifies a transformational component to educational partnership and contends that our two tiered society, 'one affluent, generally well-educated, and optimistic; the other poor,

increasingly isolated, badly educated, and despairing' (Davies, 1993b: 205) can be transformed through educational attainment, facilitated through partnership. Indeed he advocates partnership practice since:

> **The schools obviously can't address the problem alone; neither can low income and minority families. Schools and families need each other, and they need other community resources and support. New forms of family, school, and community partnerships are needed (Davies, 1993b: 205).**

The potential for enhanced achievement through partnership is recognised by the OECD publication, *'Parents as Partners in Schooling'* (OECD, 1997)*,* which advocates collaboration between key stakeholders stating that, 'Children, parents, teachers and the community can all achieve more if they co-operate with each other' (OECD, 1997: 57). This report highlights the long-term and systematic benefits of working in partnership '… if the young are to be educated to play their full role in society, and if their parents are to be given a chance to continue learning, partnership is the only way forward' (OECD, 1997: 57). The benefits of working in partnership extend beyond the immediate results of positive relationships, making a strategic lifelong difference to young people playing their full role in society and adults embracing opportunities for lifelong learning.

In his ecological framework Bronfenbrenner creates a strategic link between the 'nature of ties between the school and the home' and academic outcomes for the child, noting that 'a child's ability to learn to read in the primary grades may depend no less on how he is taught than on the existence and nature of ties between the school and the home' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 3). Indeed, according to Bronfenbrenner, the efficacy of individual settings can be augmented or depleted by the nature of communication between settings:

> **The capacity of a setting such as the home, school, or workplace – to function effectively as a context for development is seen to depend on the existence and nature of social interconnections between setting,**

> **including joint participation, communication, and the existence of information in each setting about the other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 5).**

Henry advocates collaborative practice since she believes 'Education has become inbred and inward looking to the extent that educators talk mostly to other educators' (Henry, 1996: 134). According to Higgins 'the three sites of home, school, and community are intrinsically connected, and positive or negative factors impacting on any one site has a knock on effect within the other sites. Their connectivity is a given, the quality of their relationship is not' (Higgins, 2008: 95). As Epstein succinctly states, 'all the years that children attend school, they also attend home' (Epstein, 1990: 99). Furthermore, the INTO advocates a collaborative approach between parents and schools in order to enhance achievement, and forewarns teachers of the dangers of working in isolation:

> **Should teachers and schools fail to involve parents in the education of their children they risk creating the impression that schools alone determine educational success or failure and will have to accept blame for educational failure when in reality many of the reasons for such failure lie beyond the responsibility and influence of the school (INTO, 1997: 111).**

Lareau, in her work in the American context, compared the 'separation between the family life and educational institutions' of the working class home with the 'interconnectedness between the family life and educational institutions' of the middle class homes (Lareau, 2000: 169). She found a distinct difference in how parents from within different social classes interacted with the school. She found that working class parents 'viewed education as something that took place in school, under the supervision of the teacher', and therefore 'trusted the school to educate their children' (ibid: 169). In contrast, upper middle class parents 'actively supervised, supplemented, and intervened in their children's schooling' (ibid: 169). This offers a very interesting insight into the complexities of home/school relationships. Parents may view the teachers as professionals and feel they have little to

offer while teachers may be concerned with the lack of parental involvement, mistakenly assuming lack of interest. This offers some insight into the complexity of developing educational partnerships. Indeed, according to Ryan and Galvin, 'partnership might best be understood as a 'process', an ongoing development, a new field of thought that will continue to grow if researchers ask new and demanding questions' (Ryan and Galvin, 2007: 18).

BENEFITS OF WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP >>

Thus far we have presented a general rationale for working in partnership. We have made the case that when the key stakeholders in the child's life work together they have the potential to greatly enable and facilitate positive learning outcomes for the child. Higgins' research into a school-based community learning project, which adopted a partnership approach to learning, found that through the process of engaging with learners, teachers and children the quality of all participant's lives was transformed. Learners 'built solidarity and resilience and formed networks of friends' (Higgins, 2008: 262). Furthermore, the skill, knowledge, and experiences they developed impacted on their lives and on the lives of their families' (ibid: 262). Children in this school-based community learning project in which parents and tutors worked collaboratively spoke of feeling safe, developing self-esteem and a sense of belonging (ibid: 277). Teachers working in the school felt appreciated by parents and expressed very high job satisfaction (ibid: 295).

Apart from the direct benefit to the child there are also specific benefits to be gained by the home,

school and community. Epstein contends that the benefits of working in partnership extend to all three sites, with the learner as key beneficiary. For the school, working in partnership can mean an improvement in 'school programs and school climate', for the families, it can 'increase parents skills and leadership', and from a community perspective it can 'connect people' (Epstein, 2001: 403). Indeed Haynes and Ben-Avie contend that parental involvement in schools positively affects teachers, parents, and school practices, as well as community dynamics (Haynes and Ben-Avie, 1996: 45).

Benefits to Schools:
Haynes and Ben-Avie specifically state that when parents become more involved in the school it increases the staff's knowledge base of the 'socio cultural context of the communities served by the school' (Haynes and Ben-Avie, 1996: 45). Accordingly, this informs practice and enables the teacher to adapt her/his teaching approaches and styles to fit the child's needs more effectively. Indeed, Wescott Dodd and Konzal posit that 'the more educators know about children's families, the more effectively they will be able to teach them at school' (Wescott Dodd and Konzal, 2002: 27). Haynes and Ben-Avie identify the enhanced capacity of the school to sustain educational change through maintaining the commitment and involvement of parents. The school transforms from a traditional site of the education of the young to a 'potent force in the community' (Haynes and Ben-Avie, 1996: 46). According to Henry, schools have a lot to gain from involvement with their communities. She believes that 'schools do not exist in isolation from the larger society and that schooling can be revitalised with help from the community' (Henry, 1996: 15).

Higgins problematizes the role of the teacher to include a review of how he/she works within the school, as well as how he/she relates to the home and community:

> I would like to see the teacher as a resource person, an enabler, a facilitator of learning … A teacher needs to know the community in which he or she is operating, needs to be aware of how unemployment affects people, of how illness in the

family affects the child, of how family strife might affect the child (Higgins, 1999: 42).

Potential school outcomes from working in partnership include a renewed energy injected into school processes through parental involvement. If parents become empowered through active involvement and if schools can shed their inward looking stance, this new energy and commitment may be translated into collaborative activity reaching out into the community (Higgins, 2008: 96). However, this involves a radical reappraisal and resourcing within school and community sites if the potential developments with their ensuing outcomes are to be realised.

Wescott Dodd and Konzal outline the positive outcomes when 'schools take seriously the importance of building on-going two way communication with parents and other community members' (Wescott Dodd and Konzal, 2002: 40). They believe that because of the 'foundation of trust and respect that has been developed' (ibid: 40) the school will enjoy greater co-operation from parents when problems arise and furthermore will enjoy enhanced support in implementing new programmes.

Benefits to Home

Parental outcomes to working in partnership with the school include a personal dimension as potential adult learners, as engagement with the educational system may 'motivate(d) (them) to further their own education' (Haynes and Ben-Avie, 1996: 45). Furthermore, parents may develop skills to enable them to support their children's learning. The DES publication *Ready to Learn, White paper on Early Childhood Education* acknowledged the benefits parents can gain from being involved with their children's early childhood education, stating that 'Parents involved in pilot early education programmes have reported improved self-confidence and better relationships with their children' (DES, 1999: 112). According to Haynes and Ben-Avie, positive experiences of involvement for parents can be transformative, in that it may enable them to shed negative experiences and see the school as 'a bastion of hope for their children and for themselves' (Haynes and Ben-Avie, 1996: 45). Fundamentally, efforts that parents and teachers make to 'understand and respect each

other' help the child 'feel comfortable with who they are' and support them to 'reconcile their experiences at home and at school' (Henderson and Berla, 1994: 11).

Benefits to Community

Working in partnership in order to nurture positive educational outcomes may not only benefit individual learning outcomes, the school and the home contexts, but can also improve the quality of life and cohesiveness within the community. As Conaty reminds us the school and home are located within the community (Conaty, 2006). There are potentially very great benefits to the community of having young people positively engaged in learning through partnership. Communities with children who have succeeded in the education system provide very positive role models for upcoming learners. Communities where different stakeholders are engaged in supporting each other to support the children provide a web of social supports, which enrich the quality of life of the community.

According to Higgins 'young people growing and learning in a community with high rates of school drop-out and with negative role models do not as easily receive that positive affirmation within the community' (Higgins, 2008: 79). The young people who grow up in communities without this affirmation experience a different type of socialisation, and 'one where the home and school have to work hard to counteract community based negative influences' (ibid: 79). Comer highlights the implications of difficult neighbourhoods stating that child development is hampered when 'neighbourhood and peer conditions are troublesome' (Comer, 1980: 35). He also acknowledges the destructive impact of peer and neighbourhood influences which can counteract 'good child rearing experiences and positive early school experiences' (ibid: 35), leading to poor school performance. Disturbingly, communities where the young leave school early to take up part time or full time low paid employment, are also inhibitors of retention within the educational system, thus perpetuating the cycle of educational disadvantage and poor attainment (Higgins, 2008: 79).

However, while communities have the capacity to negatively impact on learning they also have the potential to enrich children's learning. McAllister

Swap, for example, acknowledges the potential of community contexts to nurture children's intellectual, social, and physical growth.

> Cultural institutions such as museums or theatres, recreation centres, after-school programmes, and enrichment programs can add important dimensions to youngsters' intellectual, social, and physical growth (McAllister Swap, 1993: 118).

SOCIAL CAPITAL >>

Defining Social Capital

One of the major benefits of working in partnership is the potential for the development of social capital. The prevalence of social capital has implications at an individual and at a community level. Social capital has been defined as 'glue that holds a community together' (Potapchuk et al., 1997: 130) or as a form of 'wealth that can be enjoyed by all' (Mac Gillivary and Walker, 2000: 199). There are a number of competing definitions. Firstly, Bourdieu defines social capital as the 'aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network, of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition - or in other words, to membership of a group' (Bourdieu, 1986: 248). Secondly, Coleman defines social capital 'by its function', understood as a 'variety of entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors - whether persons or corporate actors - within a structure' (Coleman, 1988: S98). Thirdly, 'Putnam emphasises the role social capital plays in supporting a stable society' (Higgins, 2008: 317). Putnam defines social capital in relation to 'social organisation such as network, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (Putnam, 1995b: 67). Basically social capital refers to 'our relations with one another' (Putnam, 1995a: 665). In Warren et al.'s concise definition, social capital is understood as 'the set of resources that inhere in relationships of trust and cooperation between people' (Warren et al., 2001: 1). Finally, Cohen

defined social capital in terms of 'networks, trust, norms, and interactions in which people engage daily to both survive and become enriched' (Cohen, 2001: 267). Higgins recognises that while 'competing definitions of social capital emphasis particular aspects of the social capital construct, they also exhibit some cohesion' (Higgins, 2008: 318). Fundamentally, 'they acknowledge the central role of relationships, networking, trust, empowerment and mobilisation of resources as key features of social capital' (ibid: 318).

Networks – A Core Component of Social Capital

Now that there is some consensus on what it is, the next challenge is to gain an understanding of how it is used. According to Briggs, social capital 'works at various levels: family, neighbourhood, city and society' (Briggs, 1997: 2). Lappe and du Bois contend that 'humans are clearly social creatures who thrive best in rich associated networks' (Lappe and du Bois, 1997: 2). He believes that social capital can be used for two purposes, namely to 'get by' and to 'get ahead' (ibid: 2). Briggs says that we draw on social capital 'when we get others, whether acquaintances, friends, or kin, to help us solve problems, seize opportunities, and accomplish other aims that matter to us' (Briggs, 1998: 178).

Social networks form a very important component of social capital. Social capital is 'important not only for finding jobs, but also for most other things people want in life - physical safety, good health, companionship, social esteem' (de Graff and Flap, 1988: 453). The literature on social capital highlights positive outcomes in the areas of health and education and also in the regeneration of neighbourhoods (Stall and Stoecker, 1998; Potapchuk et al., 1997; Field, 1999 & 2003). Social capital can also provide 'counter-weight to economic and social disadvantage' (Field, 2003: 47).

As previously stated networks and trust are core components of social capital. In her work, which examined the impact of an inter-generational partnership educational intervention in Limerick city, Higgins found that social capital, activated through trust and networks, had the capacity to create strong neighbourhood cohesion (2008). The literature bears out these findings as, 'local communities high in social capital are better able to realize common values and maintain the social

controls that foster public safety' (Sampson, 2001: 95). Indeed, Temkin and Rohe concluded that 'social capital plays an important role in neighbourhood dynamics' (Temkin and Rohe, 1998: 84). MacBeath et al. noted the very practical outcomes of high quality networks namely 'those with extensive networks are more likely not only to be housed, healthy, hired and happier but also more willing and able to access and find success within the educational system' (MacBeath et al., 2007: 43). Finally, according to Leyden, 'empirical linkages have been found among social capital, the proper functioning of democracy, the prevention of crime, and enhanced economic development' (Leyden, 2003: 1546). Warren et al. capture the very precious nature of social capital and define it as 'a collective asset, a feature of communities rather than the property of an individual' (Warren et al., 2001: 1).

Trust – A Core Component of Social Capital

Trust is a core component of social capital generation and indeed maintenance (Cohen, 2001; Covey, 1992; Wescott Dodd and Konzal, 2002; MacBeath et al., 2007; Putnam, 1995a and 1995b; Warren et al., 2001). Both the development and maintenance of social capital and the development and maintenance of effective partnership practice rely heavily on the development of trusting relationships. Higgins' 2008 study found that 'trusting relationships had a number of dimensions' (Higgins, 2008: 344). She found that the components in the development of trust among stakeholders in the community education project which she studied included time, empathy, respect, a growth of solidarity, an acknowledgement of life stories and aspirations and also had a 'reciprocal quality' (ibid: 344). Indeed, according to Covey 'Trust - or the lack of it - is at the root of success or failure in relationships, and in the bottom-line

results of business, industry, education, and government' (Covey, 1992: 31).

Trust has also been found to be a core component of successful educational change. Bryk and Schneider, in their Chicago based study explored the relationship between the nature of social exchanges and the capacity of the school to affect change. They found that 'the nature of these social exchanges and the local cultural features that shape them, condition a school's capacity to improve' (Bryk and Schneider, 2002: 5). Critically, they found that 'a broad base of trust across the school community lubricates much of the day to day functioning and is a critical resource as local leaders embark on ambitious improvement plans' (ibid: 5). Significantly, they maintained that trust is a core component of an educational change process.

The existence of trust cannot be taken for granted. Like partnership, it is a precious component and needs time and energy to nurture and maintain. Indeed, distrust can be harnessed through negative experiences with people and with institutions. Bryk and Schneider for example contend that 'many of the social interactions that poor families have with local schools and other public institutions' are characterised by distrust as a consequence of policy and societal changes (Bryk and Schneider, 2002: 6).

Building Social Capital

'Social capital is developed when an institution metamorphoses into a 'community', or a neighbourhood moves from being a collection of individuals and embraces a collective identity, a community' (Higgins, 2008: 324).

Within the educational context 'schools develop social capital by becoming caring communities'

(Sergiovanni, 1998: 38). Social capital must be actively built and indeed maintained. Just like partnership relationships it is a volatile entity. Social capital 'comes about through changes in the relations among persons that facilitate action' (Coleman, 1988: S100).

The development of social capital requires a significant investment of time. The time-pressures within modern families and communities militates against the generation of social capital, with consequent devastating outcomes (Leyden, 2003; Putnam, 1995a; Halpern, 2005).

Education has the potential to either 'construct or destruct social capital resources' both within the school itself and within the community in which it is located (Higgins, 2008: 327). Halpern highlights the special relationship education has with social capital (Halpern, 2005: 143), and cautions educators to be cognisant of this since 'deficits in social capital may play a role in educational underperformance of many disadvantaged young people' (ibid: 151). Stanton-Salazar highlights the latent potential of the school to build social capital among its youth, by providing a 'facilitating institutional context' in which youth can 'get to know and learn to trust one another' (Stanton-Salazar, 2005: 412). Noguera, in turn, highlights the special position school has for poor children, for whom 'urban schools are increasingly the most reliable source of stability and social support' (Noguera, 2001: 197).

The capacity of the school to contribute to the development of social capital is linked to how the school operates. In 'schools where academic failure is high and low achievement is accepted as the norm and schools that isolate themselves from the neighbourhoods they serve because they perceive the residents as 'threatening' tend to undermine the social capital of the community' (Noguera, 2001: 193). Conversely schools that choose to work in partnership and build positive working relationships make commitments to building the capacity of the educational community to contribute to positive learning outcomes. There are very serious consequences to negative relationships, and Noguera contends that if the connections are 'weak or characterised by fear and distrust it is more likely that the school will serve as a source of negative social capital' (ibid: 193). Ultimately the

school can act as a formative agent, and 'when schools have formed a genuine partnership based on respect and a shared sense of responsibility, positive forms of social capital can be generated' (ibid: 193). Noguera concludes that within an urban context the:

> … goal must be to transform urban schools into sources of social stability and support for families and children by developing their potential to serve as sources of intra-community integration and to provide resources for extra-community linkages' (ibid: 197).

BARRIERS TO EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP >>

While the evidence firmly highlights the transformative impact of educational partnership the development of effective educational partnership relationships is not straightforward nor easily achieved. Indeed, 'partnerships of any kind are complex' (Pugh and De' Ath, 1989: 67). There are a number of barriers to the development of effective educational partnerships located across schools, homes, and communities and beyond these ecologies within the national and international educational, social, political, and religious systems in which a child grows and develops.

For the purpose of this report we will specifically draw on the literature to highlight the potential barriers to the development of educational partnerships that lie within the three ecologies of home, school and community. However, we acknowledge the complex nature of this phenomenon. For example, while the individual ethos and teacher belief system is particular to any school, and may either nurture or impede the development of partnership practice, how the school and teachers evolved their belief systems and ethos is nevertheless connected to broader system of educational policies and traditions that have already been highlighted with reference to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model.

School-Based Barriers to Working in Partnership

Schools are not all the same! They differ in terms of size, location, intake of pupils, pupil and teacher gender, pupil-teacher ratio, cultural diversity of teachers and pupils, resources, location, history, academic outcomes, history of working with parents and community, teacher skills, aspirations and their experiences of building educational partnerships with homes and communities. Therefore it is a complex undertaking to try to develop an understanding of the factors within schools that either inhibit or nurture partnership practice.

According to the literature, barriers to effective partnership practice within an individual school may be manifest through how the school operates as well as through the negative belief systems and practices of teachers. It is important to remember that schools hold the balance of power and indeed responsibility in relation to the development of partnership relationships. While an individual parent may engage with a school on behalf of their own child, the school has the potential to nurture engagement of parents on a broader scale. It is the school that is ultimately the gatekeeper, it is the school that chooses whether to 'open the doors' to parents and the wider community or not. Indeed, according to Higgins, 'Schools have the potential to make a profound and lasting difference to the lives of the children in their care, both directly in their work with the children and indirectly by supporting the families to support their children' (Higgins, 2008: 60).

The traditional school system, which we have inherited, does not easily lend itself to the development of effective partnership practice. Indeed, according to Wescott Dodd and Konzal, the very nature of schools 'prevents parents and teachers from productively working together' (Wescott Dodd and Konzal, 2002: 23). Within traditional school systems, the power to make decisions is invested in a few people. In many instances teachers and parents or indeed children had little or no power in decision-making and very few opportunities to interact in a non-formal way (Higgins, 2008).

The opportunity to build trusting relationships is key to the development of partnership. Wescott Dodd and Konzal highlight the traditional interaction between schools and home which took place 'in a formal and ritualistic ways, preventing them from having the kinds of informal interactions necessary for building trusting relationships' (Wescott Dodd and Konzal, 2002: 24). As well as having to contend with inherited barriers to partnership, barriers can also be created through the prevailing school ethos. If the school adopts a 'medical model' (Haynes and Ben-Avie, 1996: 50), which locates blame for underachievement solely outside the school context, the school may not nurture collaboration, and may instead work in isolation to preserve their own environment and professionalism (Higgins, 2008: 97). Working in this way again prevents the development of trusting relationships. This has implications for effective problem solving when issues arise. Indeed, according to Dowling and Pound, when poor relationships exist 'parent-teacher meetings can become a confrontation rather than a dialogue', only adding to the already negative relationships (Dowling and Pound, 1985: 70). Henry, in tandem decries the 'walling out of community as a response to professionalization of teaching' (Henry, 1996: 15). Finally, Fine recognises the complexities of developing partnership and critiques the trend to invite parents 'into the deficit-ridden public sphere of public education … "as if" it were a 'power-neutral partnership" (Fine, 1993: 682).

As already stated, understanding the nature of relationships between schools and homes is a complex task since 'each family has a history, each school has a history, and so does the connection between them' (Connell et al., 1982: 42). Schools can alienate parents who can 'feel ignored or criticized by the school when they try to advocate for their child' (Mc Caleb, 1994: xi). Mulkerrins, in her research on the effects of the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme found that parents who were involved 'agreed that HSCL practices have dispelled many fears around schooling, thus facilitating the enhancement of parents' confidence and self-esteem' (Mulkerrins, 2007: 136). This achievement is all the more remarkable when set in a context in which 'teachers in the past scarcely provided information, much less invited parents to ask questions' (ibid: 136). Schools can also seek 'to protect the autonomy of the school and its personnel' cited by Powell this

was noted as one of the primary reasons for the 'social distance between the schools and the families' (Powell, 1991: 310). This echoes Mulkerrins findings where parents in her study 'felt that teachers regarded parents as being of inferior status and not worth consulting or including as an equal in their children's education' (Mulkerrins, 2007: 13). Lareau highlights a further dimension to how schools can exclude parents stating that 'the standards of schools are not neutral; their requests for parental involvement may be laden with social and cultural experiences of an intellectual and economic elite' (Lareau, 1987: 74).

Teacher belief systems have the potential to create yet another barrier to the development of effective partnership practice. Henry raises a sinister element in the debate around the development of relationships and partnerships between schools and homes. She challenges teachers to reflect on whether they treat children of parents who are actively involved in schooling more favourably than children, whose families remain outside the realm of partnership, thus, by implication, contributing to inequality:

> Equality becomes an issue if the scales are tipped in favour of enhanced outcomes for those students whose parents are involved in schooling when not all parents are able to participate equally (Henry, 1996: 6).

This of course raises issues around how teachers, who traditionally come from middle class backgrounds, interpret the culture and norms of children and families from other cultural backgrounds. Within the Irish context, the INTO acknowledges this challenge, and urges teachers to be very aware of the danger of judging parental interest in their offsprings' education from the norm of a middle class perspective stating that '… it would be wrong to conclude that parents in disadvantaged areas are not interested in their children's education or do not value education for their children' (INTO, 1994: 98). Wescott Dodd and Konzal also draw attention to how cultural differences might contribute to misunderstandings between teachers and parents, stating that 'many times parents who are poor or whose cultures are different from teachers demonstrate their care for

their children in ways that are unfamiliar to the teachers' (Wescott Dodd and Konzal, 2002: 152). Sleeter too is concerned about the impact of difference between the background of teachers and their students and contends that the difference in cultural/class origins is not insurmountable but must be given due consideration and teachers must be supported to navigate between cultures:

> The fact that demographic profiles of teachers and children in U.S. schools are increasingly at variance does not mean that teachers cannot be expected to learn to relate to the children and their families. It does, however, mean that we cannot simply expect this to happen 'naturally' (Sleeter, 1996: x).

The OECD publication, *'Parents as Partners in Schooling'* recognises the volatile nature of relationships between parents and teachers and the inherent potential for damage thus decreasing chances of open communication between parties; 'over critical parents can damage relationships by forcing teachers onto the defensive, making them unwilling to be open and reflective about their practice' (OECD, 1997: 53). Both parties in the relationship have the potential to hurt each other, but when teachers' trust is either wounded or underdeveloped the implications for the development of an effective educational partnership between teachers and parents are serious, since teachers are the most likely gatekeepers of the educational partnership processes. Teachers also need to be conscious of how they communicate with parents, as parents can sometimes feel alienated by 'the impenetrable cloak of the

professional educator's jargon and terminology' (Henry, 1996: 140).

International research indicates that teacher attitudes to low-income parents may impact negatively on children's attainment (Barbour et al, 1997; Davies, 1993(b); Vincent, 1996; Valdes, 1996). One would hope that the converse is true, of course. Many teachers work to ensure children succeed and actively build parents' and children's aspirations. Barbour et al. believe that because children are very perceptive they will 'internalise these attitudes of mutual disrespect' (Barbour et al., 1997: 6). This in turn can have a negative impact on children's own attitudes and motivation. They ascertain that:

> ...children acquire certain attitudes by hearing words, observing actions, and surmising the feelings of significant others in their environment. These attitudes then become more firm when children are encouraged to express such beliefs. Adult attitudes result from perceptions sustained over years (ibid: 4).

Sometimes teachers are either reticent or perhaps not supported to work in partnership with parents. Mc Allister Swap's research looked at the role of the teacher in relation to working with parents. She found that, 'teachers often feel that parent outreach is an added burden' (Mc Allister Swap, 1993: 65). Indeed, not all teachers are comfortable or confident with a multiplicity of roles. Draper and Duffy acknowledge the different skills demanded of teachers and advise that 'often practitioners who feel confident in their work with children feel less confident in their work with parents' (Draper and Duffy, 1992: 150). Wolfendale acknowledges that 'teachers are undeniably key facilitators, but we cannot take for granted equal competence in the sensitive area of human interaction among all teachers' (Wolfendale, 1992: 128). However, while the development of positive working relationships is challenging, Coleman encourages teachers to 'take responsibility for strengthening parent efficacy' (Coleman, 1998: 61), and believes that in so doing they will improve 'the attitude of children in the classroom', thereby bringing about immediate benefits.

Teachers are also vulnerable to how they are ill/treated by parents (Barbour et al. 1997; OECD, 1997). Comer also acknowledges the vulnerability of teachers and highlights the lack of effective processes to build trust. He advises that:

> ...when parent participation has not been well thought out and well-structured parents' concerns about teaching methods, the goals of the school, and even the competence of the staff can lead to conflict. For this reason, many educators shy away from parent participation programs (Comer, 1986: 444).

Home-Based Barriers to Working in Partnership

Just like schools, homes are hugely diverse! Homes vary in relation to their location, resources, skills, expectations, prior and current school experiences, number of adults and children, links with extended families, lifestyle, employment patterns, care responsibilities and prior experiences of developing educational partnerships with schools and communities. Therefore, there are equal complexities in trying to develop an understanding of how factors within the home environment impact on the ability and capacity of parents and carers to be involved in the development of partnership relationships with the school and community, and ultimately support learning. Indeed, Kellaghan et al. believe that 'homes vary in the extent to which they foster knowledge, skills, and dispositions that support school learning' (Kellaghan et al., 1993: 18).

Just like the school environment, the home environment also harbours a number of potential barriers to the development of effective partnership practice. Poverty, poor parental school experiences and poor educational attainment, negative attitudes, lack of resources, and the high cost of education can all stand in the way of the development of effective educational partnership.

Partnership practice between key stakeholders in the home, school and community has been promoted as a mechanism for the promotion of learning. Casanova, however, highlights the potential abuse of power by a minority of parents and challenges Epstein's naivety in relation to working effectively in partnership. She is concerned

'a small minority of parents can seize power and dictate their preferences to the school as well as to other parents, potentially leading to anti-democratic consequences' (Casanova, 1996: 30). It is understandable that teachers and parents who have experienced such dictatorial practice would be reticent in the future to re-engage in partnership programmes.

Teachers' appreciation of parents' childhood experience of school is of fundamental importance in understanding parents' ability to both help their children's learning in the home and their capacity to work collaboratively with the school. Parents who had negative experiences of their own school days can carry negative memories, which may impact on their capacity and indeed ability to get involved with their children's school (Barbour et al., 1997). Wescott Dodd and Konzal forewarn us that 'for parents whose own experiences were very painful, the school can be an unwelcoming or fearful place' (Wescott Dodd and Konzal, 2002: 15).

The negative childhood experiences of parents can be further compounded by their interaction with the school system as parents or carers. This can happen when parents are 'called to the school only when there is a problem with their child' (Comer, 1986: 444). In addition, Comer contends that parents 'are afraid that their children will perform poorly and reflect badly on them as parents' (ibid: 444). According to Higgins:

> **Negative experiences from childhood can transfer into parenting practices in adult life. Firstly, they may form a hindrance to participation in life-long learning opportunities for adults themselves. Secondly, they can act as a barrier to adults in supporting their own children's learning whether in the home or in collaboration with the school. Finally, the negative attitudes incurred through negative experiences may be transferred to the child.**
>
> *(Higgins, 2008: 42)*

However, it is very important not to stereotype parents. Higgins posits that 'parents with negative childhood experiences within the educational system may very well be highly motivated and work proactively to ensure their own children have more positive experiences and outcomes. While negative childhood experiences may form subsequent barriers, it does not mean that they are insurmountable, it does, however, mean that they create challenging contexts' (Higgins, 2008: 43).

Poverty in the home can present a very real barrier to educational partnership and educational attainment. Indeed, Kellaghan et al. make a direct link between the family's lack of economic resources and the child's ability to 'benefit fully from educational provision' (Kellaghan et al., 1995: 30). Schneider and Coleman highlight how the lack of resources in the home inhibits parents from realising their expectations for their children:

> **Not all parents have the same resources or opportunities to act on the educational expectations they have for their children. Variations in financial and social resources, such as money to purchase a home computer or adequate childcare, factor into parents' decisions about the actions they take regarding their children's education (Schneider and Coleman, 1993: 1).**

Lynch is very clear that 'the lack of adequate income' (Lynch , 1999: 57) prevents children, from working class contexts, from maximising the opportunities the education system offers and acts as a major contributor to inequality of educational outcome:

> **The principal problem which working-class people have in relation to education is that they lack adequate income to maximise the advantages that the system could offer: looked at in another way, they are seriously deprived of resources relative to middle-class people with whom they must compete for credentials (Lynch, 1999: 57).**

Community-Based Barriers to Working in Partnership

Just like schools and homes, communities also differ from each other. Communities vary in the nature of resources, amenities, networks, learning opportunities, quality of housing, levels of safety

and crime, location and their experiences of developing educational partnerships with homes and schools. Communities are important learning arenas, 'as children expand their horizons, the living conditions of the neighbourhood and community give them experiences on which to build their linguistic, kinaesthetic, artistic, spatial and interpersonal skills' (Barbour et al., 1997: 14). There may be a strong tradition of the school linking with the community or alternatively, the community may have little interaction with the school. In recent years the advent of the HSCL and the School Completion Programme (SCP) has facilitated the opening of the school to the broader community through a variety of activities which are targeted at adult and child learners. These initiatives provide very real opportunities for the development of educational partnerships.

The quality of community life is very important. However, 'many communities are now in crisis due to the growth of social problems including drugs, crime, and alcohol abuse as well as the loss of family and community networks' (Higgins, 2008: 76). Difficulties in the community have a knock-on effect on the individual, the family and the school. 'The difficulties experienced in poor, highly stratified communities in urban settings are often compounded by irresponsible planning which has led to high concentrations of local authority housing within urban contexts' (Higgins, 2008: 76).

Changes in communities and society have a direct impact on homes and on schools, since homes and schools are located within communities. According to Carlson and Apple we are living in 'unsettling times', which are 'characterised by the breakdown of community, the fragmentation of culture, and the more instrumentalization of self within market logic' (Carlson and Apple, 1998: 1).

Community factors may impact negatively on the individual and on the school, and on the potential to develop educational partnerships. Additionally, 'they may impact on the family's ability to support their young' (Higgins, 2008: 77), since it is '… harder to do a good job of parenting if one lives in a high-risk neighbourhood or if one is financially stressed' (Eccles and Harold, 1996: 9).

MODELS OF
EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP >>

The previous sections discussed the challenges that impede effective partnership practice across the home, school and community contexts, and highlighted the benefits of working in partnership. Significantly, the quality of relationships between stakeholders was identified as a core element in the development of effective partnership. The quality of relationships provides the backdrop not only for the day-to-day interactions between stakeholders but also provides the foundation on which long term programmes and interventions may be built. We now present a number of partnership models.

There are some similarities between the three models, in that they all recognise the distinct settings of home, school, and community and affirm the dynamic nature of the connections between them. Furthermore, they acknowledge the potential to affect positive change by developing strategic interventions, based on the premise that affecting change within and between settings can enhance the learner's potential to access learning.

Firstly, we present Epstein's framework, 'Overlapping Spheres of Influence', which explores the nature of the interaction and dynamics between home, school, and community (2001). We then briefly refer to the work of Wescott Dodd and Konzal, who propose two opposing frameworks to interpret the nature of relationships between sites (2002). Barbour et al.'s model identifies three levels of interaction between the home and school, the minimum level, the associative level, finally, the decision making level (2005).

EPSTEIN: OVERLAPPING SPHERES OF INFLUENCE >>

Epstein presents a model which facilitates inquiry into the nature of relationships and indeed interactions between family, school and community. Theoretical models and practical interventions are guided by underlying belief systems. Epstein defines three different perspectives or belief systems that 'guide researchers and practitioners in their thinking' (Epstein, 2001: 22). The first interpretation, *'separate responsibilities of institutions,* stress the inherent incompatibility, competition, and conflict between families and schools' (Epstein, 2001: 22). The second interpretation, and opposing view, is based on *shared responsibilities of institutions* which 'emphasise the coordination, cooperation and complementarity of schools and families and encourage communication and collaboration between institutions' (Epstein, 2001: 22). The third and final perspective is of *sequential responsibilities of institutions* that 'emphasise the critical stages of parents' and teachers' contributions to the child's development' (Epstein, 2001: 22). Epstein embraces the second perspective and advocates partnership between institutions as a mechanism to address attainment. According to Epstein,

> **...the main goal of partnership is *to develop and conduct better communications with families across the grades to assist students to succeed in school* (Epstein, 2001: 42)**

In developing partnership, stakeholders need to develop a shared understanding of how power is shared, how decisions are made, and how resources are allocated. They must also have realistic

expectations of each other. Drawing on the findings of extensive research in this area Epstein contends that:

> **Teachers would like families to assist, guide and influence their children to do their schoolwork. Families wish teachers would let them know how to help their children at home. Students wish their families were knowledgeable about their school and helpful to them on school matters at home (Epstein, 2001: 3).**

Epstein's model is conceptualised at two levels. Firstly, the external, and secondly, the internal structure of the Overlapping Spheres of Influence of Family, School, and Community on Children's Learning. Essentially, Epstein's model recognises the dynamic and fluctuating nature of relationships between sites.
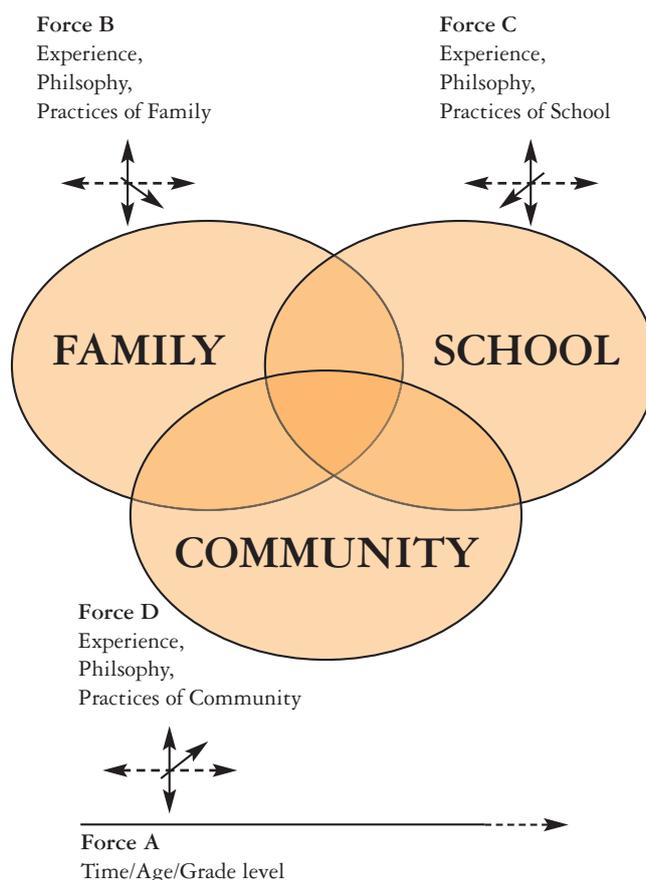
Force B
Experience,
Philsophy,
Practices of Family

Force C
Experience,
Philsophy,
Practices of School

Force D
Experience,
Philsophy,
Practices of Community

Force A
Time/Age/Grade level

Overlapping Spheres of Influence of Family, School, and Community on Children's Learning (External Structure of Theoretical Model)

(Epstein 2001: 28 (reprinted with permission))

In the external model left, the three circles represent the three sites of community, family and school. There are areas which overlap and areas which are independent of other sites. Not all school, family and home partnerships exhibit such evenly balanced interactions as portrayed in the diagram above. The extent to which these areas overlap 'is controlled by three forces: time, experience in families, and experiences in schools' (Epstein, 2001: 27). Time may refer to historical time or time relating to the age and class level of the individual. Forces that push the spheres together or pull them apart include experiences, philosophies and practices in the three sites. The belief system operating within each site affects the pattern of interaction and communication between sites (degree of overlap). Epstein maintains that, 'when teachers make parents part of their regular teaching practice they create greater overlap than would normally be expected' (Epstein, 2001: 29). Furthermore, she contends that 'when parents maintain or increase interest in their children's schooling' (Epstein, 2001: 29) more overlap between sites is activated. According to Epstein this enhanced partnership translates into tangible benefits for the learner:

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

In this model Epstein seeks to promote continuity of experience between home and school by creating *'school like families'* and *'family like schools'* (Epstein, 2001: 405). In the 'family like school' the individuality of the child is recognised and celebrated, and just like at home the child is made to feel 'special and included' (Epstein, 2001: 405). In the *school like family*, parents recognise the student dimension of the child's life and parents 'reinforce the importance of school, homework, and activities that build student skills and feelings of success' (Epstein, 2001: 405). Epstein contends that if there is more co-operation across contexts students are more likely to receive 'common

messages' (Epstein, 2001: 404) and this consistency will boost their resolve to stay in school.
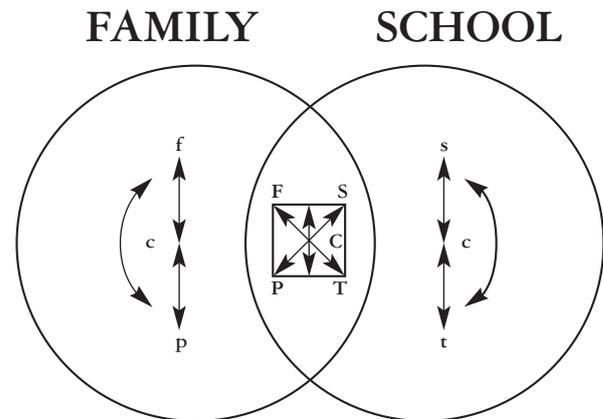
KEY: Intra-institutionall interactions (lowercase)
Intra-institutionall interactions (uppercase)
f/F = Family   c/C = Child
s/S = School   p/P = Parent
               t/T = Teacher
Note: In the full mode the internal structure
is extended, using the same KEY to include:
co/CO = Community
a/A = Agent from community/business

Overlapping Spheres of Influence of Family, School, and Community on Children's Learning (Internal Structure of Theoretical Model)

(Epstein, 2001: 28 (reprinted with permission))

The second sphere, the internal model of interaction, highlights the importance of interpersonal relations and patterns of influence between the home, school and community (Epstein, 2001: 404).

Within this framework, 'social relationships may be enacted and studied at an institutional level … and at an individual level' (Epstein, 2001: 404), and also within and between organisations. Interaction may be analysed at an individual level between the parent and the teacher and at an institutional level between the school and the family. The external and internal models are co-dependent. According to Epstein;

> The internal organisational and individual relationships are influenced simultaneously by the age and grade level of the student and the common practices of the time period (Force A), and by the actions, attitudes, experiences, and decisions of teachers

and parents (Force B and C). The degree of overlap of family and school organisations and their goals and practices affects the social and psychological distance between family and school members and their patterns of communication, and the results or outcomes of more or less interactions (Epstein, 2001: 31).

Epstein's model offers a framework to investigate not only the sites of home, school, and community but also the complex dynamic of relationships and interaction between them. Fundamentally, this model recognises that relationships are dynamic and mutable and consequently hold the potential to either improve or dis-improve over time; a factor all stakeholders need to be cognisant of.

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

Barbour, Barbour and Scully conceptualise partnership as the means through which learners are supported to achieve their potential (Barbour,

Barbour and Scully, 1997: 325). They present a framework, which facilitates interpretation of the level of interaction/partnership between the school and the home. The concept of partnership can prove problematic since different stakeholders may conceptualise it differently, have different expectations of themselves and of other stakeholders. At the *Minimum level* (Barbour, Barbour and Scully, 1997: 326) school personnel seek support for school programmes, for example through homework assignments. Parents and other community members are expected to help children to complete assignments, parents may also be invited to help with fundraising and requested to gather materials for art projects (Barbour, Barbour and Scully, 1997: 326). They contend that this minimum level 'is common-place; it serves a definite purpose; and it is a good foundation from which to start working for more complete participation' (Barbour, Barbour and Scully, 1997: 326).

At the second level, the *Associative level,* teachers may invite parents or volunteers to become involved in helping in the classroom, to share skills or talents, to photocopy materials and to help on school trips and get involved in advocacy work (Barbour, Barbour and Scully, 1997: 326). At this level children 'benefit from involvement of adults at the associative level; due to their school experience and intensified role, school expectations are much clearer to these parents, and all communication is facilitated' (Barbour, Barbour and Scully, 1997: 327). Realistically, 'at any point in time fewer parents will be involved at the associative level than at the minimal level' (Barbour, Barbour and Scully, 1997: 327). Thirdly, at the *Decision Making level* (Barbour, Barbour and Scully, 1997: 327), 'individual parents, business persons, professionals and community leaders participate actively in decision making for the education of children' (Barbour, Barbour and Scully, 1997: 327). There is a substantive shift in the nature of involvement at this level when 'parents move beyond being committed advocates for their children into sharing responsibility for providing quality (school) education for their own and other children' (Barbour, Barbour and Scully, 1997: 327). According to Barbour, Barbour and Scully, parent participation at both minimum and associative levels produces little controversy (Barbour, Barbour

and Scully, 1997: 327), however working at the *Decision Making level* requires mutual respect and a new definition of shared responsibility and accountability' (Barbour, Barbour and Scully, 1997: 327).

The models presented thus far offer a framework to understand the nature of relationships between three 'sites of influence'. In recognising the volatile and dynamic nature of relationships they also acknowledge the potential for growth and development between sites, the benefits of which have already been described.

A FINAL WORD >>

The development of educational partnership is complex and makes specific demands on all stakeholders. The balance of power to develop educational partnerships rests with the school. The responsibility to engage in partnership practice rests with all stakeholders, especially those locally engaged and those with responsibility for resourcing and policy.

This approach to how teachers might engage with parents and other partners dramatically revises the role of the teacher. Teachers deserve to be properly resourced and supported if they are to be asked to fulfil this challenging and yet fulfilling role. This has implications at under-graduate and post-graduate level. If principals are to lead schools where educational partnership is embraced, not only as good practice, but also as a mechanism to promote learning inclusion, they too deserve training and support.

The framework of how parents might engage as educational partners also challenges traditional experiences and models of parental/school interaction. Parents, just like teachers, deserve opportunities to develop their communication skills, share their aspirations and develop the skills necessary for them to support their children's learning.

Ultimately, greater communication and collaboration between all stakeholders holds the potential to contribute to the development of more effective educational environments in which children grow and learn.
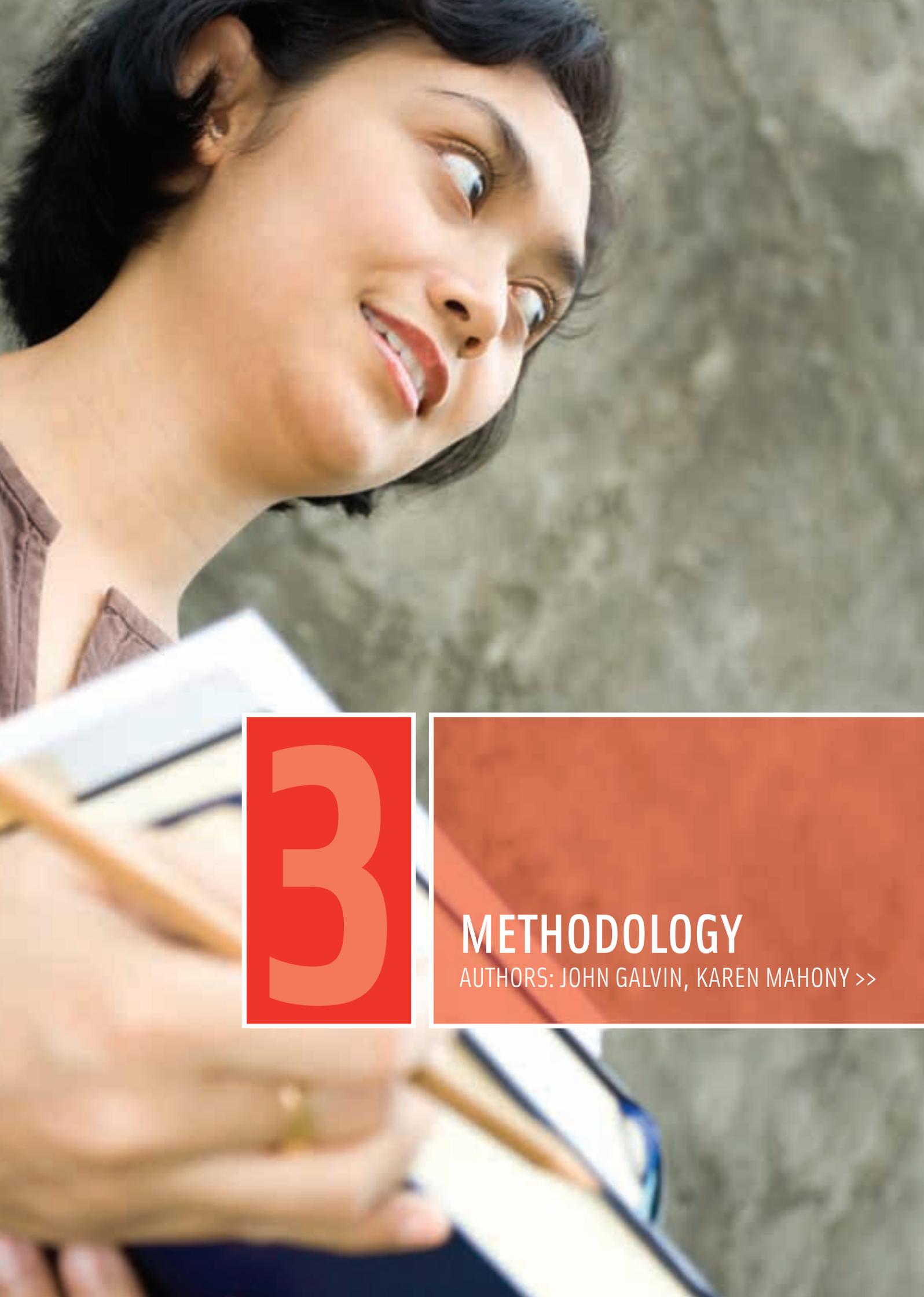
3

METHODOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION >>

As stated earlier, the FSCEP project supported the design, development and monitoring of a variety of programmes across the five participating schools. The aim of these programmes was to provide positive contexts and innovative ways for parents and teachers to work closely together. The primary rationale for the project lay in a substantial body of research in Ireland and elsewhere, which demonstrated that the nature of the relationship between the child-family-community and the school plays a central role in advantaging or disadvantaging children at school. Activities focused on literacy, numeracy, arts education and sport and were designed by FSCEP project personnel, parents and teachers, which resulted in a great variety of programmes to enhance learning and partnership across five school contexts. The FSCEP project management worked in partnership with the HSCL, the SCP, local Family Resource Centres (FRC) and local Community Development Projects (CDP), utilising local resources and expertise to support the communities to make a shared investment in the future of their children. The project endeavoured to develop a model of participatory democracy within those school communities, whereby the voice of all participants was equally valued.

The methodologies employed to address the research questions of this study are outlined and discussed in this section. The core research questions can be summed up as follows:

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

2. What made the educational partnership process work well?

3. What prevented it from working well?

4. What models of partnership were most appropriate to the five participating schools?

The methodological framework employed to gain insights and better understandings of the above questions used the following approaches: (1) a participatory ethnographic approach to the collection of data, (2) a grounded theory approach to the interpretation of this data, and (3) a multi-vocal narrative approach to the representation of findings.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK >>

This research study is fundamentally ethnographic; therefore the data gathered was largely qualitative. An ethnographic study, by its nature 'aims to describe and interpret human behavior within a certain *culture*; uses extensive fieldwork and participant observation, aiming to develop rapport and empathy with the people studied' (Wellington and Szczerbinski, 2007: 218). To a lesser extent, this study also draws on quantitative data. The FSCEP project and data gathering was carried out over a period of four years under realistic conditions. Additionally, as a result of its ethnographic nature, the study involved a variety of formal and informal methods of data collection; which were principally written and spoken, but also incorporated visual sources of data, including photographs and DVD footage.

The formal methods of data collection included:

1. Review of literature (both national and international) and policy developments relating to educational partnership and social capital within the Irish context. This work informed the development of the project, its overall implementation and individual elements of the FSCEP project model;

2. Questionnaires disseminated to participating teachers across five schools at the end of year two;

3. Teacher journals, which allowed the participating teachers to track their progress, thoughts and feelings relative to individual initiatives and to the overall progress of the project;

4. Interviews in five schools with:
    - Teachers and Principals
    - Parents
    - Children
    - Special Needs Assistants;

5. Focus groups with participating school representatives;

6. Teacher evaluation forms, which were completed at the culmination of each programme activity;

7. Celebrating Partnership Days. These were workshops where representative groups (parents, teachers, members of BOM, project personnel) from each of the three urban schools came together to exchange ideas and celebrate their successes. These occasions were an invaluable source of data and information for the future development of the project.

Table 3.1 provides a broad overview of the amount of formal data that was gathered during the lifetime of the study.

Table 3.1: Quantity of Formal Data Gathered					
Data Source	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	TOTAL
Teacher Journals	15	24	18	3	60
Child Interviews	-	11	30	-	41
Parent Interviews	-	12	18	-	30
Teacher Interviews	-	5	16	-	21
Teacher Questionnaires	-	51	-	-	51
Teacher Evaluation Forms	-	15	12	3	30
Celebrating Partnership Days	-	1	1	1	3
TOTAL	15	119	95	7	236

In addition to the more formal methods of data collection, the ethnographic study also incorporated informal sources of primary data collection. These included:

1. Video footage and photographs of activities;

2. Letters and flyers to parents;

3. Newsletters to school staff and Mary Immaculate College staff;

4. Programme funding proposals;

5. Quarterly project reports.;

6. FSCEP Team, Management and Advisory Meeting minutes;

7. Informal discussions and conversations.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS >>

This research report endeavours to include the perspectives of all stakeholders involved in the process of implementing the project i.e. school representatives (principals and teachers), parents, children and young people, representatives of People Against Unemployment in Limerick

(PAUL) Partnership and members of the management and advisory committees of the project. A total of five schools participated in the project, three of which were in urban settings within Limerick city and two of which were in rural settings, located in County Clare. Table 3.2 below shows the variety of perspectives gained throughout the four-year lifetime of the ethnographic research.

Table 3.2: Research Participants	
Research Participants	**TOTAL**
Principals	5
Teachers	57
Parents / Guardians / Adults	30
Children / Young People	41
Home-School-Community Liaison Representatives	4
School Completion Programme Representatives	3
Family Resource Centre Representatives	2
Community Development Project Representatives	4
Programme Facilitators	13
TOTAL	159

To protect participants' identities and retain their right to anonymity and confidentiality, codes were developed when preparing the data. Each school was assigned a capital letter and each teacher a number. Hence teacher quotations were referenced by using the assigned capital letter followed by a capital T followed by their number e.g. BT9, DT14, AT2 and so on. Parents' quotations were referenced by using the capital letter of the school followed by a capital P followed by the year number in which the interview took place, e.g. BP2, CP3 and so on. In similar fashion, children's quotations were referenced by using the school letter, followed by the letter C, followed by the year of interview e.g. EC3, AC2 and so on. Similarly, programme facilitators were referenced using the school letter in which they delivered the programme followed by the letter F, followed by the year number e.g. BF2.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS >>

Since 1999 all schools have been issued with a copy of *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (DH&C, 1999). These guidelines embody the principles contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and offer a comprehensive framework to assist professionals and other persons who have contact with children. The welfare of children, in all five participating schools, was of paramount importance and consequently due deference was paid to the *Children First* guidelines throughout the FSCEP project. For example children's photographs were not used in FSCEP project newsletters and were only exhibited at FSCEP project displays with parental consent. With regard to the interviewing of children, principal teachers in all five schools made it clear that such interviews were dependent on both the consent of the children themselves and that of their parents. All student interviews were conducted with groups of children and all took place on school premises and were overseen by school principals. Additionally, all researchers were cognisant of the *Children First* guidelines (DH&C, 1999) throughout the research period and, although such circumstances didn't arise, were aware of the reporting procedures for child protection concerns as laid out by such a document.

A similar ethically informed approach was adopted for fieldwork with other stakeholders i.e. teachers, principals, HSCL coordinators, programme facilitators, parents and community workers. From the start the research goals were made clear to all members of the school community and informed consent was attained. Issues of confidentiality and representation were discussed and it was made clear to all participants that any identifiable accounts or descriptions would be avoided and that the report would be referred back and discussed with research informants, where possible, before final drafts were

written up. This was seen as a means of assisting accurate and sensitive representation. Due consideration was given to the sensitivity of language in reporting the findings. An important consideration for the FSCEP project was to ensure that the research did not harm or exploit the research participants. Consequently, every effort was made to safeguard the rights of individuals interviewed and to protect the honour and dignity of those studied in the presentation of the research findings. Although in some cases, anonymity and confidentiality could not be guaranteed given the nature of the individuals' roles.

DATA ANALYSIS >>

As shown above, the methodological framework consisted of a variety of formal and informal methods of data collection. Data analysis drew on two main techniques:

1. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) analysis;
2. Thematic analysis of qualitative data.

SPSS Analysis

The SPSS software package was used to analyse the quantitative data i.e. the questionnaire that was disseminated amongst participating teachers. A response rate of 81% was achieved in relation to the quantitative questionnaire i.e. fifty-one questionnaires were returned out of a total of sixty-three disseminated. A SPSS framework was constructed and variables were developed for each questionnaire item and basic frequency analysis was performed. The findings of the quantitative analysis are reported in section five.

Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data

The research design for this study followed the three-stage model outlined by Pole and Lampard (2002: 190-191), (1) "preliminary" (2) "processual" and (3) "summative". The analysis and interpretation of data was, to a great extent, ongoing over the four-year period. The ongoing collection and analysis informed the developments of the project over time. The "preliminary" stage of this study related to the design and organisation of the FSCEP project in the five schools. The "processual" stage related to the 'continued engagement with the data as it is collected' (Pole

and Lampard, 2002: 190) and finally the "summative" stage refers to the stage at which final conclusions were drawn and recommendations offered. These sequential phases of data gathering and analysis afforded a form of triangulation for three themes that began to emerge from an early stage in the research project. The first theme, Theme A, which is perhaps the most detailed, refers to the development and/or enhancement of the school ethos, mission and/or culture and how those elements influence working in partnership with families and communities. The second theme, Theme B, contains findings relating to the more measurable, logistical elements of working in partnership i.e. the presence of school policies, processes, procedures, organisational structures and practices, and how they impact on partnership processes. The final section, Theme C, presents findings under the theme 'teaching, curriculum development and learning styles' - this section outlines how partnership enhanced educational outcomes for children, families and schools.

Kane (1984: 151) describes analysis as 'the processing which your brain performs on what you have collected'. In this sense, the research approach employed in this study ensured the accumulation of a reliable body of knowledge which helped inform practice on an ongoing basis in the schools which in turn aided the analysis and interpretation process. The three themes identified above were rigorously interrogated in the summative stage of the analysis using a grounded theory approach so as to allow the emergence of new insights as experienced by the FSCEP project participants. Throughout the FSCEP project an inductive approach to the analysis and interpretation of the data was employed. The inductive approach is defined by Wellington and Szczerbinski as 'the process of inferring a general law from the observation of particular instances' (Wellington and Szczerbinski, 2007: 220).

Charmaz (2003) proposes that grounded theory approaches have the following characteristics in common:

- Simultaneous data collection and analysis;
- Pursuit of emerging themes through early data analysis;
- Discovery of basic social processes within the data;

- Inductive construction of abstract categories that explain and synthesize these processes;
- Sampling to refine the categories through comparative processes;
- Integration of categories into a theoretical framework that specifies causes, conditions, and consequences of studied processes.

(Charmaz, 2003: 313).

In the current study, the stages of data gathering and analysis were, to a large extent, concurrent, continual, experiential and spread over a lengthy period of time. Consequently, this sequence of events reflected the grounded theory characteristics outlined above to be an integral component of the data gathering process.

According to Quinn Patton, 'grounded theory depends on methods that take the researcher into and close to the real world so that the results and findings are grounded in the empirical world' (Quinn Patton, 2002: 125). In the FSCEP this process involved disciplined examination, creative insight, and careful attention to the purposes of the research study. It began by getting an overview of the entire process and bit-by-bit assembling the raw data and finally mediating the research by engaging sympathetically and sensitively with participants. This approach was adopted to ensure that the participants' experiences were valued, validated, and understood. In so doing, it was hoped this study would contribute to the evolution of partnership theories by analysing the language and feelings of the teachers, parents, students and community members who were closely involved with the partnership activity programmes, and also by hearing the voices of management voiced through sustained engagement with team, management and advisory meetings.

While analysis and interpretation are closely intertwined, they are conceptually separate processes. Analysis is the process of bringing order to the data, organising what has been gathered into patterns, categories, and basic descriptive units (Huberman and Miles, 1984, in Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: 428-429). Interpretation, on the other hand, involves attaching meaning and significance to the analysis, explaining descriptive patterns, and looking for relationships and linkages among descriptive dimensions (Denzin and Lincoln,

1994: 500-501). The researcher's role, therefore, moves along a continuum of sorting out the raw data to interpreting meanings. In selecting quotations from the data the researcher is challenged to remain faithful to the essence of what the interviewees were attempting to convey. In this regard, it should be noted that during the course of interviews meanings are conveyed in many ways. Finding the appropriate language to communicate effectively can sometimes present a barrier with which interviewers must grapple while remaining aware of the pitfall of leading the interviewee. In this respect the representation of the voice of interviewees clearly demands careful consideration, scrupulous analysis, and serious moral deliberation (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: 503). Denzin highlight the difficulties involved in such undertakings:

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

In this context, the analytical process drew on scholarship within the field of grounded theory. Glasser and Strauss, fathers of grounded theory, defined it as 'the discovery of theory from data' (Glasser and Strauss, 1967: 1). In doing so, they set out to provide 'an inductive approach to collecting and analysing qualitative data that seriously attempted to be faithful to the understandings, interpretations, intentions and perspectives of the people studied' (Clarke, 2005:3). Similarly, Quinn Patton (2002:454) emphasises the need for the researcher to become 'immersed in the data…so that embedded meanings and relationships can emerge'. Pole and Lampard advocate 'an intimate relationship between the researcher and the data' (Pole and Lampard, 2002: 206). During the study this process was supplemented by seeking clarification and further insights from FSCEP project participants.

As outlined above, the qualitative data for this study was generated through research journals, informal discussion and conversation, personal observations, individual and group interviews and Celebrating Partnership days. The third and final

Methodology

phase of Pole and Lampard's analytic framework is the stage at which final conclusions are drawn from the research, enabling 'the researcher to make sense of the collected data and to advance explanations and understandings of the social phenomena to which they relate' (Pole and Lampard, 2002: 192) and finally to present it in accessible form. As shown in Table 3.1 above, there were sixty journals compiled by participating teachers during the course of the FSCEP project. In the summative stage of analysis, these were photocopied to ensure the safety of the originals and to allow the researcher the freedom, while working with the documents, to make notes and cuttings in attempting to match the data to the three emerging themes. This strategy helped the researcher in the process of choosing and categorising representative quotations that ultimately resulted in a multi-vocal presentation of the findings. It also afforded many opportunities for the researcher to link existing theory in the literature with initial findings in the data.

Unlike the data from the journals, the interview data was analysed in audio format. As can be seen from Table 3.1 above, a wide range of interviews were carried out during the course of the FSCEP project, which resulted in approximately thirty hours of very rich data. These were recorded on audiocassette tapes, which were later transferred on to a computer-aided analysis package called Annotape. The FSCEP project team conducted the interviews. As the interviews were transferred from audiocassette to the laptop, the principal researcher listened to all of the interviews. The Annotape software's analytical system is effective when working with large amounts of data. Silverman contends that computer-aided analysis 'supports the code and retrieves operations of grounded theorising' (Silverman, 2005: 197). However, while the Annotape system is helpful in analysing the data, it is important to remember that the hidden, non-verbal messages, which are often integral to the intended interpretation, cannot be electronically retrieved. Hence, the importance of filling in an interview recording journal at the end of each interview. During the summative stage it was necessary to refer back to a number of interviewees for further clarification on points raised in their interviews.

Reporting and Representation

Reporting on a qualitative study necessitates a great deal of description of programmes and experiences of the people involved. The purpose of this description is to let the reader know what happened in the environment under observation and what it was like from the participants' point of view. In representing events that arose during the partnership activities, every effort was made to portray as full and accurate an account as possible. In some instances entire activities are reported in detail as little vignettes because they represented typical experiences and captured the essence of what the FSCEP project was about. Some of these descriptions are written in narrative form to provide a more holistic picture of what had taken place. Hopefully, the representation of events and experiences in the upcoming sections has provided a balanced report of the feelings, insights and observations of the parents, teachers, children and community members who took part in the FSCEP project. The Partnership Development Coordinator circulated drafts of the research findings to all five participating schools and to members of the management committee for feedback and comment. Additionally, research findings were summarised and multiple copies sent to all schools for circulation to all research participants to check for truth and accuracy, to ensure nothing pertinent had been omitted and to confirm balanced representation. Finally, FSCEP project management made a verbal presentation of findings at the final Celebrating Partnership forum.

CONCLUSION >>

The vast array of data gathered during the course of this research presented a dilemma with regard to what should be included or indeed omitted in the final report. As detailed descriptions and in-depth quotations are essential qualities of qualitative accounts, it is hoped that sufficient description and direct quotations are included in this report to allow the reader to understand fully the research context and the thoughts of the people represented in the study. It is hoped that the descriptive passages are evenly balanced by analysis and interpretation and supported with sufficient direct quotations to present an interesting and readable account of the experiences and thoughts of the research participants.

4

FSCEP PROJECT
SCHOOL PROFILES

AUTHOR: JOHN GALVIN >>

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INTRODUCTION >>

This research study was facilitated by the good will and assistance of the five school communities in which the FSCEP project was located. The current section offers a profile of these schools and their communities with a view to enhancing the reader's appreciation of the data analysis and findings. Three of the schools were in an urban setting and two were in a rural setting. The three urban schools were situated in areas that experienced varying levels of deprivation. For policy purposes such urban areas had been designated under the term RAPID, an acronym for Revitalising Areas through Planning, Investment and Development. The two rural schools came under a similar designation that uses a Gaelic acronym CLÁR, standing for Ceanntair Laga Árd Riachtanais.

SCHOOL PROFILES >>

All five schools in which FSCEP operated had a mixed enrolment of boys and girls and varied greatly in size. Teaching staffs were predominantly female with a mix of age groups ranging from newly qualified to more experienced teachers. All schools were at varying stages of development in terms of parental involvement and links with their communities but each school enjoyed its own unique home-school-community dynamic.

All of the schools carried 'designated disadvantaged' status, which gave them an entitlement to some additional funding and resources. The amount was dependent on the category into which the school is placed. The term 'designated disadvantaged' has recently been replaced by the acronym *DEIS* (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DES, 2005)). Within *DEIS* there are *DEIS* Band 1 and *DEIS* Band 2 as indicators of levels of disadvantage. Schools in Band 1 are seen as experiencing greater levels of disadvantage than schools in Band 2. The three urban schools in the FSCEP project were categorised as Band 1 while the two rural schools were categorised as Band 2. *DEIS* represents a shift

in emphasis from individual initiatives, each addressing a particular aspect of the problem, to one which adopts a multi-faceted and more integrated approach to reducing inequality and promoting social inclusion. Over the past three decades numerous intervention measures have been put in place to help schools whose pupils are experiencing educational disadvantage. These initiatives are now set out in a more integrated form in the current partnership agreement *Towards 2016*, the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016* (Office for Social Inclusion, 2007) and the social inclusion chapters of the *National Development Plan 2007 - 2013* (Department of Finance, 2007).

Participation in these schemes is obligatory for all designated schools, while participation in the FSCEP project was voluntary and limited by funding constraints to a small number of schools. Volunteering to take part in the FSCEP project indicated a readiness on the part of the schools to further improve family-school-community relations and a recognition that working in partnership would support children's learning. What the FSCEP project offered the schools included an acceleration of growth in parent-teacher collaboration and a deeper grounding of the children's education in the local community.

The following table[4] and detailed school profiles that follow, which were compiled in collaboration with the principals and members of staff in each school, will give a clearer picture of the context in which this research took place. As pointed out above, schools A, B, and C are in the *DEIS* Band 1 category and schools D and E are in *DEIS* Band 2.

School A

This was a large urban school, with a teaching staff of thirteen *mainstream teachers*, which caters for two hundred and twenty-four pupils ranging from junior infants to sixth class. In addition there were five *resource teachers*, a *home-school-community liaison coordinator*, and an *early start teacher*, giving a total staff of twenty-one, only one of whom was male. Four *special needs assistants* were employed in the care of children with special educational needs. The post of principal was administrative and there was additional support from six staff members who held

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[4] Note: the table above captures the profile of the schools at the inception of the FSCEP project. It is important to note that school profiles may have changed over time.

Table 4.1: Participating School Profiles					
	School A	**School B**	**School C**	**School D**	**School E**
Description	Full-stream School	Infant School	Junior School	Full-stream School	Full-stream School
Location	Urban	Urban	Urban	Rural	Rural
DEIS Band	1	1	1	2	2
Principal Status	Administrative	Teaching	Administrative	Teaching	Administrative
No. of Mainstream Teachers	13	4	5	2	12
No. of Support Teachers	7	2 Full-time 2 Shared	4	1	10
No. of Special Needs Assistants	4	1 Part-time	2	2	9
Caretaker Services	Half-time	0	1	0	1
Secretarial Services	1	0	1	1 Part-time	1 Part-time

special duty posts as well as a *deputy principal* and two *assistant principals*. The school had the benefit of full-time secretarial and part-time caretaking services.

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

The school was housed in a large two-storey building, which was erected in 1963 but is still in good repair. The classrooms were traditional in design with much of the old furniture still in use which, it might be argued, might not be conducive to using different learning styles or working in groups. Nevertheless, innovative approaches to teaching and learning were employed in the daily life of the school. The school building looked on to a concrete yard with sheds on two sides for sheltering from rain. Beyond the yard there was a large green area of well maintained grass and on the other side of the school there were two structured play areas, one containing swings and slides and the other was made up of a nature trail with raised flower-beds, trees and shrubs. The school was surrounded by a high railing and both entrance gates were securely locked each evening.

School B
This school was an urban infant school with an enrolement of approximately seventy children. There were four *mainstream teachers*, along with two *resource teachers*, one shared *resource teacher for Travellers*, a shared *HSCL Coordinato*r and one part-

time SNA. The principal had full teaching duties and the school did not have secretarial or caretaking assistance. These combined factors presented challenges in making arrangements and organising events. There were seventy children registered on the school roll. A pre-school group was also housed in the building which, while it provided a very valuable and much needed service, added to congestion in the school buildings. The all-female staff, two of whom held special duties posts, had over the years adopted 'an open-door' policy towards parents and members of the community.

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

School C

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

The school building was erected in 1971 and was imaginatively designed in hexagonal fashion around a central complex. The school was maintained in very good condition and was bright and airy in aspect. There was a medium-sized hall that hosts indoor play, Christmas and summer shows and various other gatherings. The school looked out onto a large tarmac playing area where children spent their lunch-breaks. A prefabricated building that housed two pre-school groups comprised of twenty-eight children was located at the end of this yard. The school grounds were surrounded by a high railing and the entrance gate was locked at the end of the school day.

Many of the children experienced a variety of social problems of which the teachers were acutely aware. The commitment and dedication of the teaching staff to the children in their care and to their families was manifest in numerous ways. The atmosphere of the school was cheerful, pleasant and caring and the children enjoyed a variety of extracurricular activities, many of which were funded and organised through the FSCEP project.

School D

School D was a small rural school situated in open countryside that catered for twenty-eight children from junior infants to sixth class. The school had an all-female staff comprising two *mainstream teachers* (one of whom was the principal), one *resource teacher*, two *special needs assistants* and a part-time *secretary*. A tranquil, caring atmosphere pervaded the school and this ethos extended to the children as older children actively engaged in activities with younger children. Much parent-teacher activity had taken place in recent years in conjunction with the FSCEP project. This tightly knit community had strong allegiance to its school and many parents had given freely of their time and energy in developing the school grounds. School celebrations enjoyed full attendance, not only of parents but also of grandparents and other family members. Some discussions with regard to the formation of a formal parent-teacher association had recently taken place.

The original building, which was erected in 1933, consisted of two rooms and a corridor; a recent extension had added greatly to the schools amenities, with improved toilet facilities, a principal's office, a special educational needs room and an all-purpose room. The school was situated

on a large plot of ground with very scenic views all around and with much potential for development. The building was being upgraded, bit-by-bit, in a combined effort by parents, teachers and the older children. While some may decry the shortage of funding and the slow progress in this development, others may see the benefit of the process as unifying the community and highlighting the importance of the school's position in the parish.

School E

This school was situated in a small town on the western seaboard. The original school dates back to the 1850s but the building had undergone a number of renovations and extensions in recent times. It was a large school, catering for two hundred and ninety-five pupils, with twelve *mainstream teachers*, nine *special needs assistants*, seven *resource teachers*, one *language teacher*, one *special class (ASD) teacher*, one *HSCL Coordinator*, a part-time *secretary* and a full-time *caretaker*. There was a wide range of age groups amongst the staff and this was seen as a positive dynamic in the school. There were four male staff, one of whom was the principal. The principal was assisted in administrative duties by

twelve members of staff who held *special duties posts*.

The school fostered partnership processes at various levels. It worked in close liaison with the School Completion Programme (SCP) and high levels of parent involvement were evident. The school also maintained an active parent-teacher association, which had been in place for a number of years. The Board of Management extended the services of the school by employing a play therapist, two days per week, from a private source of funding. The caring ethos of the school was manifest in many ways and the needs of the children were seen as paramount. Adjacent to the main building was a new Autistic Unit catering for four children, aged eight to ten. The children from this Unit were integrated, whenever possible, into the life of the school.

One of the interesting features of this school was the multi-purpose split-level quadrangle in the centre of the building, which was used for physical education activities, school concerts and assembly time. This space acted as a focal point and a showcase area for many of the schools activities. Surrounding the quadrangle were large bright classrooms that provided adequate space for different teaching and learning styles. Adjacent to the school was a large gymnasium with good facilities and two large outdoor play areas on the same campus that ran down to a busy street where town and school met.

Urban Community Profile

The three urban schools were located in large local authority housing estates, built in the '50s and '60s. As pointed out by Ryan and Galvin (2006: 2) 'the housing development ethos of the time seemed to favour social segregation over social integration' and thereby aggravating the social divide in the city. While the quality of the houses was of a reasonably high standard, 'the planning and provision for social and community development was very limited' (ibid: 2). 'For over three decades unemployment has been endemic and many households have experienced three generations of welfare dependency' (ibid: 3).

Higgins (2008: 178) draws on the research work of McCafferty and Canny (2005) in which they constructed a profile of tenants and estates within the Limerick City area. These authors pointed out that 'while not all local authority estates are the

same … the similarities in general outweigh these differences, and studies conducted in various localities/estates have repeatedly pointed to a number of characteristic problems' (McCafferty and Canny, 2005: 23). According to McCafferty and Canny these problems include high rates of educational disadvantage, high levels of welfare dependency, a greater reliance on public amenities, a high incidence of neighbourhood problems, and quality of life impairment due to anti-social behaviour.

In all three housing estates there was clear evidence of anti-social behaviour. Vandalised buildings and burnt-out cars often scarred the streetscape. Graffiti covered walls read, "*smoke weed and fly*"; "*skinhead rule ok*"; "*{name omitted} is a rat fink*"; "*{name omitted} is a dead man walking*", and so on (Ryan and Galvin, 2006: 3). Many similar threatening signs conveyed an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. The telltale signs of the advance of Ireland's drug culture sent out their insidious messages to a younger generation. Accounts of young children throwing stones at police cars, ambulances and fire engines appeared regularly in local newspapers. Mc Cafferty and Canny's 2005 report *'Limerick Profile of a Changing City'*, (cited in Higgins, 2008: 188) highlights the fact that 'despite the economic growth of the late 1990s, social exclusion remains a major problem in the Limerick urban area' (Mc Cafferty and Canny, 2005: 7). In this respect, the three urban schools were acutely aware of the multiple deprivations experienced by many of the children in their care and endeavoured to compensate for unmet needs in whatever way they could and wherever possible.

Rural Community Profile

Both rural school communities were situated on the western seaboard of Ireland, one in a small town setting and the other in remote open countryside. As explained above both of these schools held *DEIS* Band 2 designated status, and which meant they were seen as experiencing lower levels of educational disadvantage as the DES defined it. The positive response by parents to participation in the FSCEP project activities was viewed by both principals as an indication of the value placed on education in their schools and communities. At the large school, however, some parents spoke of the recent increase in anti-social behaviour and substance abuse in their town and felt that the impact of this was becoming more noticeable in the school.

The region in which these schools were located had a distinct tradition of Irish music, song and dance in which the memory of the past was captured and celebrated. Both schools capitalised on this tradition and augmented it by fostering a love of Irish music and Irish culture in the students. It was interesting to note that the favourite traditional instrument in this area is the concertina and this was taught in both schools to high proficiency, which was a source of pride and joy for many parents. In the small rural school every family knew every other family intimately and this closeness seemed to provide a safeguard and protection against vulnerability and isolation. Homesteads were mainly quite far apart and so the school served as a focal point where parents got to meet, chat and consolidate friendships as they waited to collect their children at the school gate.

5

FAMILY SCHOOL COMMUNITY EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP: QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

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INTRODUCTION >>

This section presents the findings of a survey questionnaire that was disseminated towards the end of the second year of the FSCEP project, within all five participating schools. The survey drew on responses to multiple-choice questions (see Appendix 1) accessing an overview of teachers' opinions, beliefs and observations with regard to working in partnership with parents and the wider community through the FSCEP programmes in their schools. Analysis and interpretation of this survey provided a platform on which to develop an appraisal of teachers' understanding of the home-school-community dynamic and its impact on children's learning. It also drew attention to some of the barriers, both cultural and structural, in relation to the implementation and outcomes of the partnership programmes in schools. The survey helped to inform the future development of the FSCEP project and also helped to inform the development of the qualitative methodologies at a later stage.

METHODOLOGY >>

In June 2007 the largely quantitative questionnaire was disseminated to all teachers and principals (N=63) in the five participating schools. Fifty-one questionnaires were completed in all, a valid response-rate of 80.9%. All questionnaires were returned anonymously. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to collate, organise and analyse the quantitative data gathered. The questionnaire consisted of 26 items in total, two of which were categorical variables with dichotomous responses i.e. yes / no answers. Twenty-four of the items were Likert scales i.e. drawing on statements that asked respondents to rate each individual statement on a five-point Likert scale. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement from 1: 'Strongly agree' to 5: 'Strongly Disagree' with each of the statements. And finally, an open-ended section for general comments was included at the end of the questionnaire; this allowed further clarification of responses to the preceding statements.

FINDINGS >>

The following section presents the findings of the simple frequency analysis that was conducted using SPSS. There were two categorical variables and 24 statements i.e. 26 quantitative items in total; each item has been presented below. It is important to point out that the teaching staffs in these five schools volunteered to participate in the FSCEP project; having fully understood what was required and expected of them. For this reason the responses are only applicable to the schools in question and cannot be seen as representative of the feelings of other school staffs. The survey was carried out during the early years of the FSCEP project and consequently may not reflect the full absorption of the FSCEP programmes into the school cultures or the subsequent changes that may have occurred in the ethos of these schools as a result of the FSCEP project. Nonetheless, the results reflect teachers' views of the project and its effects after almost two years of engagement with the project.

As outlined earlier, the questionnaire contained twenty-four statements that referred to the impact of the FSCEP activity programmes in the individual schools. The participating teachers were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale. The impact of the partnership programmes on teachers, parents, children and the wider community was elicited through an eclectic array of questions, many of which were similar in theme, but each contained a unique and individual focus. To facilitate ease of reading for the reader, the order of the presentation of findings corresponds with the emergent qualitative finding themes. Therefore, they do not follow the consecutive order in which the statements appeared on the questionnaire. Additionally, both the figures and the discussion relative to the tables contained in this section relate to the valid responses only. The number of missing cases for each individual variable is accessible through the tables contained herein.

Theme A: Development and Enhancement of the School Ethos, Mission and/or Culture

The overall attitude of the school staff towards working in partnership with parents, in supporting their children's learning was elicited through statements 1, 2 and 3. The responses provided a strong endorsement of partnership approaches to

children's learning. 98% of the teaching staff of all five schools responded favourably to the FSCEP intervention activities in their schools. 88% believed that their involvement with the partnership activities had given them a deeper appreciation of the concept of educational partnership (statement 2) while 82% indicated that the FSCEP project had raised their awareness of the value of involving parents in their children's learning (statement 3).

Table 5.1: Staff Attitudes to Working in Partnership with Parents						
		I Welcome FSCEP		Deeper Appreciation of Educational Partnerships		Aware of Value of Parental Involvement	
		Frequency	Cum. %	Frequency	Cum. %	Frequency	Cum. %
Valid	*Agree Strongly*	34	68.0	19	37.3	21	41.2
	Agree	15	98.0	26	88.2	21	82.4
	Don't Know	1	100.0	5	98.0	7	96.1
	Disagree	-	-	1	100.0	2	100.0
Missing Answer		1	-	-	-	-	-
Total		51	100.0	51	100.0	51	100.0

Statement 5 elicited teachers' views on the action-research element of the project i.e. journal-keeping during the course of activity programmes, and whether or not it was beneficial to them. 58% indicated that the action-research element of the project was of benefit. Teachers who had not co-ordinated individual class activities were not requested to keep journals and consequently 29% of teachers gave a 'don't know' response to this statement and a further 13% gave a negative response.

Table 5.2: Action-Research Element was of Benefit to Me				
		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative %
Valid	*Agree Strongly*	6	12.5	12.5
	Agree	22	45.8	58.3
	Don't Know	14	29.2	87.5
	Disagree	6	12.5	100.0
Missing Answer		3	-	
Total		51	100.0	

Statement 14: 'The FSCEP activities enhanced parent/teacher relationships with parents' and Statement 18: 'FSCEP increased my interactions with parents and families' sought insights into teachers' relationships with parents and families. In this regard more than three-quarters (78%) of teachers indicated an increase in interactions with parents and families as a result of the FSCEP programmes. 13% indicated a non-committal response and 9% felt that FSCEP activities had not increased parent-teacher interactions. This might reflect the high levels of parent-teacher interactions already in existence in some schools prior to the advent of the FSCEP project; four of the five schools had HSCL coordinators in place. While one cannot equate parent-teacher interactions with relationships, it is reasonable to infer that both are closely linked. Consequently, 84% of respondents indicated that the FSCEP activities had enhanced their relationships with parents, while 1% of responds indicated that the project had not changed teacher-parent relationships in their schools and a remaining 14% registered a non-committal response.

programmes. 28% of teachers registered a 'Don't Know' response to this statement and the remaining 9% disagreed that better pupil-teacher relationships had resulted from the FSCEP activities. The figure of 9% in disagreement is a similar figure to that which indicated a negative response to statement 18 that stated that 'FSCEP increased my interactions with parents and families'.
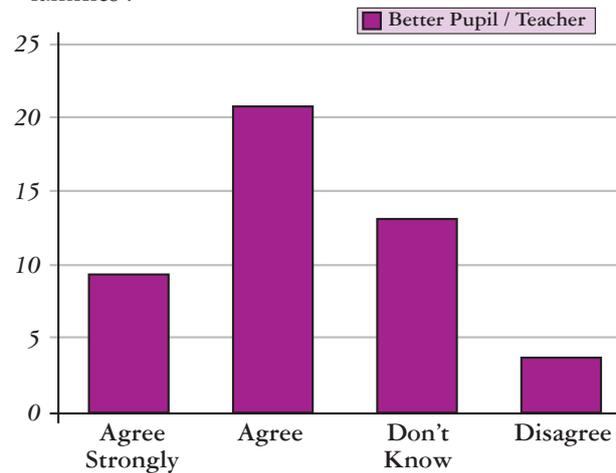
Figure 5.1: Better Pupil/Teacher Relationships have resulted from the FSCEP Project

Table 5.3: Teachers' Relationships with Parents & Families					
		Enhanced Parent / Teacher Relationships		Increased my Interactions with Parents & Families	
		Frequency	Cum. %	Frequency	Cum. %
Valid	*Agree Strongly*	16	32.0	9	19.6
	Agree	26	84.0	27	78.3
	Don't Know	7	98.0	6	91.3
	Disagree	1	100.0	3	97.8
	Strongly Disagree	-	-	1	100.0
Missing Answer		1	-	5	
Total		51	100.0	51	100.0

Statement 21: 'Better pupil/teacher relationships have resulted from FSCEP activities', elicited teachers' opinions on whether or not the FSCEP activities had impacted on pupil-teacher relationships. The quality of relationships, pupil-pupil relationships and pupil-teacher relationships had been highlighted in the teacher journals as a key element of successful partnership activities. 64% of respondents felt that better pupil-teacher relationships had resulted from the FSCEP

In contrast to most of the statements in the questionnaire, statement 6 was phrased in a negative format. This statement focused on the impact of the FSCEP project on teaching practices in the schools. Over half the respondents (53%) disagreed that "the FSCEP project has made little or no difference to the way I work as a teacher". In interpreting this response it could be assumed that the teaching practices of 47% of respondents were not affected by the partnership activities with a

third (33%) indicating that this was the case and the remaining 14% registering a non-committal response. These findings do not correlate with the findings of statements 2 and 3 (outlined earlier), when the majority of respondents agreed that the activities had given them a deeper appreciation of educational partnership and that they believed they now had a greater awareness of the value of parental involvement in children's education. Nor do they correlate with statements 1 or 16, which indicated that that participants 'welcome FSCEP's intervention activities' in their schools and the majority outlining that they would welcome increased parental involvement in the life of the school. Such positive responses offer both hope and reassurance for the promotion of educational partnership. The discrepancy in the figures with regard to the impact on teaching practices in the schools points to the complexities involved in finding shared meanings and to the communication challenges within a partnership process.

Table 5.4: The FSCEP Project has made Little or No Difference to the Way I Work as a Teacher		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Valid	*Agree Strongly*	3	5.9	6.1
	Agree	13	25.5	32.7
	Don't Know	7	13.7	46.9
	Disagree	20	39.2	87.8
	Strongly Disagree	6	11.8	100.0
Missing Answer		2	4.0	
Total		51	100.0	

Statement 11: 'The benefits of the project were confined to a small number of teachers in our school' and Statement 17: 'Only a limited number of parents benefited from the project', sought an understanding of how widespread the benefits of the partnership programmes were believed to be throughout the schools both in term of parental involvement and whole-school participation. Considering that the five schools had volunteered to be part of the FSCEP project it is not surprising that 85% of the overall teaching staff disagreed that its "benefits were confined to a small number of teachers". Nevertheless 4% of respondents felt that FSCEP benefits were 'confined to a small number of teachers' and a remaining 12% gave a non-committal response. These figures are slightly at variance with the FSCEP policy of adopting a whole-school approach to the development of educational partnership. In relation to this discrepancy, statement 17 elicited teachers' views on the extent and benefit of the FSCEP activity programmes to parents. In response to this 76% of teachers believed that only a limited number of parents had benefitted for the FSCEP project, while a further 8% opted for a 'Don't Know' response. However, viewed from a positive stance, the remaining 16% of respondents felt that the FSCEP project had benefitted a broader range of parents and community members.

Table 5.5: Benefits of the Partnership Programmes					
		Benefits Confined to Small Number of Teachers		A Limited Number of Parents Benefited	
		Frequency	Cum. %	Frequency	Cum. %
Valid	Agree Strongly	-	-	5	10.2
	Agree	2	3.9	32	75.5
	Don't Know	6	15.7	4	83.7
	Disagree	33	80.4	7	98.0
	Strongly Disagree	10	100.0	1	100.0
Missing Answer		-	-	2	-
Total		51	100.0	51	100.0

In contrast, the responses to statements 11: 'The benefits of the project were confined to a small number of teachers in our school' and 17: 'Only a limited number of parents benefited from the project' are at variance with the responses to statements 22 and 24. Statement 22 and 24 elicited teachers' perceptions of the impact of the FSCEP activities on the school's image in the local community. Statement 22 required teachers in each of the schools to speculate on their school's image in the local community to which 69% indicated their belief that the FSCEP project had 'raised our school's profile in the community'. By reason of the speculative nature of the statement it is not surprising that 26% of teachers registered a 'Don't Know' response. However, a further 4% disagreed that the FSCEP project had raised the 'school's profile in the community'. Statement 24 sought teachers' views on how they perceived changes to the learning environment within their schools, with over half outlining that the FSCEP project helped their school to become a learning centre for adults and children (see 'Theme C' for more detailed results of this statement).
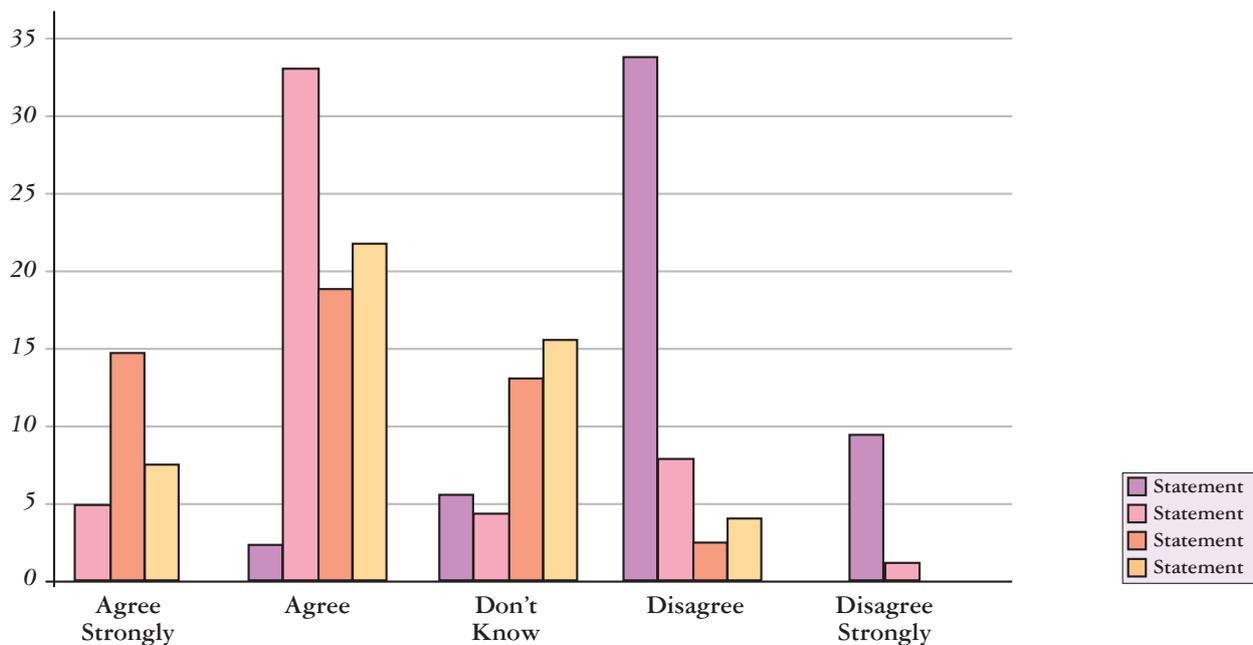
Figure 5.2: Benefits and Impacts of the FSCEP Project

Theme B: Planning of School Policies, Processes, Procedures, Organisational Structure and Practices.

The school-level impact of the FSCEP project activities and their influence on policy and practice within the schools was elicited through statements 4, 7, 9. Statement 4 focused on impacts on organisational matters in the schools to which 64% of respondents agreed that FSCEP project had impacted on school planning and policymaking. In contrast, about a fifth of respondents (22%) indicated their lack of awareness of whether or not this was the case, and a small proportion (14%) disagreed with the statement. Statements 7 and 9 are dealt with separately under Theme C.

Table 5.6: The FSCEP Project has Impacted on our School Planning and Policymaking		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative %
Valid	*Agree Strongly*	11	22.0	22.0
	Agree	21	42.0	64.0
	Don't Know	11	22.0	86.0
	Disagree	6	12.0	98.0
	Strongly Disagree	1	2.0	100.0
Missing		1	-	
Total		51	100.0	

Statements 22, 23 and 24 elicited teachers' views on the impact of the FSCEP project on the local communities and on the capacity-building potential of working in partnership. This final section of the survey attempted to gauge the impact of the FSCEP project on each school's image within its community. As outlined in 'Theme A' above, statement 22 asked participants to speculate on their school's image in the local community, as a result of their involvement in the FSCEP project; to which 69% indicated their belief that the FSCEP project had 'raised our school's profile in the community'. Statement 23 sought an indication of the levels of improved networking with other agencies in the community. In relation to this, a majority of respondents (55%) agreed that FSCEP had developed their networking capacity while 39% registered a non-committal response to this statement and a further 6% disagreed that this was the case. Statement 24 (dealt with in greater detail in Theme C, below) which obtained teachers' views on their school's role as a learning centre for the community found that 59% agreed that the FSCEP has helped their school become a learning centre for adults as well as children.
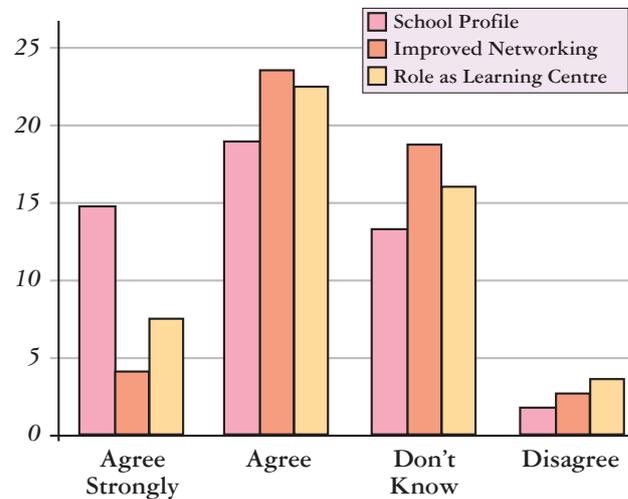
Figure 5.3: Impact of the FSCEP Project on the Local Community

Statement 8 focused on the challenges involved in developing and working in partnership with parents and community members. This statement elicited teachers' views on the requirements of designing, co-ordinating and implementing educational activity programmes. 59% disagreed that FSCEP activities presented an extra workload

while the remaining 41% felt it did bring an additional workload. There were many mitigating factors that possibly influenced teachers' responses to this statement, e.g.: the levels of support available in the endeavour; their own capacities to work collaboratively; physical and structural conditions within the schools etc. Another interpretation of partnership as additional work might be that some teachers were more innovative in the integration of the subject matter of the partnership programmes into the syllabus and consequently included more of the core curriculum groundwork in the partnership activities.

Table 5.7: The FSCEP Project Brought an Added Workload and Extra Pressure on Me as a Teacher				
		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative %
Valid	Agree Strongly	2	4.1	4.1
	Agree	16	32.7	36.7
	Don't Know	1	2.0	38.8
	Disagree	27	55.1	93.9
	Disagree Strongly	3	6.1	100.0
Missing		2	-	
Total		51	100.0	

The final statement within this theme, statement 10: 'The FSCEP project provided some well-designed, inclusive and comprehensive approaches to family involvement in children's learning', received an overwhelmingly positive response, with 82% of respondents agreeing that the project provided some well-designed approaches. However, 12% didn't know if the project made this contribution and 4% disagreed with the statement.

Table 5.8: The FSCEP Project Provided Some Well-designed, Inclusive and Comprehensive Approaches to Family Involvement in Children's Learning				
		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative %
Valid	Agree Strongly	10	20.4	20.4
	Agree	30	61.2	81.6
	Don't Know	6	12.2	93.9
	Disagree	2	4.1	98.0
	Disagree Strongly	1	2.0	100.0
Missing		2	-	
Total		51	100.0	

Theme C: Teaching, Curriculum Development and Learning Styles

In the categorical statements teachers were asked to indicate the nature of their participation, i.e. whether they had been part of whole-school activities or individual class activities. The whole-school activities included those teachers who had organised individual class activities. Figure 5.4 (below) illustrates that 80.5% of those respondents who responded to this item had participated in whole-school activities. These activities included Christmas concerts, summer shows, St Patrick's Day parade activities, whole-school literacy projects and various fieldtrips.

Involved in whole school activites

19.50%

80.50%
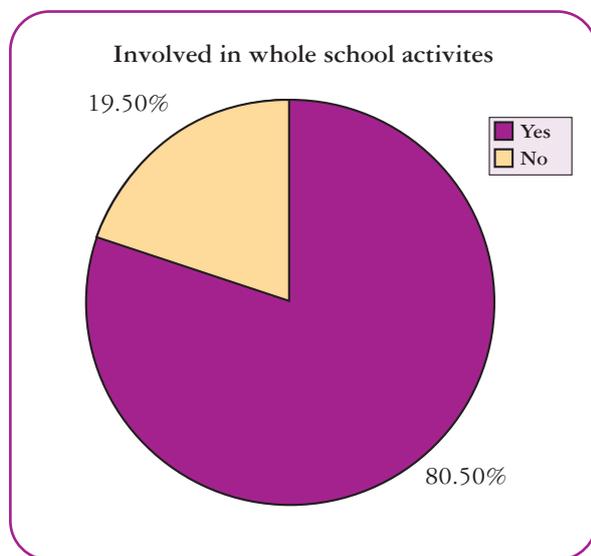
Figure 5.4: I Have Been Involved in Whole-School Activities with FSCEP

As noted earlier, a high proportion of teachers who engaged in whole-school activities also designed their own individual class activities. Figure 5.5 below illustrates that, of those respondents who responded to this item, 75.5% were involved in individual activity programmes in their own classrooms. These activities involved parents and guardians in the classrooms engaging in shared-reading programmes, maths-games programmes, music programmes, dance and performance activities, mime and movement activities and various art/craft activities, as well as outdoor activities such as sports, gardening, school grounds enhancement, equestrian experiences, sea-shore and workplace experiences etc. Many of these activities necessitated going on trips to various venues.

Involved in individual class activites

25.50%

75.50%
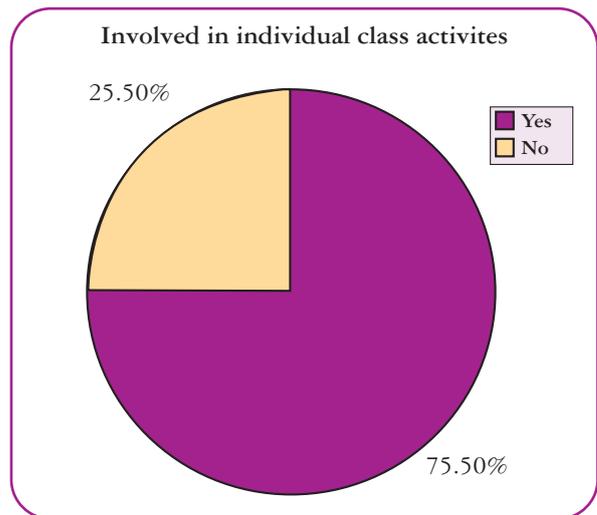
Figure 5.5: I Have Been Involved with Activities with my Class for FSCEP

Statement 20: 'Children's attendance and behaviour improved because of FSCEP activities', explored links between the FSCEP activities and children's attendance and behaviour at school. The willingness and enthusiasm to attend partnership activities was seen as a growth point for some pupils. However the statistics were somewhat inconclusive with 40% believing that there was an improvement in the children's attendance and behaviour that could be attributed to the FSCEP activities. However, 14% disagreed that this was the case, which may be an indication of teacher awareness of the many 'external' factors involved in pupils' lives and another 42% of the valid return registered a 'Don't Know' response.
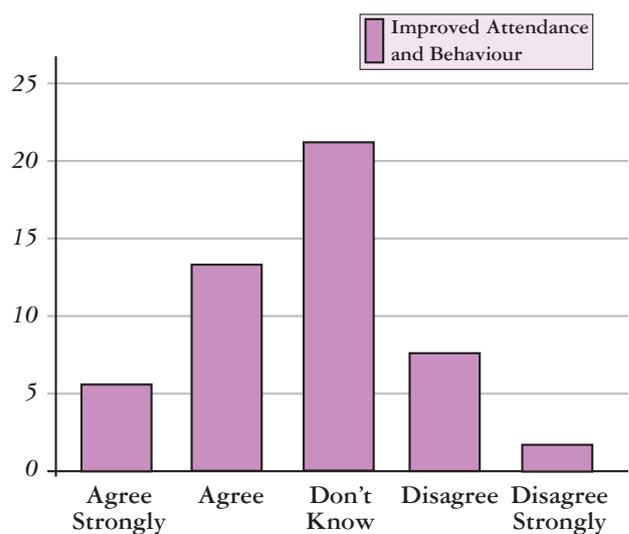
Figure 5.6: Children's Attendance and Behaviour Improved Because of FSCEP Activities

Almost three-quarters of respondents (74%) agreed that "FSCEP activities brought a new dynamic to teaching and learning for my class" (statement 7) and less than a fifth (16%) disagreed that this was the case. On a related theme statement 9 attempted to gauge teacher awareness of the importance of *complementary learning* in the home and in the community as an aid to the more formal school learning to which 45% either agreed or strongly agreed that *complementary learning* was important and 'consequently offered more interactive homework'.
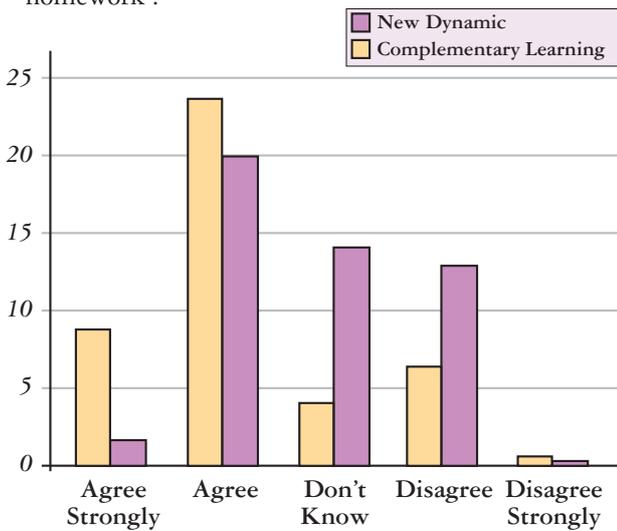
Figure 5.7: FSCEP Activities Brought a New Dynamic to Teaching and Learning for my Class

In response to statement 15: 'As a teacher, I welcome increased parent involvement in the life of this school', all teachers either agreed (54%) or strongly agreed (46%) that they would welcome increased parental involvement in the life of the school and all but one indicated a desire for increased parent participation in children's education (statement 16: 'As a teacher I want increased parent participation in children's learning').

Table 5.9: As a Teacher I Welcome Increased Parental Involvement					
		In the Life of the School		In Children's Learning	
		Frequency	Cum. %	Frequency	Cum. %
Valid	*Agree Strongly*	-	-	5	10.2
	Agree	2	3.9	32	75.5
	Don't Know	6	15.7	4	83.7
Missing Answer		-	-	2	-
Total		51	100.0	51	100.0

Also related to children's learning were statements 19 and 20 which elicited teachers' views on the impact of FSCEP programmes on children, from a number of capacity building perspectives; their engagement with literacy and numeracy activities, their attendance and behaviour, the levels of home involvement in their learning and relationships with their teachers. Statement 20 was dealt with above and in relation to statement 19 over half of the teachers (52%) agreed that FSCEP improved pupils' engagement with literacy and numeracy, a third (33%) indicated a 'Don't Know' response and 15% disagreed that this was the case. This may reflect the fact that the main focus of the project in some schools was not on literacy and numeracy but on other activities in the area of arts education. Partnership activities in the area of arts education were very popular in all schools and were viewed as a means of developing individual capacity in children through intrinsically motivated activities.

(10%) disagreed that this was so. In contrast 94% of respondents agreed that the FSCEP project had increased parental involvement in partnership activities in the school (statement 12) and 84% believed that this had enhanced parent-teacher relationships (statement 14 – Theme A). This draws attention to the fact that a large percentage of the partnership activities were based in the schools and in the main were organised by teachers.
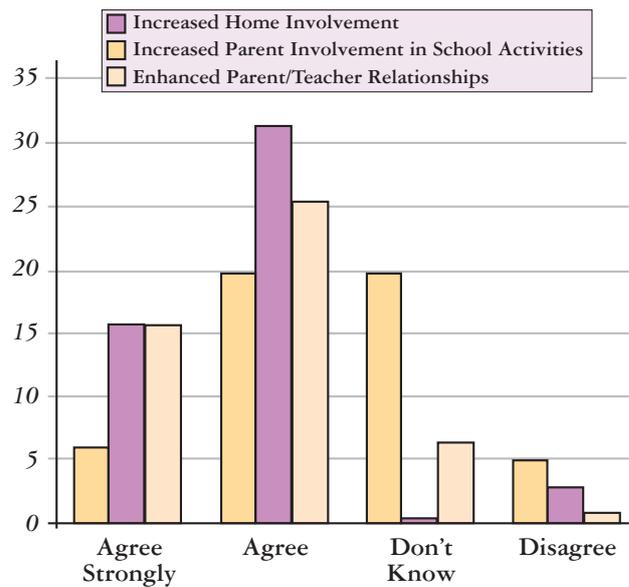
Figure 5.9: Parental Involvement in the Home compared with in the School

Statement 24 elicited teachers' views on their schools' role as a learning centre for their communities. Overall a large majority of respondents (59%) agreed with this statement and in one of the schools the response to this statement registered full agreement, with 100% of teachers believing that the FSCEP project had helped the school to 'become a learning centre for adults as well as children'. 33% were non-committal in their response to this statement and a further 8% felt that this was not the case.

Figure 5.8: The Impact of the FSCEP Programmes on Children's Literacy, Numeracy, Attendance and Behaviour

Statement 13 related to parental involvement in their children's learning in the home setting. This required some speculation on the part of teachers to elicit whether or not 'home involvement in children's learning increased because of FSCEP'. In response to this statement, over half the respondents (51%) agreed that home involvement in children's learning increased as a result of FSCEP activities. A large proportion of respondents (39%) registered a 'Don't Know' response and a tenth

Table 5.10: FSCEP Helped Our School Become a Learning Centre for Adults as well as Children		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative %
Valid	Agree Strongly	7	14.3	14.3
	Agree	22	44.9	59.2
	Don't Know	16	32.7	91.8
	Disagree	4	8.2	100.0
Missing		2	-	
Total		51	100.0	

Additional Comments

At the end of the questionnaire teachers were invited to include additional comments. All responses were anonymous; therefore it was not possible to apply a reference coding system to these quotations. Thirteen of the fifty-one respondents added comments, most of which most were very positive and complimentary to the FSCEP project with phrases such as: "A very worthwhile programme; more of the same please". One of the principals highlighted the successes of the project and attributed these successes to "parent enthusiasm and teacher enthusiasm". Another teacher's comment highlighted "the confidence-building" nature of the programmes and believed that "the children had benefitted greatly" from the partnership activities. One respondent pointed to the difficulty of trying to meet the needs of each individual child and parent, but believed "we must try to do so". The sharing of skills and talents was stressed by another respondent as an important element of the project. Whilst another respondent, who indicated that she was not in a mainstream class, felt that some teachers may have 'felt excluded from the programmes'. Some comments were negative in tone and focused on the difficulties experienced. One comment read: "I was reluctant to begin projects because money was not available up-front to purchase materials". In relation to this difficulty the FSCEP management had requested school principals to advance sums of money to teachers for prospective activities, whenever this was possible. Another teacher felt that the project management should offer "greater guidance and back-up" to participating teachers, while another felt that the activities were good, but that "it was a pity that all parents will not attend". And finally, a principal stated that she/he had enjoyed the partnership activities and believed that all were beneficial to the school but that "some were more successful than others".

CONCLUSION >>

It is clear from the response to the survey that the five participating schools were open to the concept of educational partnership and recognised the importance of parents' roles in their children's education and also showed a deep awareness of the influence of the community on their work as teachers. There was strong agreement that the FSCEP project impacted favourably on parent-teacher relationships, on pupil-teacher relationships and on school-community relationships and this was seen as being beneficial to the children's growth and development. The survey indicated the importance of bringing families and schools more closely together in the education process and of the need to involve the greater community in the life of a school. It provided a convincing endorsement of educational partnerships as the way forward in Irish primary education. On balance the majority of teachers indicated growth points attributed to the FSCEP activities in relation to their schools' culture and practices and these were seen as beneficial to their work in the classrooms and also their work with parents. In addition, the partnership activities were seen to impact on school planning and policymaking and on teacher reflexivity. The responses indicate that involvement in the FSCEP partnership programmes was a source of capacity building for teachers, parents and children. Parent capacity development was seen to take place

through increased participation in their children's learning both in the home and in the school which, in turn, was shown to impact favourably on children's attendance, behaviour and engagement with learning. The schools' standing in their communities was also seen as an outcome of the capacity building process at community level and this was related to improved interagency networking and the evolution of the school as a learning centre for their respective communities. Finally, the responses produced some confusing statistics in relation to teachers' perceptions of impact of the FSCEP project on their professional practice and the extent to which the partnership programmes reached all members of the school communities.

It is worth noting, at this point, the limitations of the quantitative findings. Although they provide a statistical overview of the teachers attitudes towards and opinions on the benefits, challenges and structures of working in partnership, it does not test how successful partnerships function and what the impediments to developing such partnerships in all schools are. What the quantitative findings do is provide a platform on which to locate the qualitative findings of this study in relation to the home-school-community dynamic that existed in the five schools in which the FSCEP project operated. However, the qualitative data analysed and presented in the subsequent section offers a deeper appreciation of the nature, process and outcomes of family-school-community partnerships.

6

FAMILY SCHOOL COMMUNITY EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP: QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

AUTHOR: JOHN GALVIN >>

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"*There was a great buzz about the place when the parents were in*" [5]

INTRODUCTION >>

The current section presents the main findings of the research conducted with the five participating schools, the families and the community members who participated in the FSCEP research study. A total of 159 individuals participated in the research i.e. five principals, fifty-seven teachers, thirty parents/guardians/adults, forty-one children and young people, four HSCLs, three SCP representatives, two people representing local family resource centres, four community development project representatives and thirteen programme facilitators.

This section is presented thematically in three parts, with an initial overview of the historical context within which the schools were operating. The first theme, Theme A, which is perhaps the most detailed, refers to the development and/or enhancement of the school ethos, mission and/or culture and how those elements influence working in partnership with families and communities. The second theme, Theme B, contains findings relating to the more measurable, logistical elements of working in partnership i.e. the presence of school policies, processes, procedures, organisational structures and practices, and how they impact on partnership processes. The final theme, Theme C, presents findings that relate to teaching, curriculum development and learning styles - this section outlines how partnership enhanced educational outcomes for children, families and schools. Further discussion on the main findings is contained within the final section of this report.

[5] Participating teacher's quote (AY2,2).

FINDINGS >>

Many of the challenges to educational partnership have their roots in the historical evolution of the contemporary Irish educational system. Since educational practice is an evolutionary phenomenon it was inevitable that residual elements of traditional practices would become evident as barriers to some degree in all schools. However, the schools that were involved in the FSCEP project must be acknowledged for their courage in actively opting to become part of the FSCEP project, which provided both challenges and opportunities for these schools to reflect on existing practice, acknowledge good practice, and actively strive towards greater participation for all stakeholders in the child's educational journey. The consensus is that when educational partnership is in practice; the child's learning is greatly enhanced: 'The evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life' (Henderson and Berla, 1994: 1).

One HSCL coordinator (CT14) believed: "The main issue for educational partnership is attitudinal change ... the other practical things will come about in time if schools believe that a partnership approach is the best way forward". A brief review of how education systems and school structures evolved will assist the reader in appreciating some of the difficulties which were faced by the schools in overcoming the wide range of barriers to involving families and the wider community in children's education,

Historical Perspective
Schools as we understand them today are an evolutionary product of political and economic compromises informed by assumptions about teaching and learning. With the introduction of compulsory education at the end of the nineteenth century the state assumed the responsibility formally held by 'parents, community and Church' (OECD, 1997: 25) and became the new stakeholders in the provision of primary education, and 'whether or not the parents wanted their child to spend every day in school, the law now obliged them to conform' (ibid: 25). Indeed, according to the OECD report, *Parents as Partners in Schooling* (OECD, 1997) '…the advent of compulsory education had a marked effect on the relationship between the family and society' (ibid: 25). This was

accelerated in the aftermath of World War II when there was a rapid expansion of schooling in Britain and Ireland under fairly rigid prescribed guidelines that resulted in schools being responsible for education and the parents' role being confined to the socialisation and moral training of children. Since the vast majority of parents had little or no schooling themselves teachers were seen as 'experts' when it came to academic education (ibid: 25). Hence, little value was placed on parents' views and parent involvement or participation in the life of the school was not encouraged. In Britain with the development of a welfare state, schools moved into the sphere of social and moral education and even took responsibility for physical health. Indeed, '…the churches began to withdraw from their former educational function and went into partnership with the state' (ibid: 25). Within the Irish context this also held the opportunity to ensure the development of a strong Catholic ethos in all schools. Consequently, '…from being central to the overall development of their children, families ran the risk of being pushed onto the sidelines' (ibid: 25).

Over the years, as government reforms were put in place, ulterior motives were often the driving forces for such changes. Carr (2003) informs us that the history of educational reform indicates that:

> **…those advancing the case of social and educational reform did so, not because of any strong desire to improve the wellbeing of the working class, but because they believed that the best way to resist threats to the existing social order was to provide working-class children with an elementary education that would instil in them the knowledge, values and attitudes that would reconcile them to their future social and economic roles in the emerging industrial society. (Carr, 2003: 8)**

In addition, Carr (2003: 8) points out that the utilitarian philosophy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century demanded that '…the contribution of any public institution to the common good had to be calculated in terms of its productive usefulness'. Hence, the measure of effectiveness of social services was linked to the burden it imposed on the taxpayer. In relation to

this, the underfunding of primary education in Ireland has been a major cause of concern for many decades (CMRS, 1992; Combat Poverty Agency, 1993; INTO, 1994). The FSCEP project research resonated with these concerns. A principal (DT1) in one school was adamant that "money spent at primary level would offset the need for greater expenditure in redressing social ills at later stages". In another school the principal (BT1) pointed out that "The additional resource provided by the FSCEP project enabled us to implement programmes that otherwise would not have been possible". The HSCL coordinator (CT14) in another school highlighted the importance of designing "parent-friendly partnership programmes" and stated "the structure of the activities challenged some of the taken-for-granted assumptions in the primary school system".

Past Legacies

Institutionalised cultures tend to be resistant to change. As a consequence, many embedded assumptions within school cultures act as subconscious and conscious barriers that prevent real progress towards the full actualisation of educational partnership. Traditionally schools tended to be autonomous in all matters concerning school policy and operation and their relationships with parents and local communities reflected this. This power imbalance was experienced as the norm for many generations. As one parent (AP3) stated: "Teachers were seen as authority figures in the community...you never questioned decisions made by the school". In attempting to address this imbalance the FSCEP project endeavoured to create an awareness of the need to involve parents in the decision-making process at all levels of school planning but recognised that this would be a slow and difficult undertaking. For example, the organisation of the school year and the school day has always been regarded as an internal matter for school staffs and often little consideration was given to what may or may not have suited parents. A HSCL coordinator (CT14) asserted "getting consensus amongst neighbouring schools with regard to school closures throughout the year was a difficult task". In relation to this, the coordinator recounted the inconvenience experienced by one family whose children were attending four different schools, "…the youngest in junior school, two girls in the girls' school, a boy in the boys' school and an older girl in the local secondary school". In this regard, involvement with the partnership activities

helped to increase awareness of the need to consider parents' wishes in the overall planning of school structures.

For their part, many parents found, as one mother (BP2) put it, that 'old habits die hard'. Many parents still hold negative memories in relation to parent-teacher interactions. A grandmother's (BT3) memories summed up some psychological barriers that seemed to affect many parents: "In my time you came with your children to the school door and no further ... but sometimes you'd be sent for if your child was bold". 'Being sent for' was often a daunting experience for parents and usually had negative connotations. In such situations the communication between teachers and parents tended to focus on children's 'bad' behaviour while 'good' behaviour went largely unnoticed.

Discussions on these issues increased awareness within the school staff of the need to send out positive messages to the community. Consequently, all schools compiled annual newsletters for distribution throughout their communities featuring the highlights of the school's activities. These were well balanced and sensitively composed newsletters that conveyed very positives images of the schools and acknowledged parental support and assistance throughout the year. The importance of sensitivity of language when communicating with parents came to light during an interview with a group of parents in which a mother (DP2) explained her unease at a greeting that went: "You here again today"? While this may have been said in jest it was interpreted negatively by the parent and had discouraged her from attending other activities. This incident raised awareness of parents' vulnerability in these situations and points to the need for teachers to reassure them of their welcome in the school.

The FSCEP project also increased awareness of the need for culturally responsive homework assignments in which parents could participate and make a contribution in a meaningful way. Historically, schools placed little value on children's home educational experiences, and parents' input into their children's education was often prescribed by the teacher. In addition the prescribed homework was 'often a source of stress' for both children and parents (INTO, 1994: 36), which impacted in a negative way on children's feelings about school. From its inception the FSCEP project

set out to nurture an empathic relationship between the schools and their communities by promoting family input into the education process as a mechanism to maximise the child's learning. One parent's (AT3) comment highlighted the value of ensuring 'a fun element' in children's homework: "Helping with FSCEP activities at home was different from the usual homework, 'twas fun, the kids enjoyed it, and we enjoyed helping them". The FSCEP project endeavoured to facilitate a parent-centred approach to planning and decision-making and through this process hoped to foster a more integrated approach to school policy-making and thus help to build the capacity of the school, home and the local community to work more closely together.

THEME A: DEVELOPMENT AND ENHANCEMENT OF THE SCHOOL ETHOS, MISSION AND/OR CULTURE >>

The first of the three themes that emerged is possibly the most detailed of all three. However, that does not indicate that it is, by any stretch of the imagination, the most significant. On the contrary, all three emergent themes hold equal weight within the current study, as each plays a valuable role in influencing and supporting partnership activities and programmes with families and communities. The present theme includes research findings relating to: Mission Statements of the five schools; participant reflexivity; communication; working collaboratively; capacity building; quality of relationships; and integration and inclusion.

School Mission Statements
The following table contains the Mission Statements of all five participating schools. As evidenced within the statements, all five schools are at varying stages of development in terms of parental involvement and links with their communities but each school enjoys its own unique home-school-community dynamic:

Table 6.1: School Mission Statements	
	SCHOOL MISSION STATEMENT
School A	"…in partnership and communication with parents to create a happy atmosphere and environment in a team spirit, which will enhance and encourage the teaching and learning of all pupils in order to develop their spiritual, cognitive, emotional, kinaesthetic, musical and social skills, thereby encouraging and making their learning and development a happy experience."
School B	"…aims to provide a welcoming, enjoyable, high quality and inclusive learning centre for all members of the local community."
School C	"…the management and staff, together with parents strive to create a happy environment where pupils learn and develop spiritually, emotionally and socially. We endeavour to promote self-esteem, thus ensuring the overall development of each child, encompassing a life-long love of learning."
School D	"…is committed to a working and learning environment in the Christian tradition where respect, co-operation and responsibility are essential to positive learning experiences."
School E	"…strives to provide a well-ordered, caring happy and secure environment where the intellectual, spiritual, physical, moral and cultural needs of the pupils are identified and addressed…cherishes all children equally and strives to develop the potential for learning that exists in each person."

Participant Reflexivity

The importance of reflexivity as an effective strategy to working in partnership emerged across the research journals, the formal interviews and day-to-day discussions with participating teachers, parents and community members. It was evident from an early stage in the research process that teachers were acutely aware of their need to develop greater sensitivity towards parents' experiences and needs. This acknowledgement gave rise to an ethos of working towards more culturally responsive programmes and engaging in greater consultation with parents in the planning and designing of partnership activities. Many teachers identified the need for greater familiarisation with and knowledge of the children's background, culture and customs, as they understood that it was of paramount importance in enhancing and guiding their involvement in the partnership process. In this respect, the FSCEP project provided a mechanism for teachers to examine their own personal assumptions and beliefs in regard to working in this way.

Awareness Raising and Reflective Practice in the Schools

During the course of the FSCEP project, staff meetings in all schools became sites for discussions on partnership issues and together the researcher and participants extended an understanding of what the concept meant and how best it might be implemented. As one teacher (AT7) pointed out: "We are gaining a deeper understanding of partnership, which in turn will lead to more consultation with parents and a greater awareness of working closely with the community". Awareness of parents' feelings was seen by another principal (ET1) as crucially important "in establishing a rapport, in building trust, in bridging differences, in gathering information and in developing friendships". O'Donohue's (1998: 109) observations are of interest in this connection when he points out that "…awareness is one of the greatest gifts you can bring to your friendship. Where there is a depth of awareness there is a great reverence for human presence". One parent's (DP2) classroom experience seemed to capture this concept concisely:

> **To be there inside in the middle of it was a lovely experience… I felt valued and I really appreciated been given the chance to be there… you see your child in a different light… I was thrilled to be there for him. (DP2)**

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

> **Exploring the partnership between the children, the parents, and myself has made me realise the asset such a relationship could be…the parents had a very different point of view to me as a teacher in many areas and this caused me to rethink my stance on a number of issues. (ET1)**

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

It should be noted that not all parents were able or willing to become involved in school-based partnership activities. While high visibility of parents within the schools was a desired outcome because as a principal (AT1) asserted "it gives off the right signals to students about the importance of education", it was difficult to maintain the momentum of involvement after a few sessions had elapsed. Only once-off fieldtrips or audience participation occasions brought out a full cohort of parents during the course of activity programmes. On the other hand it was pointed out by a young member of staff (CT8) in one school "there simply wouldn't be space for large groups of adults to work

in my classroom". One of the biggest challenges, therefore, for all schools was finding ways of reaching all parents and creating meaningful opportunities for them to be involved in their children's learning. Much discussion took place in trying to clarify the researcher and participants' thinking on these issues during the many interactions of designing, planning and implementing programmes. A general consensus amongst all school staffs believed that any activities whether in the classroom, the home, or in the community that enabled parents to become involved in their children's education and development could be viewed as partnership in practice. This was an important learning point for many teachers, which, as one teacher (CT1) pointed out "improved the quality of the partnership programmes by reducing the pressure to have adults present in the classrooms".

Awareness Raising in the Communities

Parent reflexivity was also evident throughout the data. This was captured in a less structured way, mainly during the course of conversations and discussions at planning meetings, but also through the interviews across the lifetime of the FSCEP project. A father (CP2) of two young children stated: "what you put in, you get out. You need to put an effort in to help children achieve…children pick up on parents' expectations". During the course of the interview this parent (CP2) explained that he worked at home and welcomed the chance to be more involved in his children's education. He claimed that "a man can't hang around in the school, you need an invitation, a reason to be part of your child's learning" and was grateful for the opportunities afforded him through the FSCEP project. It gave him, as he phrased it "a ticket of admission to my daughter's classroom". In another school a father (BP3) came from his workplace to be in his daughter's classroom for the Science Discovery activities and later joked about it by saying: "the things we do for our children, but if we don't do it, who will?" Hence, constructing a more central role for male members of families and designing programmes to this effect became an issue of concern in the schools.

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

Male participation within the classroom, across all schools, was low by comparison to female participation. In relation to this challenge a facilitator of one community-focused activity programme pioneered a new approach stating that: "We would like to explore the possibility of visiting their [parents'] place of work". This was organised and subsequently the children were invited to visit various work environments throughout this rural community, which were mainly the workplaces of fathers. This worked out well and teachers and parents alike appreciated the learning involved in these visits. The activities were viewed by the teacher (ET1) as a means of expanding participants' worldviews in ways that fostered deeper insights into the holistic nature of learning and knowledge generation. Similar experiences in other schools raised awareness for teachers and parents of their complementary roles in the children's education. A mother (CP2) of three school-going children said, "it's great for parents and teachers to be working together…in this way we learn things about our own children as well and you see what their potential is in the different areas ". Another parent (BP2) pointed out that "parents need to be part of the process and can learn a lot from being in the classroom and might be able to continue the lessons in the home".

In many instances the data highlighted the importance of parental presence in the classrooms. Being present in the classroom setting, even for brief periods, stimulated some reflexivity for one parent (DP3) who pointed to the benefit of observing activities in the classroom: "You get to see a different side of your child, you see how they relate to other children in the classroom context and you're happy to know that they're doing alright and becoming their own person". The benefit of spending time in the classroom was also highlighted by another young mother (AP3) of four children who reflected on the importance of being able to give special attention to each child:

> I think she loves me coming into her classroom … it's like our time together because at home she has to fight for my attention. So I think that when I come down to the school … that's our time together doing our special thing just for an hour or so … it was kinda 'me and her time' and that will have a positive effect on her. (AP3)

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

The question of what parents wanted most for their children from the school system often arose during the course of conversations between parents and the FSCEP Partnership Development Coordinator[6]. Invariably the answer would be, as one mother (BP2) put it: "That they are happy and fulfilled in themselves and develop their personalities and their confidence". What Tolle (2004: 88) points out is relevant here and became the central theme of many discussions while planning activities: 'Your life's journey has an outer purpose and an inner purpose'. He asserts that if too much attention is focused on our outward purpose we are likely to 'completely miss the journey's inner purpose, which has nothing to do with where you are going or what you are doing but everything to do with how' (Tolle, 2004: 88). The word how, therefore, became an important word in discourses relating to the working of the FSCEP project, particularly in relation to working with the more vulnerable sections of society. Many participants of the partnership activities saw how we related to each other as fellow humans as an important outcome. During one such discussion a teacher (BT14) in an urban school believed that "our education system tends to focus on the outer purpose often to the exclusion of the inner purpose". She claimed "the system places a high value on academic achievement, sometimes to the neglect of other important qualities and attributes".

Embracing Difference

All the participating schools in the project cater for children and families who include children from diverse backgrounds. These include children from the Traveller Community, children of different ancestry and children with special educational needs. The FSCEP project remained deeply conscious of facilitating the involvement of diverse groups in the

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

Four of the five schools have a small number of children of different ancestry, all of whom were encouraged to participate in the FSCEP project activities. All four principals reported a readiness on the part of the foreign national families to take part wherever possible. When one school sought help in preparing the school hall for a summer show the principal (BT1) pointed out that "a group of foreign national parents volunteered to make up a

[6] The FSCEP Partnership Development Coordinator's role included the gathering, collation and analysis of primary research.

large backdrop for the stage and also painted colourful posters for display on the walls". At a later stage many of these parents participated in the focus group discussion that was held in the school hall and readily shared their views of their own cultural experiences. This was something new for the school community and as such was enjoyed as a new experience. In another school an activity programme celebrated cultural diversity by holding an intercultural fair where parents and children of many different ancestries set up cultural displays in the school hall for the local community to view.

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

> **On one occasion when a seven-year old child won a prize in the Write-a-Book activity his parents were full of praise for the school and as a reward for the child decided to take the whole family for lunch in a local restaurant to celebrate his success (AT2).**

One other profile of families presented serious challenges to the development of partnership and warranted much discussion at various levels in the urban schools. There was a marked awareness amongst school staffs of community members who were engaged in criminal activities and in anti-social behaviour. In implementing activity programmes, school principals seemed to be in agreement that the most acceptable policy for the inclusion of all families, was that of a non-judgemental approach while at the same time being alert to the dynamics that operated amongst other parents within that community. In this respect the accumulated knowledge of experienced staff members in these schools proved to be an invaluable asset to the FSCEP project. Discussions on this topic in one school raised further concerns in reference to parental presence in the classrooms.

Communication

The data contained many references to the importance of communication skills and indicated that communication is far more than the sharing of information. Communication skills were seen as key elements in relationship building and also in developing bonds of friendship. All school staffs accepted that the development of good communication skills were crucial to the development of educational partnership. During a focus-group session that involved parents, teachers and community members from the three urban schools the issue of good communication was discussed in the context of children's behaviour. Discipline requirements in the formal learning environment of the school setting were discussed and contrasted with the informal setting of the home environment. It was noted during the course of the discussion that misunderstandings between parents and teachers are often related to behavioural issues of children while in the care of teachers. It was accepted that agreement between the home and the school with regard to codes of behaviour was of paramount importance for the smooth running of partnership activities.

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

> **I felt so embarrassed coming in for the first time, but the teacher was brilliant, she explained everything so well and told me not to worry and made me feel at ease. I think you kinda forget about it when you see the kids enjoying themselves and you start to enjoy it too because they're enjoying it…you look forward, then, to coming in every week and doing different stuff with them (DP3).**

In another interview a parent (BP3) in one of the urban schools highlighted the benefits of her improved communication skills with her children due to participating in classroom activities:

> **The things I was doing with the kids in the classroom in a way kinda relates to them and their little world and so**

when you get home if they are talking about it you can communicate better with them because you know what they are after doing in the classroom and so there's more fun in doing it with them at home. (BP3)

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

I knew she was shy but every week she is coming on and she is getting better and better. When she sees me in around the school it makes her feel special; it gives her more confidence and makes her feel more involved. When she has to stand up and say out her name she looks at me and smiles and every week she has been that little bit louder…her teacher said she is getting more and more confident. (AP2)

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

Information Sharing
The practical aspects of communicating with large numbers of people were highlighted at various times in the evaluation sheets, which were completed at the end of activity programmes. Effective sharing of information was seen as an important element of communication but was also seen as a difficult undertaking. In the early stages one principal (AT1) stated that "it was difficult to communicate the concept of partnership to some staff members and that parents had little or no understanding of what working in partnership meant". In order to address this problem the principal suggested that a 'flyer' (Appendix 2) should be designed that would convey in simple format what the project was trying to accomplish. The same principal asserted, "...the more informed

parents are the more willing they will be to buy into what we are trying to do". After much re-drafting the flyer was circulated to all members of the school community and was also hand-delivered to other agencies working in the school catchment area. This provided an opportunity to improve local networking and a chance to discuss common aims and objectives with other local agencies working with children. Prominent amongst these were the Family Resource Centre (FRC), the Local Education Committees (LEC) and the School Completion Programme (SCP). This exercise was then replicated in the other four school environments.

Working Collaboratively
Many teachers acknowledged in the journals that through FSCEP project activities their collaboration skills were improved. However, they also pointed to the extra work involved in working collaboratively. As one teacher (BT14) put, "you need to be super organised when you have parents coming into the classroom and you must have everything very well prepared". As well as impacting on school practice there was also evidence to show that the FSCEP project impacted on school policy. In two of the schools special duties posts, carrying responsibility for promoting educational partnership, were allocated to members

of staff. One such staff member explained that this resulted in partnership issues being prioritised on the agenda at staff meetings and consequently greatly increased collaboration between all partners in the education process; increased parent-teacher collaboration, internal school collaboration and school-community collaboration.

Parent-Teacher Collaboration

At various times in all five schools many parents, particularly mothers, gave willingly of their time and energy in supporting partnership programmes. Participating in this way was a new experience not just for parents but also for teachers and pupils. After initial apprehension it proved to be a very positive learning experience for the vast majority of those who got involved. One parent (DP3) pointed out: "You feel differently about the school … you are friends with the teacher and you know what's going on". Another (EP3) believed it was important for parents to have first-hand knowledge of classroom activities: "Parents and the community can see what teachers have to do in the school and should try to support them". A parent (CP2), who was an active member of a community development project, hinted at a political dimension to partnership and concluded, "Showing parents and teachers what power they have when the whole school community works together is what it's all about". Two teacher journals, one from an urban school and one from a rural school, expressed similar views by stressing the reciprocal nature of learning and highlighting the positive effects of working collaboratively. The urban school (AT7) journal read: "It provides a framework through which we can learn from each other…it generates a lot of enthusiasm and people are interested in how everything is progressing". In similar vein a parent (BP2) pointed out that "being in the classroom provided an opportunity for informal chats with the teacher that helped her to understand how her child was coming along". It is interesting to note that these informal chats were seen by many parents as being more helpful than the formal once-a-year parent-teacher meetings.

It was clear from the data that endeavouring to work in close collaboration with parents made additional demands on teachers' time and energy. As a member of the management team phrased it: "Working in partnership is not for the faint-hearted". In this respect, there were some experiences that were less positive especially in the early stages of the project. One teacher (DT15) wrote that "parents had too little understanding of partnership and that they saw it as a chore rather than something that could and should be enjoyed". Another teacher (ET2) expressed some annoyance that all the organization and administration involved in putting partnership programmes in place was left to her, and that while there were great benefits she also said it also created a lot of extra work:

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

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

Internal School Collaboration

In the main, the project necessitated a lot of teamwork on the part of school staffs. The willingness and ability of staff members to work collaboratively, however, cannot be taken for granted and, as one principal (DT1) noted, "… needs to be fostered and maintained". Ensuring a

whole-school approach was viewed by all principals as a necessary element in making partnership work well. Another principal (AT1) believed that "for partnership to succeed all staff members, including ancillary staff, should be of one mind in our approach to parental involvement". It became clear from the start that school secretarial and caretaking staff had a key role to play in the partnership process. In many instances the schools' secretaries or caretakers were the first point of contact for parents and other visitors entering the school. Their relationship with parents was mainly on a first name basis and they were generally seen, as one parent (AP2) put it, "more approachable". Their interpersonal skills and talents at reaching out to visitors and making them feel welcome and at ease were commented on at many staff meetings.

Ironically, in none of the schools were ancillary staff members included in monthly staff meetings and, as a consequence, whole-school approaches to partnership were discussed in their absence. Other difficulties in bringing all staff members on board arose in one of the schools where one member (DT2) of staff had been previously pioneering innovative ways of working with parents and felt that her work was "being overshadowed and duplicated by some of the activity programmes of the FSCEP project". On reflection it was accepted

that her observations were justified. Making amends and attempting to clear up misunderstandings met with some success but it seemed that some misgivings remained. In this regard, working in ways that are sensitive to the feelings of others and that are in keeping with the local situation were noted as important collaboration skills.

School-Community Collaboration
Probably one of the best examples of over-all collaboration took place in one of the schools in an activity programme called 'Our Community', a project that seemed to energise all those who took part. A brief description of how this project evolved and developed will give the reader an appreciation of the potential such a project has for personal growth and fulfilment. This project set out to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the local Community Development Project (CDP). CDPs are government-sponsored agencies that work in deprived areas. The FSCEP project, in conjunction with CDP personnel, arranged a number of planning meetings for the purpose of designing a six-week activity programme on a community theme that would highlight and celebrate the community's successes over the past ten years. A plan of action was decided upon, beginning with a data gathering exercise on the locality by the children and their families. Twenty-seven children accompanied by eight adults and two teachers set off in different directions on a walking tour of the locality. Each child/family had been given a disposable camera, which would allow each of them to take twenty photographs of what they considered were important features of their community. As the children shared their 'world', pointing out where grandparents and other family relations lived, the walk-about generated a great deal of excitement and interest amongst the people that the group encountered. This proved to be a valuable intergenerational learning experience for all. Much good-humoured banter and many favourable comments were received. One grandmother (BP2) commented: "Children love school nowadays … the teachers do great work with them".

As a result of this exercise all sorts of interesting interpretations of the word 'community' surfaced from analysis of the photographs. For example one student viewed the Lidl supermarket as the hub of the community while another family viewed the

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

At the end of the six weeks the finished collaborative products were put on display in the community hall and a celebration ceremony was organised in conjunction with the Community Development Project (CDP). This proved to be a great social occasion with tea and coffee and lots of tasty snacks, all home produced by the participating parents. The contribution of the FSCEP activities to community spirit and goodwill was obvious. One mother (BP2) stated that "it caused a great buzz in the community" while her daughter (BC2) believed that "it keeps the school fresh and interesting by involving the community".

Capacity Building

There are numerous definitions of 'capacity building' in the literature that describe the process through which an individual's strengths are developed to address individual problems which in turn enhances a community's potential to exploit opportunities. A definition put forward by Kildare County Development Board focuses on the educational aspect of capacity building: 'Capacity building is about increasing the confidence of the learner in themselves and their ability so as to enable them to fully take part in education' (www.kildare.ie/kcdb/kildare-2012-strategy/education.asp 24 - 6 - 2009). Another definition from Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority (Australia) places greater emphasis on community development as an important outcome: 'Capacity building – Increasing the potential to gain maximum results/benefits for the community' (www.glenelg-hopkins.vic.gov.au/ 24 – 6 - 2009). For the FSCEP project, therefore, capacity building was seen as the strengthening of participants' capacity to determine their own values and priorities and their abilities to act on these for their own development.

As both a concept and a strategy, capacity building has relevance to all communities and to society as a whole, but has particular application to communities which are experiencing disadvantage. Cochran and Henderson (1986) contend that 'the school can be a powerful force for building parent capacity' (cited in Henderson and Berla, 1994: 46) and this contention was evidenced throughout the FSCEP project data. In this respect, Glickman's (1998) assertion that society is largely improved by how citizens live in everyday personal interactions is very relevant. As pointed out by a Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) coordinator (AT7), in one of the urban schools; "when you've been working with parents on a project it creates its own dynamic and you get to know them very well; close friendships develop and a sense of solidarity begins to grow between the school and the community". A parent (AP2) from this school explained that she "found it a good way of building a relationship with neighbouring children … my little one was telling me about her friends in class and now I know who they are". This parent had recently settled in the area and was happy to participate in the partnership activities as it provided a means of

getting acquainted with other members of the community. A number of parents in all schools highlighted the social aspect of the activity programmes as being very important to them. During the course of an interview one parent (BP2) stated: "It's great to be asked to help out in the classroom... we all have something to offer ... 'tis good to feel needed; I felt a bit nervous at first but felt good afterwards".

O'Donohue (2003: 143) raises a pertinent point here. He decries the loss of what he describes as the 'web of betweenness' within communities where traditionally 'there was a sense that the individual life was deeply woven into the lives of others'. He asserts that this web is unraveling fast and needs to be rebuilt. In relation to this it is fair to say that the partnership activities made a very positive contribution towards re-building this 'web of betweenness' as a form of capacity building in all schools. For example, in one rural school parents, grandparents and other family members gave freely of their time and energy in helping out with the annual Christmas concert. Consequently, a wide range of parental skills, from artistic to practical, were available to the school. The principal's journal entry (ET1), describing the concert preparations for Christmas 2007, highlighted the school's potential for community capacity building: "It made it all so easy…when we were finished with the rehearsals and the dressing up a number of mothers stayed behind to tidy up and I found them reading to a group of children in the resource room. This isn't a school anymore…it's a big family."

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

In this sense the FSCEP partnership programmes

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

Quality of Relationships

Most people would agree that the quality of one's life is inextricably linked with the quality of one's relationships. During the FSCEP project the quality of relationships amongst those taking part was seen as an essential element in the maintenance of activities and in mediating the outcomes. In this respect a teacher (AT2) in one of the urban schools remarked: "All parents, teachers and pupils develop some sort of relationship during their time in school but it's the quality of these relationships that makes a difference". This statement relates to the primary aim of the research, namely that of acquiring a better understanding of the core elements of parent-teacher-pupil relationships. Positive relationships between parents and teachers were seen to lead to positive reinforcement of mutually accepted values. One parent (CP2) observed, "When the teacher is reinforcing the same message as the parent the children are more likely to accept it". In contrast, the impact of negative relationships was highlighted in a teacher (CT3) interview: "If a parent has negative feelings about a teacher or the school it can be difficult for the child ... they're sometimes caught in the middle".

At various meetings across all five schools during the planning of activities all teachers accepted that the quality of relationships with parents and indeed with students was of paramount importance in building capacity in participants. In this regard the data provided many entries that focused on the levels of perceived happiness and fulfilment experienced by children at school as a criterion for

measuring the quality of relationships. A teacher's journal (AT2) read: "It was lovely to see adults and children working side by side and to hear their happy laughter". In similar vein a parent (BP1) admitted: "We laughed a lot while we were doing it". In one of the Maths for Fun (HSCL Coordinator, 2006) projects a parent (EP2) said she really enjoyed her involvement and commented "school is now a much happier place and children enjoy being at school". In the children's interview one girl (EC2) commented: "I was happy to see parents in the classroom; the way everyone was there was safe and nice" while also stating (EC2): "I like my Mommy sitting beside me…I show her my writing". A happy and positive environment, therefore, was seen as a prerequisite for learning as it provided a context in which relationships could grow and flourish and individual capacity could be nurtured.

The Maths for Fun (HSCL Coordinator, 2006) activities proved popular in all schools at various times with positive effects on classroom atmosphere. In the early stages these activities consisted mainly of board-game activities whereby parents, children, teachers and, occasionally, classroom assistants engaged with each other in the informal learning of mathematical concepts. A principal's (ET1) journal read: "This session was Maths for Fun at its best and was a great experience in interpersonal relationships" while an older student (EC3) from the same school commented: "The relationship between the school and parents is important because it lets teachers and parents get to know each other and it creates a nice atmosphere". One of the boys from this school (EC3) hinted at the intrinsic motivation involved in these activities when he commented, "it was much better than schoolwork anyway". One evaluation sheet (AT4) highlighted the importance of other aspects of capacity building provided by the Maths for Fun (HSCL Coordinator, 2006) activities: "It gave a chance to the less academic pupils to shine and it was also a good experience for children to relate to other adults from the community in a structured setting".

As a consequence of the partnership activities the symbiotic relationship between the home, the school and the community was manifested in many ways during the course of the project. Over time it became clear that the development of good partnership practices was contingent on the development of good parent-teacher-community relationships. In this respect the data highlights a number of qualities and attributes that are essential components of quality relationships for educational partnership. These include mutual respect between parents and teachers, a welcoming atmosphere in a school, a trusting relationship between the home, the school and the wider community, sensitivity towards the feelings of others, and an appreciation of the input of all participants.

Mutual Respect

Mutual respect is a fundamental part of a productive and harmonious co-existence. Being respectful of the thoughts, feelings, beliefs and actions of those with whom we work is at the heart of quality relationships. One urban teacher (AT2) expressed the opinion that "it is the quality of our relationships that makes the difference". Hence, thoughtfulness towards others was seen in the partnership programmes as an essential element of respect. In this context, getting the balance right between the levels of participation that can reasonably be expected of parents and the degree, nature and duration of participation that might be deemed beneficial to children's education is a key consideration for proponents of educational partnership. This was concisely summarised by one class teacher (CT4) in an urban school who stated that "parents can only be expected to do so much … making unreasonable demands on parents' time and energy is not respectful". This teacher believed that "we must be prepared to give parents time to get used to new ideas and approaches, step by step, in little baby steps". In line with this thinking another teacher (CT3) described how rewarding it was for her to see a young mother venture into the

classroom for the first time: "When somebody comes in that you thought would never come in and you see the welcome they get from other parents and also from children … it's very affirming for them to get such a positive reaction". Another teacher (CT7) pointed out that some parents who came into her classroom were very inclusive in their approach to welcoming other parents and this encouraged others to take part. In another school a class teacher (AT2) commented on the way parents affirmed each other in the work they were doing: "Some parents give a great welcome to new parents when they venture in. They encourage each other in the activities by joking and cajoling". A contributing factor to the relaxed and welcoming atmosphere in this classroom might well be attributed to this teacher's wealth of experience over a thirty-year period working in this school. Her interest in and knowledge of the generations of families that had passed through the school served as an access point to the wider community.

Welcoming Atmosphere

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

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

In relation to this, the HSCL coordinator (AT7) of one urban school stood by the main door most mornings from 8.45 to 9.15 to welcome parents and children into the school. Each "grown-up" and child was greeted by name and some pleasantries exchanged. Obviously, the ability to remember each person's name is a vitally important skill in being an effective HSCL coordinator. Some parents would stop for a quick chat and much of the partnership planning of FSCEP activities took place in this informal way. During a group interview in this school parents (AP3) referred to the importance of knowing that this welcome awaited them when they came into the school. Having a friendly relationship with their children's teachers was regarded as important for success in school. One parent (AP3) observed: "Sometimes children can feel a bit nervous coming into school in the morning or they mightn't be feeling too good or worried about homework and stuff". Hence, a principal (AT1, 3) pointed out: "A brief word with the teacher can put a parent's mind at ease". In another school the principal (CT1) believed that it was important for teachers to be available to parents in the morning "to have a quick word with the teacher when they're dropping off their children as this can avert many misunderstandings at a later stage."

Trusting Relationships

Trust was seen as a core component in capacity building by a number of teachers. A HSCL coordinator (CT14, 3) claimed: "Within our relationships it is all too easy to take trust for granted and overlook its pivotal role in our interactions with others". Thus, trust was seen to enable relationships to develop and flourish. A

principal (AT1,3) stated: "In a trusting relationship we are willing to conduct ourselves differently, engage in a wider range of actions, and also to be more open to a variety of experiences". Mistrust, on the other hand, was seen to have a devastating impact on relationships and on the types and quality of conversations that occur. In other words, when trust erodes, relationships deteriorate. In this regard, the frequency of the positive parent-teacher interactions through the partnership activities helped to develop strong trusting relationships. One teacher believed (DT15,1) that it was very important that "parents have absolute confidence in their child's teacher … to know that their children are treated with love and respect". However, maintaining trusting relationships required a degree of time, attention and presence of mind that were, in the words of one teacher (CT3,1), "often in short supply" for mainstream class teachers. Due to the pressurised nature of a teacher's work and the lack of back-up support, the ability to be really present for parents is a challenging demand. Hence, much of the teacher-parent interactions in relation to planning partnership activities were incidental meetings at the classroom door or along the school corridor and often resulted in teachers working through lunch-breaks; discussing partnership arrangements while trying to eat a sandwich. This raised an ethical issue with regard to the extra demands on teachers' time and energy and highlighted the challenges to the sustainability of partnership practices under such circumstances.

In spite of these challenges teachers were, invariably, good-humoured, pleasant and extremely accommodating of parents' needs. In one school, due to confined space, the corridor became very congested when parents were collecting their children at the end of the school day. At these times it was refreshing to observe the social interaction, conversation and good-humoured banter that arose between parents and teachers as they attempted to make their way down the corridor through what one teacher (CT6, 2) described as "an obstacle course of baby buggies and toddlers". These were also occasions on which parents shared information with each other and offered advice and support on a variety of issues. As an observer it was evident that a great deal of collaboration and sharing occurred and that human nature's irrepressible spirit can surface in spite of many trials and tribulations.

O'Donohue (2003: 143) offers an interesting allegory that was a source of inspiration in promoting the partnership practices: 'As in the rainforest, a dazzling diversity of life-forms complement and sustain each other; there is a secret oxygen with which we unknowingly sustain one another. True community is not produced; it is invoked and awakened'. In this regard a HSCL coordinator (CT14, 3) believed that schools could play a central role in bonding communities together. She pointed out that if the role of the parent is sidelined by a school "it's so easy for parents to become disconnected from their school and from their children's education". Hence, the school in which this coordinator worked set out to reinforce a continuity of routine for children between home and school in which the "sharing of agreed values by parents and teachers" (CT14) was regarded as very important. This resonates strongly with Epstein's (1990: 702) claim:

The overlapping of school and family can produce family-like schools and school-like families. Family-like schools have an accepting, caring atmosphere and welcome families. They are able to recognize each child's individuality and special traits. Similarly, school-like families emphasize the importance of school, homework, and learning activities. (Epstein, 1990: 702)

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

Sensitivity

Sensitivity of language and the use of appropriate terminology were highlighted in one school as being an important growth point in the partnership activities. Due to the changed composition of many modern families, one principal (CT1, 2) felt the term "grown-ups" was the most acceptable term when encouraging young children to invite family members to participate in classroom activities. Any significant adult in the life of the child (parent, foster-parent, or guardian) was welcome to participate in the partnership programmes. So also were other members of the extended family circle. This principal (CT1,2) also felt that the term "children" was a more appropriate term than "pupils" or "students" as this gave a more homely feeling to the school as an extension of the family. During the course of discussion at a staff meeting it was accepted as good practice to avoid the use of what one teacher (CT4,3) described as "prejudice-laden words", whenever possible. Thus, words with negative connotations such as 'disadvantaged', 'underprivileged', 'deprived', 'marginalized' and such like were studiously avoided.

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

Appreciation

An individual's capacity to express and receive gratitude was regarded as an important facet of one's personal development by a facilitator (AF2, 1) who was employed to deliver some of the activity programmes. In one instance this facilitator was engaged by one of the schools to prepare a variety show. As noted in the researcher's journal in the following vignette this facilitator was very innovative in her approach to showing appreciation of participants' contributions to the concert preparations:

> **A great deal of time and energy was required of parents and teachers in working with the children in this school to prepare a variety show. The rehearsals required parents and teachers to work with young children developing a movement-to-music routine. At the end of each session the facilitator devoted some time to expressing appreciation in the following manner. Parents and teachers encouraged the children with whom they were working by telling them how much they enjoyed doing the activities and this affirmation was concluded with a "high five" hand slap. In response, each child had been primed by the facilitator to say "thank you for helping us" and "please come again next week". (AF2,1)**

As well as being a subtle stratagem that ensured parents' attendance at subsequent sessions, this facilitator (AF2) believed that "showing appreciation was essential to developing good relationships" and that politeness and gratitude were best advanced by role-modelling these qualities in everyday behaviour and interactions. All school principals and parents availed of every opportunity to express their thanks and appreciation of parents' contributions to the various activities.

During the course of the FSCEP project, one slogan was repeated regularly when planning activities; "the process is more important than the product". The process of designing and implementing partnership programmes was seen as a worthwhile exercise that afforded many opportunities for capacity building. The programmes therefore, were not seen as a means to producing end-products even though many of them resulted in outcomes such as shows, concerts, art exhibitions, flower and garden displays, entries in community celebrations, excursions and so on. The process of combined planning, designing and implementing the activities inevitably enhanced democratic practices in all schools.

Integration and Inclusion

Partnership activities within FSCEP project were carried out in close liaison with local agencies, particularly with the Local Education Committees (LECs). The LECs were set up under the HSCL scheme to address issues within communities that were impinging on children's educational achievement. Membership is comprised of voluntary and statutory agencies with equal representation of parents and community members. As these LECs became more established over time they have provided an effective forum for debate on communities' input into education. As such they provided a useful mechanism for the advancement of educational partnership. During the course of the FSCEP project it became the established custom to have student representation on two of these LECs. These were students who had moved on to secondary education and were permitted to attend the monthly meetings of the LECs accompanied by the HSCL coordinator from those schools. As well

as extending democratic practice, their involvement was seen as a valuable input into the partnership process. The students in question seemed to enjoy participating and matured into their roles as time went by. Their presence added to the inclusive

ethos of the committees as other committee members deferred to their expertise and knowledge in matters relating to adolescent issues. It also ensured, as a community worker (CC3) put it, that the committee remained "people focused" rather than "task driven".

The project's objective was to attempt to achieve maximum participation and inclusion of parents and other family members in their children's learning and in the life of the school. In this respect school concerts and shows were extremely popular and so all schools experienced capacity crowds for these occasions. The concerts and shows were great family occasions in which parents and other family members made a huge contribution in terms of preparation, organisation and occasionally participation on stage. Optimal participation was regarded as very important by one principal (DT1, 3) as "it helps to place the school at the centre of things in the community". This was in keeping with the beliefs of the FSCEP project in which the term social inclusion was understood as an operational experience that required a physical presence in the schools, for all parents, from time to time.

A further outlet for democratic practice and collaboration, again on a large scale, was participation in community celebration events such as St. Patrick's Day parades. Two schools expended much time, energy and effort making preparations and constructing floats for these events. This involved a wide range of parents and community members and drew on a cross-section of skills and talents. These events gave rise to much sharing of information and sharing of responsibilities. Shared decisions demanded common-sense input from parents, teachers, and pupils as they grappled with the difficulties of organising and implementing different aspects of the event. On such occasions, comments such as "never again" were frequently heard, in jest, from teachers involved in co-ordinating activities, which highlighted the vast amount of work that goes into organising such events. It is worth noting that these large-scale activities were reminiscent of Dewey's (1916) socially interactive model of education insofar as they endeavoured to develop inclusive practices and to eliminate exclusion tendencies. In doing so they provided opportunities for empowerment for many members of the communities.

Traditionally there was little male participation in children's education. The partnership process became an outlet to explore and challenge those social constructs, and as a result became a forum for teachers, parents and other community members to explore their attitudes and values in relation to male participation in the education process. In turn, this seemed to promote more culturally responsive learning opportunities, which increased motivation and gave children and parents a sense of 'ownership' of the education agenda as well as an active involvement in the learning process. In this way the FSCEP project attempted to locate learning in contexts that were meaningful and exciting to all family members, male and female.

THEME B: PLANNING OF SCHOOL POLICIES, PROCESSES, PROCEDURES, ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND PRACTICES

The second theme 'Theme B' refers to the more static and measurable qualitative findings within the current study i.e. the presence of school policies, processes, procedures, organisational structures and practices, and how they influenced working in partnership with families and communities. This section contains findings relating to parental participation; FSCEP project personnel as a resource; local community members as a resource; democratic practice in schools; inhibiting structures and processes e.g. time and facilities; and psychological and cultural barriers e.g. male participation.

Parental Participation

Encouraging the participation of parents/guardians/significant adults of the children attending the five schools was a challenge, but an interesting learning curve for all parents as well as schools. Some of the findings that emerged within this theme related to ethical issues such as finding the correct balance between encouraging and pressurising parents to participate, being sensitive to parents needs and working in conjunction with them to ensure activities were administered at

times that suited them, encouraging grandparents and/or siblings to participate in place of working parents and being appreciative of the commitment and time that parents dedicate to the partnership programmes.

Ethical Considerations and Mutual Respect
One principal (CT1) cautioned against putting undue pressure on parents to attend classroom activities and exerting this pressure on them through their children. During one parent interview a parent (AP2) expanded on this point:

> **In today's world there's a lot of mothers working. It was said to me on numerous occasions that they feel guilty that they can't come… they feel they are letting their children down… and they, themselves, feel kinda left out of things. (AP2)**

She pointed out that "children for whom no adult can attend are likely to feel bad about it". Another parent (CP2) who had attended a number of classroom activities corroborated this point by stating: "Sometimes when some of the things are going on in the classroom and some of the kids don't have parents with them; you see their little faces and you feel sorry for them". This issue was raised at the 'Celebrating Partnership Day' that consisted of representatives of parents, teachers and community members, during the second year of the project. The ensuing discussion provided useful insight into ethical considerations with regard to implementing partnership activities. One parent from an urban school (CP2) stated that "parents who may not have gone far in school themselves… may feel intimidated and are made to feel bad about themselves", while another pointed out that "parents who are working or minding small children… are unable to attend".

By way of response a HSCL coordinator (AT7) explained that in many of the activities in her school other family members such as grandparents or older siblings came to participate and that the children seemed quite happy with this arrangement. In addition, she explained that the grown-ups who came into her classroom "had a very inclusive attitude towards all of the children and made sure no one felt left out". Endeavouring to develop partnership pedagogy, therefore, that was

sensitive to the needs and circumstances of all parents became the central concern of many of the FSCEP project planning meetings. As a consequence, the importance of effective communication skills was singled out by many teachers as being a key element in the development of partnership approaches in the educational process.

In this context, getting the balance right between the levels of participation that can reasonably be expected from parents and the degree, nature and duration of participation that might be deemed beneficial to children's education is a key consideration for proponents of educational partnership.

Parents' Time

Being sensitive to parents' needs with regard to time and other family commitments also required due consideration when planning activities. It was generally agreed that short programmes of four to six weeks, with one session weekly, were more sensitive to parents needs. Longer programmes experienced a marked fall-off in numbers, which often resulted in much disappointment for children, especially if parents had promised to come and for one reason or another failed to show up. In relation to this a HSCL coordinator (CT14, 3) suggested, "We need to be more creative in finding ways of involving parents who are working outside the home". This aspect of the partnership activities was also highlighted by the principal in this school (CT1,3):

> Doing stuff at home with their children is an important aspect of educational partnership… it is important to be creative in building a 'home element' into activity programmes as it brings school activities into the home and home activities into the school. (CT1,3)

The time at which activity programmes took place was also an important factor in making this programme accessible to parents. Many teachers found that a time period at the beginning or end of the school day was more accommodating for parents and ensured better attendance. Similarly, being respectful of teachers' needs in relation to their time and availability also required due consideration and,

in this regard, the flexibility of principals and school staffs, in planning, designing and implementing activity programmes, should be noted.

Engaging Parents

The repetition of partnership programmes over the four years of the FSCEP project meant that core groups of actively engaged parents became established in the schools. These core groups were seen as an asset to the schools and their input was greatly appreciated particularly when organising big events. As their role became more established, a sense of ownership of certain activities developed among parents. While such an outcome had many benefits, it also required a degree of maintenance on the part of school staffs to ensure that democracy prevailed. A HSCL coordinator (CT14) in one urban school observed, "... cliques can be an impediment to other parents getting involved" and felt it was "… important to remain alert and sensitive to the feelings of new parents volunteering for the first time". Consequently, many teachers believed that modelling democracy in the day-to-day running of a school was the best means of instilling democratic principles in all participants of educational partnership activities.

The FSCEP Project: A Resource

Many of the participants' journal entries highlighted the FSCEP project's role as a catalyst for increased interaction between all the partners involved. A teacher (CT8) in one school remarked, "It creates interaction between all partners and causes things to happen". A principal (DT1) stated: "having the FSCEP [Partnership Development] Coordinator calling to the school on a regular basis kept us focused on the development of partnership.

Family School Community Educational Partnership: Qualitative Findings

We knew we had to have our ideas thought out and ready to roll when he came". With the passage of time teachers began to see partnership as a huge learning experience that brought many benefits to the school and to the classroom. In an interview one teacher (CT4) highlighted the mutuality of the learning process and expressed her appreciation of the support provided by FSCEP personnel. She stated:

> **You need something like FSCEP to focus you and make you think of ideas to bring school more into the community and the community into the school but this can be extremely difficult to do without a focus and without support. (CT4)**

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

> **There is a lot of fear among teachers with regard to working in partnership... that's why it is so important to have something like the FSCEP project to get you going... it provides a mechanism through which to develop partnership and helps you become proactive in involving parents. (CT14)**

Local Community Members: A Resource

As the partnership activities became more firmly established within the culture of the schools, their impact on the development of individual capacity was noted. Thus, a principal (DT1) in one of the rural schools acknowledged that a lot of the activity programmes had been facilitated by local community members. In this school a local musician was employed to facilitate a music appreciation programme in the classroom for parents and children. This facilitator believed that there was "a lot of untapped talent and skills in the community that would benefit children's learning". As this activity programme was repeated for different classes it unearthed a diverse range of musical talents including proficiency in a variety of different musical instruments from within the community. As a consequence it provided an audit

of the skills and talents of community members. This led to other local musicians being invited into the school on a weekly basis to give workshops on their chosen instruments. This expanded the rich musical culture that the school already enjoyed and was greatly appreciated by many staff members. One of the teachers (DT16) involved in the activity wrote in her journal: "Meeting with members of the community in this way was a new experience for me. I see it as a great step forward for us as a school to be fostering such links". The partnership support worker (DF2) who had helped to organise these workshops wrote the following summary in her evaluation sheet at the end of the music appreciation programmes:

> **I really enjoyed the time I spent working in the schools and together we developed more creative ways of working with families. Parents and other people in the community have so much to offer if we can find the time to listen. Parents can be of so much help in creating a safe, natural and often more exciting school environment for children. Hopefully it will become a natural way of thinking; that parents walk in and out schools without anybody feeling awkward. (DF2)**

Democratic Practice in Schools

Since the establishment of Boards of Management for primary schools in Ireland in 1975 there has been a growing demand for more democratic participation of parents and teachers in schools. In this context, Glickman (1998: 49) poses a challenging question: "Are we willing to practise a form of democracy in our everyday actions in schools that make possible a societal form of democracy that we have not yet reached"? The FSCEP project activities provided a role model that was helpful in promoting greater democratic practices in schools and homes. Dewey (1916) believed that democracy needed to be re-invented anew for each generation and saw democracy as beginning in the home, being consolidated in the schools and emanating outwards to the community and to the country at large. Young (2000, cited in Nixon et al., 2002: 2) speaks of "deliberative democracy" and advances a belief in the collective wisdom of communities to solve their own

problems. Such practice would provide "the epistemic conditions for the collective knowledge of which proposals are most likely to promote results that are wise and just" (Young, 2000: 30, cited in Nixon et al. 2001: 2). In this regard, the FSCEP project believed that building upon existing structures within schools and within communities was more likely to be successful in accomplishing desired change than adopting top-down approaches.

Children's Voice

The principal (ET1) in one rural school stated: "It is important to remember that children have their own point of view and we must try to ensure that the wishes of the children are not overlooked". In this respect, the FSCEP project attempted to practice participatory democracy in all aspects of the activities and was conscious of hearing the voice of those who were central to the activities, namely the children. As the project progressed it was evident that core processes and structures of schools began to change, which in turn allowed democratic practices to flourish. The ultimate objective was to extend decision-making processes to as wide a range of participants as possible and to ensure that all voices were heard. This applied particularly to pupil participants. It was deemed critical that their opinions would be seen to be valued and that their input sought whenever appropriate. Student participation in decision-making was seen to be important because, as one teacher (ET2) affirmed, "it gave them a sense of ownership of the activity and motivated their learning". In this school the principal (ET1) believed that "many of our students appreciate the benefits of education and like their time in school to be as positive and rewarding as possible". This principal pointed out that her first step when contemplating an activity was "to throw

it out to the children to see what they think of it". She stated "students often have good ideas that can contribute to their school and their education". In another school, during the course of a planning meeting, a teacher (DT11) concluded, "giving students a voice enables them to take responsibility for their own learning". This teacher believed that "allowing children to have a say in how their school-day was planned was good training for them in learning to live in a democracy". In an intergenerational programme in this school between children and grandparents the older students researched and compiled local and family history projects which compared existing school experience with experiences of previous generations. The students were encouraged to take a leading role in organising this work and when finished presented their findings to a large gathering of parents and community members in the school hall.

Inhibiting Structures and Processes

The historical summary provided at the beginning of this section explains how the institutionalisation of education led to de-contextualised learning environments that ignored community input as a key component in children's learning. In Ireland, for over twenty years much progress is manifest in redressing this imbalance. This has been achieved through parental involvement in schools, mainly through the efforts of the Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme. Four of the five FSCEP project schools had HSCL Coordinators in place prior to the development of the FSCEP project being introduced in the schools. The FSCEP project built on the HSCL approaches to children's development by adopting a constructivist model of learning through the shared experiences of the activity programmes that encouraged greater symbiosis between the home and the school. Consequently, the FSCEP project accepted that children's learning is strongly affected at all times by "the three overlapping spheres of influence" (Epstein, 1987: 130), namely family, school and community. Predicated on these understandings the FSCEP project partnership activities emphasised the interconnectedness of learning and highlighted the paradox of schools taking full responsibility for the child's education and learning. Furthermore, the open-ended nature of learning methods employed in many of the partnership activities went well beyond the de-contextualised setting of

classrooms and set out to develop a more holistic and inclusive vision of primary education in which each person involved has a role and a responsibility. In doing so the FSCEP project was cognisant of the formidable obstacles that lie in the way of implementing partnership models.

Physical Environments

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

Over the years the prevailing circumstances in urban communities demanded high security requirements around school buildings in the form of spiked railings and locked gates. While these protective barriers are necessary for security reasons and reasons of health and safety, the concern is that the presence of such physical barriers could inhibit community involvement in the school and the development of a sense of ownership of the school by the local community. How best to overcome the negative signals that such requirements send out to local communities is a challenging task for

proponents of educational partnership. Schools operating within such environments are faced with an added challenge in cultivating a sense of belonging for parents and community members. Furthermore, new child protection guidelines have resulted in some of the schools adopting a 'locked door' policy during the school day. As a result it is sometimes difficult for parents and indeed other visitors to gain entry into some school buildings, as observed during the course of this research. Clearly, under these circumstances schools that have the services of secretarial and care taking staff are better equipped to ensure a welcome reception for visitors. From a psychological perspective these shortcomings are not helpful in developing a partnership mentality between schools and their communities.

Finding Time

Over the lifespan of the FSCEP project many of the practical issues related to working in partnership were discussed in detail at 'Celebrating Partnership Day' focus group meetings with parents, teachers, members of Boards of Management and community members. As pointed out previously, these issues included challenges with regard to time, space, added workload, funding, school facilities, behavioural issues, human resources and so on. Prominent in these discussions was the issue of time. While acknowledging the importance of careful time management principals felt there was "insufficient time" for formal partnership meetings and also for teachers to be accessible to parents and other visitors to discuss partnership activities.

This was a difficult dilemma for the FSCEP project as frequent consultation was seen as a necessary first step in developing good partnership practices. In the early stages of the FSCEP project it was noted that parent input into planning and designing activities was minimal. This difficulty became a topic for discussion at staff meetings with questions relating to time and space continually being raised. Many teachers believed that much of the consultation with parents could be done informally at the various incidental meetings between parents and teachers during the course of the school week. It was also accepted, however, that formal meetings would be necessary from time-to-time depending on the scale and challenge of the activity programmes being planned.

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

Finding time was also an issue for many parents. It was noted that in some instances parents requested time off work to attend activities and on other occasions parents were obliged to leave before the end of activities to meet other commitments. Family circumstances often dictated whether or not a parent was able to attend. One mother (EP2) explained that "it's easier this year, I have more time but the last few years were different, I didn't have much time". Another mother (DP3) pointed out that some parents will always prioritise their children's needs: "Lots of parents no matter how much they have to do will always make time and come in if it's for the good of their children".

Other areas of concern for principals in relation to partnership activities were "curriculum overload", and "class interruptions". One principal (CT1) contended, "... too many interruptions interfered with the smooth running of the school". Undoubtedly a lot of noise and commotion along the school corridor or outside classroom windows was a major source of distraction for other teachers and children engaged in more concentrated learning exercises. While "curriculum overload" was an area of concern for all principals some believed that the skilful integration of partnership activities helped to alleviate this overload as they sometimes covered a range of curricular areas by, for example, integrating elements of literacy and numeracy into the art education programmes. Under these circumstances the integration of parents as assistants on a continual basis could be seen as advantageous but this would require high levels of organisation and preparation on the part of the classroom teacher. In spite of these challenges many teachers showed great flexibility and organisational skills in delivering programmes.

Facilities
As well as finding the time, finding adequate space, either for parent meetings or when working within classrooms, was an equally challenging problem for some schools. Traditional classrooms were not designed for the kind of teaching and learning styles most appropriate to educational partnership. In schools where traditional-type furniture is used it was found to be difficult to re-arrange and cumbersome to work with. Experiences of working in partnership with parents in classrooms, therefore, were sometimes confined and limited. Furthermore, teachers were acutely aware of the paradox contained in issuing general invitations to all parents to attend a given activity. Indeed, they felt that if the full cohort of parents presented themselves it would create an impossible logistical situation in the classroom. The efficacy of many of the activities, therefore, was dependent on

the non-attendance of a considerable number of parents. Nonetheless, within these constraints all schools were successful in raising parental participation in the activities, which were delivered in the classrooms. In addition teachers were very welcoming of parents accompanied by their infant children, which occasionally added to the congestion and created difficulties for the implementation of activities against a background of competing distractions. At a more basic level, an added challenge for some of the schools was the inadequacy of adult toilet facilities. Recognition of the need to provide such basic facilities must be the subject of urgent attention if parental participation in school activities is to become a reality.

Since the inception of the HSCL scheme some progress with regard to the provision of facilities for parents has been achieved in all DEIS schools. Under this scheme schools are urged to make a parent-room available as a drop-in centre or as a room for structured activities. Getting optimal benefit from such rooms is obviously very dependent on accessibility and hospitality, which is sometimes difficult to reconcile with the aforementioned security requirements. Despite this, and the serious accommodation shortages mentioned above, parent-rooms have been made available in the five participating schools, though sometimes on a shared basis with other school activities. These rooms are traditionally maintained by the HSCL coordinators in conjunction with core groups of parents and much progress has been made in developing a sense of shared-ownership of these facilities. This was summed up concisely in one parent's (AP3) comment: "Now I feel I'm on the inside ... before I got involved in the activities in the parents' room I always felt outside of things". Another parent (BP3) enjoyed "having a cup of tea and talking to some of the teachers".

Flexibility
In spite of the difficulties and challenges outlined above, all schools were very successful in raising levels of parental involvement and participation. The research indicated that teachers were very flexible and very creative in overcoming many of these barriers. The ability and willingness to overcome barriers was seen to depend, to a large extent, on the levels of conviction with regard to the efficacy of the partnership process in delivering aspects of the curriculum. Teachers were willing to

accept inconvenience and take on different approaches to teaching and learning in the belief that it served the children, their families and the wider community. In relation to this, one principal (BT1) believed that "the flexibility and adaptability of the FSCEP project was a strong contributing factor to the success of the partnership activities". Reciprocal flexibility and innovation on the part of teachers and school management was also an important factor in the successful implementation of the partnership programmes. This flexibility and openness to change on the part of schools is essential for partnership activities to continue beyond the life of the FSCEP project.

In relation to this, the Green Paper on lifelong learning (DES, 1998), highlights the empowerment potential of local educational enterprises and stresses the need to empower local communities by giving them more responsibility for their education and learning. In offering guidelines it 'depicts an approach and a particular kind of relationship as opposed to a system of provision' and urges 'the availability of the resources of local schools and other educational institutions to the entire local community for learning purposes – not merely to the daytime student population' (DES, 1998: 88, 89). This, however, is a complex and difficult undertaking as this study illustrates. Identifying ways and means of accommodating continuous parental input into children's education demands a lot of time and energy on the part of principals and school staffs. Ultimately, it involves the development and maintenance of both formal and informal structures. While not directly involved in the establishment of formal structures, the FSCEP project recognised the important role that formal structures play in the promotion of educational partnership.

Partnership Structures
Formal partnership structures were seen to include parent representation on boards of management and the employment of parents as special needs assistants in classrooms, as school caretakers and as other ancillary staff. Parents were also seen to fill formal school-linked positions such as tutors in after-school clubs and other out-of-school activities like football and athletics coaching roles. Other formal structures included involvement in parent-teacher associations, parents' councils and Local Education Committees. Indeed, schools were seen

to have an important role in developing 'parent readiness' for these positions through information sharing and relationship-building. Thus the prevailing culture of the school was regarded as critical by the FSCEP project as it influenced the numerous incidental interactions between parents and teachers during the course of the school day. Noguera (2001: 193) contends that schools can facilitate positive or negative social capital as a function of how they operate and states that 'schools that isolate themselves from the neighbourhood they serve because they perceive the residents as 'threatening' tend to undermine the social capital of the community'. Noguera (2001: 197) asserts that 'urban schools are increasingly the most reliable source of stability and social support'. In this respect the development of positive social capital was a dominant feature of the five participating schools. Many other formal partnership arrangements were evident in all schools, which included organised parent-teacher meetings in relation to children's academic progress or in relation to religious celebrations such as First Communion and Confirmation ceremonies.

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

The data offered ample evidence in support of this finding. One father (AP2) stated: "I like being involved with the school ... it's great that we can come in here and do stuff with the kids ... I got to see qualities in my child that I hadn't seen before". In another school a mother (BP2) stated: "I love being asked to come in. I love meeting the teachers. It's great when there's something like this going on in the school". In the same school a mother (BP3) stated that "going down to the school is great ... it gets me out of the house and now we spend a lot of time at home talking about school stuff". Many

members of the school staff regarded this statement as a key insight. In this sense, finding meaningful and interesting ways of generating 'school conversation' at home was regarded by one principal (CT1) as "an important means of making schools more central to families". Endorsing this point, one teacher's (AT7) journal stated: "We're obviously being talked about a lot in the community". In all schools the FSCEP project was seen to aid this aspiration as it raised the profile of schools within their communities. Highlighting the positive aspects of school was regarded as very important because, as one HSCL coordinator (DT7) remarked "it is important to stay focused on the positive aspects of school ... sometimes at meetings the baggage from the past is often brought up and this can change the tone of what is being discussed". Therefore there needs to be acute sensitivity to the previous experiences of parents as participants within the school system and a conscious collective effort made to provide parents with positive experiences.

Psychological and Cultural Barriers
Across all the qualitative data there was much evidence of psychological and cultural barriers that act as inhibitors to progress in the implementation of educational partnership. These views and assumptions with regard to schools and education were seen to be deeply ingrained in the belief systems of many members of the school communities.

Preventing Discipline and Behaviour Issues
It is difficult to go beyond what O'Brien and O'Fathaigh (2004: 12) refer to as the "innate conservatism and consensualism in Irish Education". It was extremely difficult and indeed

courageous for school staffs to look critically at the structures, processes and prevailing conditions in a system in which they are deeply immersed. Consequently, moving away from teacher-centred, didactic methods of instruction to a more active, constructivist approach is a difficult transition for any teacher. Teachers identified potential discipline and behaviour issues as contributing factors to their reluctance in adopting active learning methodologies. In relation to this one principal (CT1) contended that "carefully structured partnership activities were less risky from a discipline perspective" and pointed out that it was problematic for teachers "to have to discipline children in the presence of their parents".

Male Participation

The data collected for this project illustrated that stereotypical thinking can have a strong bearing on how we all work and behave. In order to move forward in our thinking and practice it is important to have an understanding of how the world is changing around us, of what our place is in these new conditions, what needs to be changed and how we might change ourselves, our strategies, our models of thinking and our methods of operating. In this regard the role of fathers, grandfathers and other male members of families in the education process of children must be seen as a matter of urgent concern. The absence of male role models within the Irish primary education system in general has been highlighted for well over a decade (INTO, 1994; Kellaghan et al., 1995). The FSCEP project attempted to create a more central and inclusive role for male family members and some of the partnership activities were designed with adult male participation in mind. Throughout the data there were many references that highlighted the alienation of male members of many families from the education process. This issue was discussed on a number of occasions at the Local Education Committee (LEC) meetings of one school community. A community development worker (CC3) contended, "The feelings of alienation by some young male members of the community fuelled an anti-intellectual culture that was difficult to counteract".

As a counterbalance participants in the FSCEP project shared the view that the constructivist approach to learning as captured in an old Chinese proverb: 'Tell me and I forget. Show me and I

remember. Let me do and I understand' offered a more attractive model for male participation. In this sense teaching becomes more of an art than a science and, as such, exploits the many ways in which human beings learn. In this respect there is considerable evidence in the literature that suggests that one's 'whole being' is active in the learning process (Gardner, 1999; Nussbaum, 1995; Goleman, 1995; Garner, 2000). This holistic understanding of learning has implications for all learners and educators. Under this approach the 'rich unpredictability of learning' (Nixon, 2004: 245) is encouraged to flourish and many different learning styles are promoted. In relation to this, Nixon (2006: 151) suggests that 'we need to learn not only how to hope, but how to imbue our individual hopes with a sense of social purposefulness'.

THEME C: TEACHING, CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING STYLES

The third and final theme that emerged through the current study was 'teaching, curriculum development and learning styles'. The main findings under this heading highlighted the means by which partnership processes enhanced educational outcomes for children, families and schools. These findings have been subsumed under the following headings: reflective practice; increasing potential, empowerment and teaching and learning styles.

Reflective Practice

As noted earlier, the significance of reflexivity as an approach to working in partnership was evident

across the research journals, the formal interviews and informal discussions with participating teachers, parents and community members. Therefore there is a need to reserve time to allow teachers to reflect on their practice, but also to reflect, sensitively, on parents/families experiences, needs and cultural heritage.

Documenting Practice and Reflections

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

The term reflective practice has for long been a familiar phrase to all teachers but the practice of documenting teachers' reflections is rare. To facilitate the recording of teachers' reflections a research journal was designed that would be completed during the course of activities. A user-friendly evaluation sheet that would be completed at the end of the programmes supplemented this. While adding to teachers' workload, these were seen by one school principal (AT1) as "excellent tools for teachers to reflect on their practices and to examine parent/teacher/pupil relationships". Some teachers believed that keeping a reflective journal

heightened their sensitivity, not only in relation to parents but also in relation to their students. An evaluation sheet (ET1) on a garden activity read:

> Today's activity provided a good opportunity to observe how the children interact with each other in a less formal setting; it offered an insight into the dynamics between the children, of which I was hitherto unaware. (ET1)

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

> This activity led me to re-examine my teaching style…I now allow the children more freedom to express themselves in these classes as opposed to the more structured format I previously favoured…'twas far more enjoyable. (CT4)

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

> Perhaps through lots of interactive, child-centred tasks the next generation might be more confident and competent… through creative dance the children had the opportunity to develop movements, to express ideas and feelings in progressive stages and to develop communication and listening skills. (DT15)

The process of designing activity programmes further enabled reflections, as it required schools to complete a proposal form for funding. This form asked applicants to identify the aims, objectives and rationale for each programme they hoped to run. The schools were assisted in this work by the FSCEP Partnership Development Coordinator and

staffs were encouraged to integrate these activities into whatever strand of the curriculum was currently being studied in the classroom. This requirement promoted a great deal of personal and professional reflection on the part of teachers, which resulted in the development of many innovative programmes. One example of this was observed in an art activity programme whose main objective was the building of self-confidence. At the end of six weeks the teacher (CT7) arranged for the children's art work to be displayed in two local shops and this she believed "consolidated their sense of self-worth, accomplishment and pride in their community". Another similar example was recorded in a teacher's journal (AT2) with regard to "a quiet child who lacks confidence". This entry described how "her face lit up when her mother arrived into the classroom for a shared-reading lesson". The teacher (AT2) explained that "it took a lot of persuasion, cajoling and encouragement to bring Mammy into the school" and felt that "it was quite an ordeal for the parent who also seems to lack confidence". Later, as the researcher and the teacher discussed the progress made by both parent and child, the teacher pointed to the opportunities the FSCEP project had provided for herself as a teacher and described how delighted she was with the affirmation she had received from many parents. As her journal (AT2) stated: "It's a great morale boost for teachers when parents acknowledge the work that's being done in schools".

Increasing Potential

This section explores the many ways in which the educational partnership process increased/enhanced individual, as well as community, potential. In doing so it provides an understanding of the concept of capacity building based on various definitions in the literature and in reference to a number of relevant authors in this field. The findings of the data in relation to this theme are analysed and interpreted in relation to these understandings of capacity building set against the experiences of participants of the FSCEP partnership activities. An in-depth analysis of the data indicated that the capacity building that took place in all five school communities during the course of the FSCEP project was largely dependent on two factors; firstly, the quality of relationships that developed through the collaborative learning experiences amongst participants and secondly, the

level of democratic practice that prevailed in the learning environments of these school communities.

Educational Outcomes

The nature of the partnership programmes facilitated more culturally responsive learning opportunities, which increased motivation and gave children and parents a sense of 'ownership' of the agenda as well as an involvement in the process. Vygotsky's (1978, cited in Daniels, 1996: 147-149) social constructivist's theory emphasises the construction of an agreed-upon socially constructed reality and asserts that the culture endows the child with the cognitive tools needed for development. Armed with this knowledge the FSCEP project attempted to locate learning in contexts that were meaningful and exciting to the families involved. The importance of the non-formal learning that takes place in the home and in the community came to be seen more and more as complementary to the learning that takes place in the classroom. Consequently, parental capacity as educators was expanded as parents, teacher, and pupils engaged with each other in the partnership programmes.

It became clear, as the activities progressed that FSCEP experiences were beginning to impact on

teaching and learning styles and this seemed to encourage teachers, as one principal (ET1) stated, "to push out the boundaries a bit further" when planning and designing activity programmes. Also, the iterative and accumulative effects of repeating programmes, particularly ones like Shared Reading and Maths for Fun (HSCL Coordinator, 2006), were noted in some teacher journals as effective ways of improving literacy and numeracy levels for students that had spin-off benefits for parents.

These learning experiences were shared with other schools through the FSCEP Partnership Development Coordinator and as a result a renewed search for local talent to deliver activity programmes was prioritised in all of the schools. One principal's (ET1) journal reported: "It opened our eyes to the talent that exists within the school community of parents and extended family, which we attempted to harness in different ways and which achieved significant success". Consequently, in one urban school a local dance instructor facilitated a number of creative dance programmes that, in the words of one parent, (BP3) provided "an enjoyable experience for both parents and children". The principal of this school pointed out that the 'hip-hop' dancing classes provided an innovative way of fulfilling the physical education requirement of the school's curriculum. Similarly, in two other schools cookery workshops facilitated the sharing of diverse local culinary skills and expertise and also provided opportunities for capacity building, at a deeper level, as parents and teachers engaged with each other in shared learning experiences.

Shared Learning Experiences
A Partnership Support Worker with exceptional skills in the area of performing arts was employed by the three urban schools to help with concert productions and summer shows. Because her role required moving between schools, it facilitated the sharing of good practice and the exchange of ideas amongst teachers, as indicated in her evaluation sheet entry (ABCF2):

> It was very difficult at first trying to convince grown-ups to get stuck in and venture into the 'unknown'. We explored many different projects; from puppetry to singing, line dancing to costume making. The people I worked with were amazing. Grown-ups,

> teachers and children alike all working together ... we've come so far in such a short space of time and long may it continue. (ABCF2)

In many instances parents were delighted to be asked to share their skills and expertise with the schools. In one activity programme parents shared their skills at crochet with the children and their teacher. On one such occasion a grandmother (BP2) commented: "I love doing the crochet with the sixth-class girls ... we talk and tell stories while we're doing it ... I think I would have made a good teacher". In the junior section of this school a young mother (BP3) who enjoyed sharing her skills in the Music for Fun activity in which her four year old child was taking part said: "I like being in the classroom, I like helping out ... tis good seeing my own little fellow mixing with the others". As a consequence, this parent actively encouraged other parents to attend the Music for Fun activity, which resulted in very high attendance at each session. On such occasions the mutuality of the learning experience was clearly evident. One teacher's journal (BT17) reported: "The school learned a lot from the parents ... parents and other family members can learn a lot by being close to their children's education ... it's a two-way street". In a shared-reading activity in this school a parent (AP2) said that she "picked up a lot of useful tips on how to help with their homework and will try them out at home". This parent had been very involved in the making of 'story-sacks' for infant classes, using decorated pillowcases that were used for holding a variety of 'prompts' about a particular story. She believed that "the story-sacks were a great idea for getting children interested in reading".

On another occasion two fourth-class groups combined to produce Mother's Day cards. This was a successful piece of teamwork that required much detailed preparation by the teachers involved. The occasion was one of great enthusiasm for the large gathering that had assembled for this task. One of the teachers (BT20) completed an evaluation sheet for this activity that read: "We had six parents, two grannies, one aunt, and three older sisters assisting us in the classroom". This allowed for much interactive group work that generated huge enthusiasm and created "a great buzz in the classroom". The atmosphere was very pleasant and everybody related to each other in a very positive

way. One of the children from this group (EC2) stated in a group interview: "I felt happy because my mother came to see what I did in class".

Learning experiences such as these provided for environments that were conducive to capacity building experiences through sharing information, sharing skills and developing good working relationships. In one urban school a teacher's (AT2) evaluation sheet highlighted the advantages of the shared experience as "children and parents interacting in small groups and learning to collaborate with each other". In the same school the mutuality of the learning experience was emphasised by another teacher (CT5) when she asserted: "in learning together we learn from each other and we learn from our mistakes". Later, during the course of conversation, the principal (BT1) highlighted other important elements of capacity building when she pointed out the less tangible outcomes of working in partnership such as "learning to be patient, learning to be tolerant and a sense of being there for one another". The solidarity of "being there for one another" was emphasised for the group by a comment made by an aunt (BP2) who was filling in for her sister in a Shared Reading activity: "I'm his aunt; his mother is working. I came in so he wouldn't feel left out. I'm glad I did...I learned a few things myself". A teacher (AT4) in another school believed that sharing the classroom environment with parents was an effective means of building parent capacity. She contended that "the classroom often sets a higher benchmark than some homes and that some parents get a glimpse of what their children are capable of in regard to their behaviour and their application to work". A community worker (AC3) who had helped out in the classroom observed that "children like to have clear boundaries put in place for them" and "feel more secure" in such environments and stated that this learning could be applied to her own work in the After-school club.

Sharing learning experiences in the classroom also developed student capacity. The affirmation received from adult presence in one classroom led an eight year old girl (BC3) to comment: "I like it when grown-ups come into our classroom and look at our artwork on the walls ... it makes us feel proud of our school". A teacher's (DT16) journal also pointed to the importance of parental presence in the classroom as a means of affirming children in

their schoolwork: "It made children aware that there were many adults out there that cared about their education". In relation to a similar activity in another school a nine year old (EP2) alluded to the importance of a friendly environment for children's education. In a group interview, this child poignantly remarked: "I like seeing my mother talking to the teacher ... some teachers might become friends with the parents" (EC2).

It is clear from this study that developing a culture that supports mutual learning provided many opportunities for capacity building. This proved to be highly feasible in the partnership activities when like-minded participants were working together. There were, however, some negative experiences from time to time and also some differences of opinion between those taking part but an acceptance of human frailties and a belief in the well-intentioned efforts of all participants ensured positive outcomes. In one instance the presence of a father in the classroom seemed to cause some embarrassment for his daughter. After the activity her teacher (CT5, 2) explained that "she didn't want Daddy coming into her classroom" but as the principal (CT1, 2) pointed out "it's all part of the learning experience of working together".

Throughout the FSCEP project the dissemination of information took many different forms. To this end FSCEP articles in the school newsletters or magazines provided effective mechanisms to disseminate information to the wider community, specifically in relation to the benefits for the whole community of working in partnership. Also, at the end of each school year representative groups, including parents, teachers, and board of management members from the three urban communities, came together to evaluate progress, to share information and to celebrate successes.

These 'Celebrating Partnership' days were structured meetings but were very informal in nature and were seen as social occasions where the host school set out to make the visiting schools very welcome. An atmosphere of solidarity, hope and determination was very palpable at these meetings and much useful knowledge was generated through facilitated debate and the exchange of ideas. At the end of these sessions the host school provided a lunch for all on the school premises. The organisation of this lunch was a collaborative endeavour by a group of parents and teachers who prepared an array of appetising dishes in their own homes the previous night.

Implicit in the definition of partnership that was embraced by the FSCEP project, i.e. a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability (Pugh and De'Ath, 1989: 68), was the mutuality of the learning experience. These mutual learning experiences were seen to be successful in developing participant capacity. As a consequence it became self-evident in many of the partnership programmes that the collective learning involved was far greater than the sum of individual learning attained and this afforded insights into the symbiotic relationship that exists between teaching, learning and knowledge generation. The research findings indicated that a key factor in this process was the quality of relationships that existed between participants.

Empowerment
There is evidence in the data to suggest that through the use of innovative school-community projects, as outlined above, important shifts of power and focus can occur. The model of partnership informing the FSCEP project was that of "a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and a willingness to negotiate" (Pugh and De'ath, 1989: 68) within a relationship of trust. This made demands on teachers to remain open to new ideas and to embrace new ways of working. In the words of one teacher (AT 4, 3) "it made us leave our comfort zones to find new ways of working with parents". It challenged traditional assumptions and beliefs but also provided space wherein personal fulfilment and empowerment could take place for both parents and teachers.

One teacher's (BT17) journal in an urban school captured this sense of empowerment concisely:

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

In similar fashion a group of parents in an urban school took full responsibility for preparing and performing a puppet show for young children. They used a selection of hand puppets, which had been purchased for a previous FSCEP project activity programme, to compose and design a show. Six parents collaborated in developing character parts for each puppet and attuned their own voices to fit the character they had invented. The show took place in the local community hall and proved hugely entertaining for the children and for the teaching staff. In the words of the principal (CT1, 2), it "was a big hit to have parents performing for children rather than the other way around". In her journal the class teacher (CT4,2) stated that "the parents were delighted with what they had achieved" and pointed out that "it was very educational and also very empowering, as it involved parents and children designing the show and writing up the script without a reliance on the school". As well as empowering parents, the partnership activities also facilitated the empowerment of children, particularly students in the older age groups. Indeed, hearing the voice of parents and students has been adopted as official government policy in whole-school evaluations in recent years.

Teaching & Learning Styles
The following section outlines the changes in teaching styles, methodologies and roles, and the transformations that occurred in learning as a result. It includes data pertaining to active learning (on the part of teachers, parents and children), reflective practice, the role of the creative arts in channelling positive change and finally the conflicts and challenges relating to the changing

roles of teachers and parents within partnership programmes.

Mediating Change

The partnership programmes resulted in active learning approaches to schoolwork in many instances. For example, a Partnership Support Worker (AF2) employed in one school to deliver a 'Music for Fun' programme to a group of eight year olds skilfully applied active learning methodologies in what she referred to as "performance learning". In one such lesson called *The Story of Honey* parents, teachers and children dramatised the story of honey in the school hall. The children were required 'to become' the bees, parents 'to become' the flowers, and teachers 'to become' the beehives and each had to dress up accordingly. All of this activity was accompanied by Rimsky-Korsacov's *Flight of the Bumble Bee* and other related tunes. By the end of six weeks, which was the duration of the programme, the Partnership Support Worker's evaluation sheet (AF2) reported: "The smiles on parents' faces said it all ... as the positive energy began to spread; it transformed the activities into a happy creative learning environment". One of the participating children (AC2) said: "We learned all about honeybees and we had loads of fun". Later in the staff room the programme generated interesting debates amongst the staff and also highlighted issues in relation to the moral courage required in taking on new teaching and learning methodologies. Throughout the FSCEP project the role of the teacher as reflective practitioner and as a contributor to the research process was of the utmost importance to the success of the project.

Reflective Practitioners

In promoting the role of teachers as researchers, teachers' views on a whole range of issues were sought continuously throughout the project through a process of dialogue and journal keeping. However, as one teacher (AT2) pointed out "teachers have very little time and very few opportunities to stop and think and to take stock of their work". This teacher (AT2) found that keeping the reflective journal was a useful way of developing her own thinking on her role as a teacher, which, as she explained, "provoked interesting discussions in the staff room". She noted that teachers get very little feedback from parents: "Most of our parents are not at a stage to give feedback to teachers" and contended that school staffs "only have a vague

sense of how parents feel about the school and the education service being offered to their children". Nevertheless, the journals were seen as useful in helping teachers reflect on their work. As one teacher (ET1) wrote: "It caused us to re-evaluate our role in the education process of the children and helped us to realise the value of working together with parents/guardians and the wider community".

In this context it is interesting to note that teacher reflection continues to be part of the teacher education literature. A handbook for student teachers called *Learning to Teach Reflectively* is an essential part of initial teacher education in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. More recently, critical reflection has been recommended as a means of incorporating issues of equity and social justice into the teaching discourse as a prelude to creating a culturally responsive curriculum. In this respect the partnership process was seen to be a medium through which critical reflection on culturally relevant teaching and learning could take place. The data showed that the development of culturally relevant teaching strategies was contingent upon increased awareness by school staffs of the presenting culture and social background of the school community.

Creativity

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

> By way of preparation for this activity a brief meeting with all parents of twenty pupils in second class (eight year olds) was organised at which the community art activity programme was explained, discussed and ideas

exchanged. Subsequently, in the classroom each of the twenty children was presented with a bag of odds and ends, a child-friendly scissor, various types of adhesive, painting and colouring equipment and so on. The object of the activity was to involve the families in making an art structure of their choice with whatever waste materials were at hand. A deadline of three weeks was set at which time the finished product would be put on display in the school hall for adjudication. The finished products exceeded all expectations showing great imagination, innovation, skill and talent. It was with great care and diligence that these items were transported to the school and placed on display by adult family members. A general invitation was issued to all members of the community to attend the adjudication ceremony in the school. This was well attended and each child was given the opportunity to explain and extol their work. Finally, the principal decided that all entries were of such a high standard that each should receive a prize. Later these artworks were put on display in the local community centre for all to view. (AT5)

Through activities such as these the FSCEP project demonstrated that schools could become pivotal agencies in the lives of families and communities. In this respect the FSCEP project aimed to nurture a holistically and culturally sensitive approach to children's learning and development. As such the partnership activities extended teachers' influence into aspects of family and community life and, while having advanced learning at the core, it went far beyond academic attainment and offered a sense of renewed hope and support to many families. In this way the activity programmes played an important role in promoting and mediating positive change in all participating schools and their wider communities. This shift of emphasis was seen to impact on conventional notions of teacher professionalism.

Conflicting Pressures

The data indicated that there was considerable uncertainty in defining the role of the teacher, particularly in relation to how they work with families. Our rapidly changing society places increasing demands on schools to cater for social, emotional and physical needs of students along with their educational needs. Also, modern research (Miller, 2007) points to the importance of a more holistic approach to children's learning. Today's teacher, therefore, fills many roles and is caught between the conflicting forces of 'managerial professionalism' and 'democratic professionalism' (Blackmore and Sachs, 2007: 85 cited in Ryan and Galvin, 2007: 16). This concept can be summed up as meeting economic needs versus meeting societal needs. 'The resulting tension is bringing about levels of confusion for many teachers with regard to their professional identity' (Ryan and Galvin, 2007: 16). A teacher (DT13) in one school feared that "in focusing on partnership activities core curriculum subjects could be neglected" and pointed out that "teachers feel under pressure to raise literacy and numeracy standards at all age levels". While we acknowledge this tension, we must point out that the FSCEP project aimed to employ educational partnership practice as a mechanism by which to improve children's learning, including literacy and numeracy skills.

Managerial professionalism arises from the demands of the economy on schools. There is a growing demand to link education more closely to the economy with increasing pressure on teachers, as the corporate sector exerts an ever-stronger influence on education policy. 'The language of market forces has become the language of educational assessment with phrases like setting targets, meeting targets, raising standards, measuring outcomes, value for money and accountability' (Ryan and Galvin, 2007: 16). 'The FSCEP project, on the other hand, is attempting to promote democratic professionalism' (Ryan and Galvin, 2007: 16) whereby the five schools were encouraged and facilitated in reaching out to parents and communities, developing relationships, building alliances in order to promote learning and support the social and emotional needs of children and parents (ibid). As observed by one HSCL coordinator (CT14) "teachers are caught in the middle and it can be a source of anxiety for them as they try to get the balance right". In attempting to

strike this balance the partnership programmes assisted the schools in placing greater value on parents' input into their children's education. In so doing much attention was focused on parents' rights within the education process and rights issues became topics for discussion at some staff meetings.

The Irish Constitution states that 'parents are the prime and natural educators of children' (Bunreacht na hÉireann, Article 42, 1937). A government White Paper, *Charting Our Education Future* (DES, 1995) introduced the word partnership into educational discourse as one of the cornerstones of the primary school curriculum. Some years later the Education Act (DES, 1998) enshrined this concept in legislation. As a consequence, the questions arising for schools are both difficult and complex: In what ways and to what extent can schools assist parents in fulfilling their role as 'the prime and natural educators of children'? In attempting to

address these questions the FSCEP project focused attention on fathers, mothers and other family members and promoted a language of empowerment in staff rooms through phrases such as enabling parents, facilitating parents, accommodating parents and hearing the voice of parents. In this sense it endeavoured to raise the value of the parent role in education and consequently issues regarding parents' rights, teachers' rights and children's rights became items for discussion in school staff rooms.

CONCLUSION >>

This section profiles how the project objectives were realised and identifies the processes and progress towards an embracing of partnership at all levels targeted by the project. Furthermore, the data emphasise the place of the school at the heart of the community, in which children's education is supported in a more holistic and, effective way.

The main findings relating to the research that was conducted with the five schools, the participating families and the local communities that participated in the study were presented in this section. The section initially presented a brief overview of the historical and social context within which the participating schools were operating during the lifetime of the study. This was followed by the three themes that emerged as a result of the ethnographic study, i.e. (a) the development and enhancement of the school ethos, mission and/or culture, (b) the presence of school policies, processes, procedures, organisational structures and practices, and how they influence working in partnership with families and communities, and (c) the teaching, curriculum development and learning styles and how partnership enhanced educational outcomes for children, families and schools. A more detailed analysis and discussion of all the findings can be found in the final section of this report.

7

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
AUTHORS: JOHN GALVIN, KAREN MAHONY, DR. ANN HIGGINS >>

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INTRODUCTION >>

This section presents the conclusions and recommendations of this study based on a review of the literature in this field and on the quantitative and qualitative findings of the research. The British Educational Research Association (2007) recognises the two main goals of educational research as being: (a) to inform our understanding of educational issues, and (b) to improve educational policy and practice. Thus, the study's conclusions are presented here with the aim of adding to the general understanding of educational partnership and with a view to developing new models of best practice in this field. This report comprehensively combines an appreciation of international best practice on working in partnership with the experiential knowledge accumulated in the five primary school communities in which the FSCEP project was located. The report will be of interest to all educational practitioners as well as policymakers, community development workers, parents' groups and the broader research community.

This section begins by providing a brief summary of the relevant literature and the methodological approaches which were outlined in detail in the previous sections. In section one the literature review examined the relevant cognate fields of study and offered a comprehensive documentation of the contextual literature on educational policy, educational partnerships and educational disadvantage in Ireland. Drawing on the conceptual understandings of the home-school-community axis developed by leading authors in this field (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Epstein, 1987a, 1990; Epstein, 2001) the literature review offers a framework on how educational partnerships can evolve in primary school DEIS settings. It highlights the overwhelming international evidence that points to the advantages that accrue for children when schools activate and unleash the beneficial impacts of families, schools and communities working closely together and the consequent spin-off advantages for the whole school community in terms of increased social capital.

The next section presented a methodological overview to the study that delineated the ethnographic and grounded theory approaches adopted to collect, collate and analyse the data. This was considered the most appropriate and effective methodology to explore the nature, structure and processes of family-school-community partnership in the education of children. As such the study monitored and examined the dynamics at work in the interplay of homes, schools and communities in children's development and education. This quest was crystallised throughout the study by a continual focus on the following questions:

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

2. What made the educational partnership process work well?

3. What prevented it from working well?

4. What models of partnership were most appropriate to the five participating schools?

Questions 1, 2 and 3 above relate to the benefits, outcomes, processes and challenges of working in partnership. These questions are addressed earlier within the quantitative (Section 5) and the qualitative (Section 6) sections of this report. Question 4 i.e. the most appropriate models of partnership, as experienced by the five schools, is addressed within this section.

APPROPRIATE MODELS OF PARTNERSHIP >>

The literature illustrates a marked convergence of educational theories towards a process of educational partnership as 'the way forward' in children's education. It may seem obvious to advocate for working in partnership in light of Clarke and Glendenning's (2002: 33) observation: 'Like community, 'partnership' is a word of obvious virtue (what sensible person would choose conflict over collaboration)'? Nevertheless, in adopting this mode of working particularly in terms of promoting change in school settings it is important

to give due consideration to the most appropriate and effective models of partnership.

Three models of educational partnership were conceptualised in the literature section drawing on the works of internationally acclaimed authors such as Epstein (2001), Wescott Dodd and Konzal (2002) and Barbour, Barbour and Scully (1997). The convergence of educational theory towards a partnership approach to children's education is common to all models outlined in this section. It is clear from the discussion on each model that educational thinking is in an evolutionary process of viewing the contributions of schools, families and communities to children's education as separate inputs to a more holistic view of a shared input. In moving towards this goal the FSCEP project enhanced all stakeholders' understandings of their positions on the continuum from 'Minimum level' to 'Associative level' to 'Decision Making' level (Barbour, Barbour and Scully, 1997: 326-327). In similar vein, Epstein (2001: 22) views this continuum in terms of the 'separate responsibilities of institutions' to the 'shared responsibilities of institutions' to the 'sequential responsibilities of institutions' and illustrates this conceptualisation with the aid of a Venn diagram showing an overlap that can be increased or decreased depending on three factors; 'time, experience in families and experience in schools' (Epstein, 2001: 27). Much attention was paid to these considerations in the development and implementation of educational partnership activities throughout the lifespan of the FSCEP project and many instances of good practice in this regard are highlighted in the qualitative data analysis in the previous section. Various examples of the symbiotic relationships that were an essential part of FSCEP partnership programmes were evident in the data and resonate strongly with Wescott Dodd and Konzal's (2002: 125) 'synergistic model' that emphasises the interconnectedness and interdependence of families, schools and communities.

While there was a growing awareness in all five schools over the course of the FSCEP project of the benefits of developing educational partnerships there remained some confusion/uncertainty as to what exactly the concept entailed. While all five schools experienced a broad consensus of agreement regarding models of best practice there was also an acute awareness that a 'one size fits all' approach was not applicable, particularly given the unique qualities, experiences, resources and contexts within which the individual schools operated. In this respect the activity programmes of the FSCEP project helped to advance awareness of what models were best suited to each individual school.

Consequently, individual schools were attentive to the 'social and psychological distance between family and school members and their patterns of communication, and the results or outcomes of more or less interactions' (Epstein, 2001: 31). Increased interaction at a micro-level between individuals enhanced interaction at a macro-level and this was particularly evident during celebration events of the partnership activities. However, there were essential elements that were seen to be basic to all models of educational partnership in the FSCEP project. These were evidenced throughout the data and were concisely summed up in the following mnemonic devised by one of the participating schools (CT1,4):

What did the FSCEP project mean to our school?

F - the ***FUN*** *we had throughout the various programmes*

S - the ***SOLIDARITY*** *among all the participants*

C - the ***COMMUNITY*** *spirit among all who took part in the activities*

E - the ***ENJOYMENT AND EXPERIENCES*** *we obtained from our involvement*

P - *the diverse range of* ***PROGRAMMES*** *that we have delivered (CT1,4)*

The five schools, three urban and two rural, varied greatly in size, setting and background. Internal school cultures also manifested their own unique characteristics. On occasion each of the schools prioritised certain curricular areas over others in designing partnership activities. The origins of some partnership activities were often to be found in the interest areas and enthusiasm of members of staff. Throughout the life of the FSCEP project the data indicated that arts education in all five schools was regarded as a fertile area for the development of partnership activities. These activities ranged from parent participation in art and craft activities in the classroom to community-based art projects, to drama activities, to song and dance shows, to

puppetry, to the promotion and participation in large-scale cultural events. The creativity and intrinsic motivation involved, which are essential elements in such activities, was seen as the energy source in driving these activities forward. Thus consulting children and parents as to the nature and design of activities and providing a space for sharing decision-making, responsibility and skills was key to the success of these endeavours and this is in line with the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) and the National Children's Strategy (DH&C, 2000). Increased parent-teacher interactions led to increased parent participation which in turn led to increased empowerment of parents. This was evidenced in the parent group in one school who devised and staged their own puppet show for the entertainment of teachers and children in a role reversal situation.

As might be expected, outdoor activities such as sporting activities, field trips, exploration excursions and refurbishment activities of school surroundings (some requiring considerable levels of physical labour) were extremely popular with children in all schools. A discovery excursion to a rocky seashore was very exciting for a group of children from one school who displayed their discoveries back in the classroom. It is fair to conclude that building in 'discovery-methods' approaches, to learning excites children's curiosity and ignites their enthusiasm. Outdoor activities and sporting activities had the added advantage across all schools of attracting and accommodating greater male participation. Fathers, male guardians, grandfathers, uncles and older male siblings were more willing to participate in such activities than in class-room based activities.

In respect of classroom-based activities 'Maths for Fun' (Home School Community Liaison Coordinators, 2006) proved very popular in all five schools. As one principal explained these games had a focused structure and process to them that ensured orderly participation by large numbers of visitors to the classroom. When this activity was well organised it operated very smoothly and without disruption to other classes (as stressed by one principal). This was crucial to effective collaboration practices.

As might be expected the development and expansion of literacy skills for children was prioritised in all schools. It is no wonder, therefore, that shared-reading (sometimes called paired-reading) and other literacy promoting activities were prioritised and promoted in all five schools. These ranged from individual class activities to large scale community activities that provided and encouraged literacy development throughout the communities. Examples of these are outlined in the analysis sections and include such activities as shared-reading in the classrooms and in the homes, the making and using of story-sacks, family write-a-book programmes and family-history projects. Some literacy projects had broader objectives such as the development of social capital by promoting community spirit and encouraging civic pride. These included community-led programmes that researched and documented local community histories and culture and school-led participation in cultural celebrations at local or citywide level.

In all of these partnership activities the process of working in collaboration with teachers, parents, children and community members ensured that the FSCEP project activities were interesting, appropriate, relevant, exciting and had a sense of ownership for those taking part. Policies of inclusion and democratic practices were essential to this sense of ownership, which resulted in varying levels of empowerment for many participants.

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EVALUATION OF FSCEP AIMS AND OBJECTIVES >>

The Family-School-Community Educational Partnership project was essentially a collaborative process in developing and forging partnership between schools and families, within the context of the community. Nine aims and objectives were listed in the original proposal. The project aimed to:

1. Develop a model of good practice in the area of family-school-community partnerships;

2. Enable schools and families in disadvantaged contexts to recognise their reciprocal influences on children's learning;

3. Support disadvantaged schools and families to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours to work together in partnership to address the learning needs of their children;

4. Improve standards in schools by developing effective system-wide projects that will develop children's and parents' literacy, numeracy, creative arts, sports, and other social skills;

5. Improve children's attendance and behaviour in schools;

6. Provide opportunities and supports for school staff, pupils, and families to meet in contexts that promote shared understanding and partnership;

7. Cohesively bring together the work of a number of sectors by forming a multi-agency partnership and promote an effective and efficient use of expertise and resources;

8. Develop a more holistic and integrated systems level approach in dealing with educational disadvantage that will inform changes in areas that interface with school processes and structures e.g., in teaching styles, cultural development, school organisation, curriculum development and other areas;

9. Disseminate the models of good practice and the outcomes of the work in contexts and ways that will make them accessible to educational practitioners, community workers, parents'

groups, policy-makers and the broader educational community, including through a national conference, series of networks, in publications and in relevant journals.

For the purpose of evaluating these aims and objectives they are re-arranged below in terms of their relation to the three themes: A, B and C, as previously outlined in the Findings section and again here, in the Conclusions and Recommendations section of this research report.

Consequently, Aims 2, 6 and 9 are evaluated under Theme A in relation to the extent and nature of the impact of the FSCEP project on the culture and ethos of the schools. Similarly, Aims 1, 5 and 7 are evaluated under Theme B in relation to the impact of the FSCEP project on the policies, processes and structures within the five schools. And finally, aims 3, 4, and 8 are evaluated under Theme C in relation to the impact of the FSCEP project on teaching and learning styles and curriculum development in the schools. All nine aims and objectives are compartmentalised in Table 7.1 on the following page, according to the theme under which they fall.

Table 7.1: Evaluation of the Aims and Objectives of the FSCEP Project					
Theme A		**Theme B**		**Theme C**	
Objective	**Achieved By:**	**Objective**	**Achieved By:**	**Objective**	**Achieved By:**
Objective 2: Enable schools and families in disadvantaged contexts to recognise their reciprocal influences on children's learning	Advancing the concept of partnership at staff meetings	**Objective 1:** Develop a model of good practice in the area of family-school-community partnerships	Improving P/T communications, continuous consultation	**Objective 3:** Support disadvantaged schools and families to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours to work together in partnership to address the learning needs of their children	Coordinator and Support Workers focusing on the 'process', not the end product
	Staff development sessions		Using different approaches and many strategies		Endeavouring to develop a sense of belonging in all staff members
	Teasing out difficult elements of partnership with parents and raising expectations		Seeking parent input at planning stages		Relinquishing 'ownership' of the activities to parents/ empowering
	Keeping the reflective journal / ongoing informing of practice	**Objective 5:** Improve children's attendance and behaviour in schools	An emphasis on fun activities	**Objective 4:** Improve standards in schools by developing effective system-wide projects that will develop children's and parents' literacy, numeracy, creative arts, sports, and other social skills	A focus on literacy, numeracy, arts, sport in the partnership programmes
Objective 6: Provide opportunities and supports for school staff, pupils, and families to meet in contexts that promote shared understanding and partnership	Preliminary consultations with parents and children about partnership programmes		Promoting a pleasant, caring atmosphere/ informal approach		Incorporating the activities into core curriculum and vice versa
	Round-table planning sessions with parents and teachers		Focusing on individuals / tailoring activities		Responding to the 'presenting culture' of the communities
	A policy of collaboration and delegation	**Objective 7:** Cohesively bring together the work of a number of sectors by forming a multi-agency partnership and promote an effective and efficient use of expertise and resources	Involving CDPs, SCPs, LECs, FRCs	**Objective 8:** Develop a more holistic and integrated systems level approach in dealing with educational disadvantage that will inform changes in areas that interface with school processes and structures e.g., in teaching styles, cultural development, school	Raising awareness amongst staff of the importance of a partnership approach
Objective 9: Disseminate the models of good practice and the outcomes of the work in contexts and ways that will make them accessible to educational practitioners, community workers, parents' groups, policy-makers and the broader	Using newsletters, flyers, exhibits, displays		Using local venues, skills, expertise and community facilities		Being the catalyst/ bringing about change
	Increasing home-school communications		Learning from small rural school setting/close-knit community		Focusing on active learning/ performance learning/ fun learning
	Sharing good practice within the five schools		Supporting local summer camps		Developing a built-in evaluation process / informing practice
	Advancing parent participation and assistance				

Theme A		Theme B		Theme C	
Objective	Achieved By:	Objective	Achieved By:	Objective	Achieved By:
educational community, including through national conferences, series of networks, in publications and in relevant journals	Giving presentations within MIC and at conferences			organisation, curriculum development and other areas	Advancing a pedagogy of collaborative learning/ generating knowledge
	Presentations to MIC students				Promoting culturally relevant lessons / stressing dissonance issues
	Media coverage of large-scale partnership events				Stimulating 'school' conversations in the homes in relation to FSCEP
	Publications				Focusing on the most marginalised

KEY CONCLUSIONS >>

The following section presents the key conclusions drawn from the collated data. It has been divided into three sections, which echo the three themes in the findings section.

Table 7.2: Key Conclusions, Theme A - Development and Enhancement of the School Ethos, Mission and/or Culture	
1.	Consultation with parents and families around planning and designing of partnership activities promotes the development of more culturally responsive and culturally aware programmes, whilst also allowing the partnership programme to draw on the skills of the local parents and community, and being aware of their/its needs
2.	The inclusion of the voice of the child is paramount to the success of a partnership programme, as they can advise on the current context and realities of administering a programme
3.	Heightened visibility of parents/adults in the school setting conveys a message to students of the importance and value of education, whilst also communicating the value that their parents/significant adults place on education and school
4.	Participation of parents/adults was promoted through (1) the administration of activities in a variety of contexts e.g. the school, the home, the community etc. and (2) extended consultation with parents, to ensure it was specific to their needs and cultural and moral beliefs
5.	Schools became aware of the need to design programmes that encouraged the participation of significant male adults in children's lives. Participants accomplished this by designing and administering programmes involving sport and outdoor activities to attract male adults

6.	Partnership complements both child and adult learning and encourages a more holistic method of learning/educating oneself e.g. with greater transition between home and school, and the extension of learning from the classroom/school context to the home and/or community context. Additionally, as a result of the partnership process, the learning that takes place in the home/community context is now viewed as complementary to the learning that takes place in the classroom
7.	Partnership promotes the concept that learning is not solely accomplished through academic processes, but that it can also be achieved through other methods e.g. the arts, sports etc.
8.	Relationships and the methods used to communicate, interact and relate to one another are hugely important elements of working in partnership especially (in relation to the maintenance of activities and the mediating of outcomes)
9.	Good quality relationships, trust and open communication amongst all involved (developed through mutual respect of others' thoughts, beliefs, feelings and actions) contribute to the success of a partnership programme, whilst also leading to positive reinforcement of mutually accepted values
10.	Partnership is an approach that promotes and supports diversity; by encouraging the participation of minority groups e.g. members of the Travelling community, families of foreign nationality and majority groups alike. The participation of the diversity of social groups is encouraged through open consultation and participation in the planning and design of the partnership programmes
11.	Methods of encouraging equality of participation of all families was a reality that challenged a number of participating schools. Methods to address this included the adoption of a non-judgemental approach to all parents/adults and children, whilst also being cognisant of the dynamics that exist between different families
12.	Open communication with parents/adults and families promotes a greater sharing of information relating to the child, and also prevents the development of misunderstandings/crossed wires
13.	Greater collaboration between schools and other agents within the community allows for the exchanging of ideas and ultimately allows schools to learn from others experiences and/or challenges
14.	Working in partnership encourages and enhances the capacity of the individual and the community on the following levels: quality of relationships, development of friendships, the interdependence of individuals and structures on one another i.e. in social and artistic endeavours (e.g. music, dance, theatrical skills, and cookery skills etc.)
15.	A welcoming ethos manifested through an informal, pleasant and caring atmosphere contributes to partnership. Examples of a welcoming atmosphere include: well-established home-school links; teachers, parents and children being addressed by their first names; and a personal presence at the front door of the school when the children arrive in the morning and/or leave in the evening
16.	Sensitivity of language and the use of appropriate terminology were highlighted as important factors to the promotion of successful partnership. For example: use of the word 'grown up', as opposed to parent/guardian/significant adult in the child's life; children over 'pupils', to encourage a homely atmosphere; non use of negative and/or prejudice-laden terminology e.g. disadvantage, underprivileged, deprived, marginalized etc. Additionally, it has been learned that schools should not draw on irony when approaching parents as it can be misinterpreted e.g. 'You're here again today?' Rather schools should welcome the parent and acknowledge the value of their presence and participation

17.	Partnership requires participants to be cognisant of parental time constraints, family commitments and alternative pressures
18.	Elements/activities that encouraged children to take activities home and encouraged parental participation in the home setting worked particularly well e.g. story-sacks, reading packs and write-a-book
19.	The expression of gratitude, appreciation and politeness contributed to the development of good relationships
20.	The instillation of a sense of democracy and ownership, although beneficial to the programme, can potentially cause parents who are not involved to feel excluded. It is important therefore to nurture an ethos of inclusion and support among parents
21.	The vast amount of learning (for schools, parents/adults, children and communities), takes place throughout the process of partnership as opposed to solely at the end of that process
22.	Partnership enabled schools, parents and communities to explore their attitudes and values towards gender-orientated roles. This in turn promoted gender-responsive learning opportunities and increased motivation and ownership of the educational agenda, on behalf of the male parents/adults, as well as encouraging active involvement in the learning process

Table 7.3: Key Conclusions, Theme B - Planning of School Policies, Processes, Procedures, Organisational Structure and Practices	
1.	In relation to encouraging parental participation, participants discovered the value of finding a balance between (i) fostering a welcoming atmosphere in the school context, and making parents aware of the power and advantage of their involvement, whilst also (ii) being cognisant of parental time-constraints, commitments and pressures
2.	The existence of a person (in this case, the Partnership Development Coordinator) to coordinate partnership on a regional level assisted in the success of partnership processes through support, encouragement and knowledge of such processes
3.	Given the time pressures placed on Principals and participating teachers, the establishment of 'Special Duty Posts' within the school context would support greater collaboration and consultation between schools, teachers, parents, children and the local community
4.	Getting the balance right between the levels of parent/adult participation that can be expected i.e. the degree, nature and duration of that participation, and the value of that participation to a child's education must be a key consideration of partnership processes
5.	The maintenance of trusting relationships between the school, home and community requires a degree of time, attention and presence of mind, which can put extra demands on teachers' time and energy. This in turn highlights the challenges to the sustainability of partnership processes
6.	Increased awareness that partnership processes are time consuming and require commitment and flexibility on behalf of all involved
7.	Being cognisant of parental time-constraints, prior commitments and external pressures highlights the importance of being considerate of the length of a partnership programme. Empirical evidence highlights that shorter programmes e.g. 4/6 weeks duration with one-weekly session, are more successful at attracting parental participation than longer programmes

8.	The most appropriate and successful times (with regard to parents' and teachers' time) for partnership programmes were at the beginning or end of the school day
9.	The establishment of a core group of parents was hugely important as it greatly contributed to the organisation of large events
10.	Traditional approaches to discipline and organisation of time within the school setting are not conducive to the fluidity and flexibility required for successful partnership programmes. Flexibility on the part of the teacher/school is paramount in overcoming the challenges and barriers faced relative to partnership
11.	The relatively small amount of funding available through the FSCEP project made the partnership programmes possible. Therefore, greater supports, resources and sustainable investment are necessary for the success of partnership programmes
12.	Although high security that allows for the health, safety and protection of school staff and students is necessary within a school setting it is not, however, always conducive to a welcoming atmosphere. It was discovered that schools with secretarial and/or care-taking staff are better equipped to ensure a welcoming atmosphere throughout the school day
13.	Some of the challenges experienced by participating schools throughout the partnership process were: inadequate time, insufficient space, added workloads, poor funding, inadequate school facilities, behavioural issues and poor human resources. Difficulties relating to these challenges were overcome by schools holding staff workshops, and/or teacher/parent planning days outside of school hours, which acted as a forum for discussing the challenges involved and collectively agreeing on the best action to take
14.	Frequent consultation between school and home was viewed as a necessary first step to developing successful partnership practices. Such consultations can take the form of informal, incidental meetings, or more formal meetings, which are also necessary from time-to-time
15.	A sense of 'curriculum overload' was overcome by teachers through: (i) skilfully integrating partnership activities in to the different curricular areas of the primary school curriculum, and (ii) by accessing the support of parents as assistants to delivering programmes and activities
16.	High levels of flexibility and organisational skills are required by participating schools, families and communities, to allow for successful partnership programmes
17.	The existence of such facilities as parent meeting rooms that cater for large groups of parents and their infant children, adequate seating and adult toilets are necessary components to ensuring the successful implementation of parent participation in schools
18.	Schools play an important role in the development of social capital amongst the participating parents i.e. developing 'parent readiness' to participate and contribute towards roles such as members of boards of management, special needs assistants, caretakers, tutors in after-school and out-of-school groups and activities, members of parent-teacher associations, parents' councils and Local Education Committees
19.	Informal partnership arrangements e.g. sports days, concerts, and graduation ceremonies etc., acted as a medium through which parents were inducted into more formal partnership structures later on
20.	The involvement of parents was hugely beneficial in the design of school policy, school operation and decision-making processes as it allowed the schools to design the structures according to the needs of the families

21.	There exists a need to dispel the notion that parents/adults are only called to a school for negative purposes e.g. when a child misbehaves etc. Partnership allows schools to disperse such a notion, by calling on parents to contribute to their children's learning and to contribute to school decision-making etc. The notion is also dispelled by the regular dissemination of school newsletters and communications highlighting positive images of the school and acknowledging valuable parental support
22.	The assignment of culturally responsive homework that allowed parents to participate and contribute in a meaningful way made the partnership processes a fun experience, whilst also encouraging greater parent participation and responsiveness
23.	Participating teachers acknowledged the difficulty of disciplining children in the presence of their parents. To overcome this challenge, it was acknowledged that well organised and structured events prevented such a necessity
24.	Active participation of parents, teachers and children in the partnership activities resulted in greater respect for one another

Table 7.4: Key Conclusions, Theme C: Teaching, Curriculum Development and Learning Styles	
1.	Quiet periods are essential during the school day/week as they allow teachers the opportunity to reflect on their practice, whilst also allowing time to consult and plan with one another, parents, families and community members
2.	Partnership programmes act as a path to professional development of teachers. The programmes themselves are a learning curve, which allow teachers the opportunity to develop new ideas and skills that are then transferable to the classroom. As a result, this impacts on both teaching and learning styles within the school and home, and encourages greater creativity on the part of the teacher and/or parent
3.	The partnership process encourages greater creativity around the fulfilment of a school's curriculum i.e. participants become more skilled at incorporating the artistic, sporting and social activities in to the curriculum e.g. dance classes fulfil the physical education module, and vice versa e.g. literacy and numeracy can be incorporated in to artistic, sporting and social activities
4.	The value of shared learning between participating schools was evident at a number of levels e.g. at annual school partnership days, but also when the professional skills of a performing artist were employed by a number of schools. This contributed to a sharing of learning relating to successes and challenges
5.	Partnership programmes contributed to a sense of 'mutuality' of learning i.e. teachers/schools learned from parents/adults, whilst equally, parents/adults learned from teachers/schools
6.	The gathering of teachers, parents/adults and children for partnership programmes encouraged the sharing of information and skills, whilst also contributing to the development of good working relationships
7.	Teachers learned to be more patient, tolerant and supportive towards one another and to children and families as a result of the process
8.	Partnership made demands on teachers to remain open to new ideas and to embrace new ways of working with families and communities

9.	Partnership empowers parents/adults and children alike as they take ownership for the different projects and programmes, whilst also motivating children's learning
10.	Opportunities for reflective practice among the teaching participants was seen as hugely beneficial, as it allowed them to re-evaluate their role in the educational process, whilst also helping them to realise the value of working in partnership
11.	Participating schools viewed the creative arts as a non-threatening medium for developing partnership activities. However, as mentioned previously, the arts can also be utilised as a mechanism for introducing other curricular areas e.g. literacy and numeracy etc. and therefore, they act as a mechanism for promoting academic learning
12.	Partnership allows schools to work towards accomplishing article 42 of the Irish Constitution i.e. '…parents are the prime and natural educators of their children' (Irish Government, 1937)

RECOMMENDATIONS >>

The FSCEP project sought to develop effective partnership practice between the key stakeholders in the child's life, namely, their parents, teachers and community as a strategic mechanism to support and enable children's learning. The empirical data gathered through this current study has proven that the development of effective educational partnership practice is attainable, and that there are very positive outcomes evident as a result of working in this way. Having distilled our research findings and accumulated learning over the four-year period of the FSCEP project, we now present a set of recommendations to guide the development of sustainable and effective educational partnership. We recognise that there are many barriers and challenges to working in this way, but we are convinced that effective educational partnership practice brings a host of practical outcomes for children, teachers, parents and the community. However, we have learned that the development of effective educational partnership is not cost/resource neutral i.e. it is dependent on both. It necessitates the investment of time and resources. It challenges key stakeholders to reflect on current practices and demands that they/we move out of our 'comfort zone'. It challenges us to explore new teaching methodologies; new and effective means of communication; and to work respectfully with partners to enable children's learning. Ultimately, this involves a cultural shift from traditional home/school/community interaction patterns towards the development of collaboration and partnership practice.

We strongly believe that in order for this partnership practice to be effective it must be sustainable. That does not infer that programmes found to run effectively one year should continue year after year without review. As we have shown reflective practice is a cornerstone of this work, therefore attention needs to be paid not only to outcomes, in this case predominantly children's learning and the creation of partnership, but to the processes by which this is achieved as well as the kinds of relationships that scaffold that journey. The Interaction Associates (1988) propose an evaluation tool 'Dimensions of Success' which enables the practitioners to reflect on success in terms of relationships, processes and results. We propose to borrow elements of this tool (with some revisions) to present our recommendations. We propose the retention of the three interlinked strands of relationships, process and outcomes, but renaming it 'Dimensions of Partnership' (see figure 7.1 right).

Dimensions of Partnership
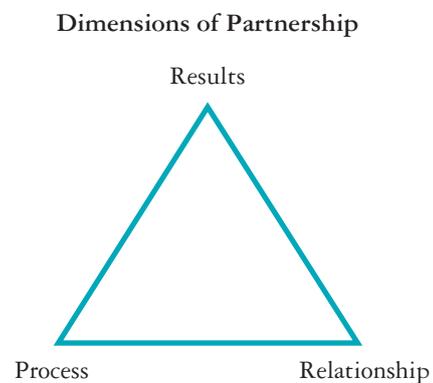
Figure 7.1: Dimensions of Partnership Model
Adapted from: Ineraction Associates, 1988

The following is a presentation of the research recommendations relating to each dimension in turn. In doing so, we recognise that for effective educational partnership to be developed and maintained due attention must be paid to relationships, process and outcomes.

Relationships

The research has highlighted that relationships are key elements in the development of effective partnership practice. The findings of this current study indicate that the nature, frequency of interaction, and quality of relationships plays a key role in facilitating the development of effective educational partnership practice, and have identified the core ingredients of effective relationships as being the need to recognise that:

- The family-based adults involved in supporting children's learning can include parents, foster-parents, carers, grandparents, extended family and older siblings;
- Parents may have had negative experiences with education and/or school contexts. This highlights the necessity of providing opportunities for them to build their confidence in talking and working with teachers;

- All partners need teachers and parents to be sensitive to each other's roles, responsibilities and past experiences. It is a requirement that teachers and parents develop an appreciation of the complementary role that each plays in supporting the child's learning;
- Working in this way provides very valuable opportunities for building positive relationships between parents and children. Therefore there is a need to be sensitive to the family dynamics;
- When teachers and parents referred to each other on a first name basis that it contributed to the development of easier working relationships and helped to put people at ease and on an equal footing and is deserving of due consideration;
- The development of trust is core to the development of partnership practice. Trust takes time to develop. We therefore recommend that attention be given to the development of trusting relationships;
- Adults, be they teachers, community members or parents need to acknowledge and show appreciation for each other's roles;
- Partnership is developed in context. We recommend that teachers are supported to understand the cultural contexts in which they are working.

Process

We believe that effective partnership practice cannot be imposed; it must be generated and subsequently nurtured. Process in this instance refers to the way in which decisions are made and communicated, the way in which schools embrace inclusive, internal and out-reach practices, and the respect shown for diversity and commitment to inclusion. Attention to process means recognising the need to:

- Develop reflection skills and build in time for reflective practice. This can be in terms of the individual teacher, or indeed parent. In terms of developing reflective practice, it can be within and across stakeholder groups;
- Provide teachers with professional development opportunities to reflect on existing practice and to develop skills to work effectively with parents across a broad range of curricular areas;
- Recognise the barriers that exist for parents to become involved in the education of their

children and to design programmes which will offer all adults opportunities to be involved at some stage of the school year. These barriers include:

- » Time e.g. family and work commitments of parents
- » Negative previous experiences of education and/or school settings, and
- » Lack of appropriate communication skills;

- Provide formal and informal opportunities for stakeholders to meet, plan and organise activities;

- Provide opportunities for all stakeholders to develop effective communication skills;

- Provide effective means of sharing information in its many guises e.g.:
  - » Verbal
  - » Written
  - » New technologies e.g. text messaging, email and web pages;

- Develop in-school structures which support teachers who are pioneering and sustaining partnership practice;

- Recognise that this work cannot be done without significant time investment, therefore teachers and other stakeholders need to find ways of finding that time. Education policy and practice needs to recognise that cultural changes cannot take place without due support and recognition;

- Support schools, parents and community members to find effective ways of engaging in planning;

- The leadership role of the Principal is central to the process; therefore training and support are essential;

- Recognise that schools hold the gatekeeper role in partnership development;

- Consider the way decisions are made within the school and between the school, home and community. Therefore consideration must be given to current practice and agreement reached on how best to progress in the spirit of partnership;

- Laugh and have fun. All adults and children love to laugh. The fun element of partnership practices is very important and needs to be built in at all stages;

- Review existing structures and decide what is working well and can be retained and what needs reconsideration;

- Listen to the voices of children and all adults;

- Explore how parents and community members can be effectively involved in the development and maintenance of effective partnership practice at all levels;

- Provide access to adequate facilities within the school setting to support partnership processes with adults and children e.g. sufficient and appropriate toilet facilities, suitable meeting spaces/rooms, and ample parking facilities for parents and visitors.

Outcomes

Traditionally initiatives were measured in relation to outcomes. This very often involved attention to measurable outcomes such as literacy scores, attendance etc. While we accept these elements as valid measures of success, we also advocate that attention be paid to the types of outcomes that also contribute to sustainability. These are less easily measurable, and involve variables such as creating a sense of belonging, the development of confidence and self-esteem and the development of advocacy skills.

Attention to outcomes means:

- Recognising the variety of outcomes that working in partnership can support – this includes outcomes for children and adults across a range of variables including academic achievement, social and personal skills, the development of a sense of community and involvement, and the development of intrinsic motivation. We recommend that policymakers and school management authorities develop

policies to guide practice in educational partnership at state, community and school level;

- Schools, parents and communities working in partnership generate a bank of talent and resources that are available to support the child's learning. The challenge is to find ways of releasing those talents in an affirming and enriching way;

- The growth of social capital. If schools are to realise their potential in terms of nurturing and developing social capital they will need support in finding new ways to connect with community organisations;

- The enablement of the formal and non-formal learning spheres of the child's life to co-operate, collaborate and work in unison. We recommend an awareness-raising media campaign on the importance of complementary learning;

- An increase of teachers' skills. There is a need to increase teachers' skills in finding new ways of involving 'hard-to-reach' families especially those who are in the most marginalised circumstances;

- Learning outcomes for children. We recommend that empowering conceptions of whole-child development be prioritised;

- Teacher training. We recommend that all pre-service teachers receive systematic and comprehensive education, concerning the role of the family and community in children's learning. This opportunity to develop skills and awareness should also be extended to practicing teachers;

- Male involvement in children's education. We recommend that positive discrimination towards the involvement of adult male members of families be put in place with additional resources and funding;

- An increased awareness and struggle with power dynamics and traditional processes. We recommend that power disparities in the management and organisation of schools be subject to regular review, and systems put in place to offer support and training.

CONCLUSION >>

The relationships that have been developed within the schools, homes and communities as a result of the FSCEP project will hopefully carry forward into future generations. As a research team, we deeply believe that the FSCEP project has had a profound effect on the school, home and communities within which our children are located. It has enhanced the learning environments of the schools by supporting teachers and principals in their work with families and community, supporting the development of programmes and providing access to resourcing. It has impacted on the learning environment of the homes, through acknowledging the talents and skills of parents and providing them with opportunities to further develop skills specific to supporting their children's learning. It has impacted on the learning environment of the community through strategically nurturing partnerships between the schools and community organisations. But ultimately, the FSCEP project has impacted on the learning environment of the child by supporting and facilitating the key stakeholders in the child's life to work together to develop effective, strategic educational partnerships. This, we believe, will strengthen the foundation that has been laid to develop this work further into the future.

" I love being in the school and having a laugh with the teachers "[7]

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[7] Participating parent's quote (BP3).

8

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FAMILY SCHOOL COMMUNITY EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP PROJECT REPORT

9

APPENDICES

FSCEP QUESTIONNAIRE

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

IMPACT ON TEACHERS

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

IMPACT ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT

	Agree Strongly	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	Disagree Strongly
The project increased parent involvement in school activities.					
Home involvement in children's learning increased because of FSCEP.					
The FSCEP activities enhanced parent/teacher relationships with parents.					
As a teacher, I welcome increased parent involvement in the life of this school.					
As a teacher, I want increased parent participation in children's learning.					
Only a limited number of parents benefited from the project.					
FSCEP increased my interactions with parents and families.					

IMPACT ON PUPILS

	Agree Strongly	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	Disagree Strongly
FSCEP improved children's engagement with literacy and numeracy.					
Children's attendance and behaviour improved because of FSCEP activities.					
Better pupil/teacher relationships have resulted from FSCEP activities.					

IMPACT ON COMMUNITY

	Agree Strongly	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	Disagree Strongly
FSCEP activities raised our school's profile in the community.					
FSCEP activities resulted in improved networking with other agencies.					
FSCEP helped our school become a learning centre for adults as well as children.					

Mary Immaculate College
Coláiste Mhuire gan Smál

TOGETHER
Teachers · Families · Communities

FAMILY-SCHOOL-COMMUNITY EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP (FSCEP)

Views educational partnership as "a working relationship ... [with] a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect, and the willingness to negotiate. .... [implying] sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability" (Pugh & De'Ath, 1989).

FSCEP:
- is a pilot project in five schools in the mid-west region;
- examines the dynamics of home-school relationships by implementing and monitoring activity programmes in schools;
- provides positive contexts and innovative ways for parents and teachers to work closely together.

FSCEP aims to:
- learn from each other;
- build good communication;
- benefit the children.

Activities focus on literacy, numeracy, arts education and sport. They are designed by parents and teachers and there is great variety from school to school.

FSCEP works closely with the Home-School-Community Liaison scheme, local Family Resource Centres and local Community Development Projects, utilising local resources to enable the communities to make a shared investment in the future of their children. The aim of the project is to explore the concept of educational partnership by providing opportunities for families and schools to work more closely together in ways that will enhance family-school-community relationships.

FSCEP is managed by the TED Project in Mary Immaculate College. An Advisory Committee to the project is comprised of representatives from PAUL Partnership, INTO, HSCL, DES, HSE, NPCP, VEC and Barnardos. FSCEP is funded through S.I.F.1, Higher Education Authority funding.

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EVALUATION OF
FAMILY, SCHOOL, COMMUNITY EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP PROJECT (FSCEP)
EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT JULY 09

MH
Consultant

Prepared by Dr. Marie Hainsworth

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<< ABBREVIATIONS >>

ADM	Area Development Management
BAICE	British Association for International & Comparative Education
BOM	Board of Management
CDP	Community Development Project
CDU	Curriculum Development Unit
CLÁR	Ceantair Laga Árd-Riachtanais (targeted investment programme in rural areas)
CLVEC	City of Limerick Vocational Educational Committee
CPA	Combat Poverty Agency
DES	Department of Education & Science
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
FRC	Family Resource Centre
FSCEP	Family, School, Community, Educational Partnership
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
HSE	Health Service Executive
LEC	Local Education Committee
LSU	Learner Support Unit
NDP	National Development Plan
PAUL Partnership	People Against Unemployment in Limerick
PLUS Network	Primary Liaison with University Services
Pobal	Formerly known as ADM (renamed in 2005)
RAPID	Revitalising Areas by Planning Investment and Development
SCP	School Completion Programme
SIF	Strategic Innovation Fund
TED	Targeting Educational Disadvantage project
VEC	Vocational Education Committee

<< GLOSSARY OF TERMS >>

Educational Disadvantage	The impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools (DES, 1998)
Educational Partnership	A working relationship between schools, parents and the wider community 'that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate.' (Adapted from Pugh & De'Ath 1989)
RAPID	A government initiative which targets 51 of the most disadvantaged communities in Ireland. The aim is to ensure that priority for resources is given to these areas under the government's National Development Plan. The programme requires Government Departments and agencies to bring 'better co-ordination and closer integration in the delivery of services' (www.pobail.ie)
CLÁR	The CLÁR programme was launched in October 2001 and is 'a targeted investment programme in rural areas' Department of Rural, Community and Gaeltacht Affairs – www.pobail.ie). CLÁR provides funding to Government Departments, State Agencies and Local Authorities in order to accelerate investment in the selected areas.
Shared Reading Programme	Encouraging the reading of books by parents and other adults to children.
Maths For Fun	A series of number games and activities designed to encourage enjoyment in Maths-related thinking.
Story Sacks	A series of activities including the recording of a story read aloud, making props and related activities around a story. All the materials produced are put into a sack.

1 >> INTRODUCTION

This report is the final evaluation report of the Family, School, Community Educational Partnership (FSCEP) project, managed by the Targeting Educational Disadvantage (TED) Project located within the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) of Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick.

The report provides an overview of the project and a description of the activities undertaken throughout a four-year period, 2005 – 2009. Five schools participated in the project, which was funded by the Dormant Accounts Fund (Sep 2005-Aug 2007) and subsequently through the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF strand 1) (Sep 2007 – Aug 2009).

The FSCEP project worked on developing an educational partnership that would impact positively on children's learning. The process of how this educational partnership was developed over the four years is documented in the academic research report at the beginning of this document, which captures the feedback from all the participants at various stages throughout the implementation.

The FSCEP project was located within both urban and rural communities in the West of Ireland, in both Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Developments (RAPID) and CLÁR designated areas. The findings and recommendations arising from this project therefore have the potential to influence a range of contexts and educational settings across Ireland.

This evaluation report examines the nature and impact of the activities undertaken and explores how these activities have contributed to achieving the intended aims and objectives of the FSCEP project, as set out in the original application to the Dormant Accounts funding body. The key evaluation findings are presented in Section 5 of this report. The recommendations contained in section 6 provide learning for future projects that others may wish to undertake and also guidance for the MIC TED project for future work that it might undertake. The conclusion provides an overall summary of the evaluation report.

2 >> EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluation process was underpinned by the following evaluation objectives, as outlined in the original tender document. These objectives have been sub-divided into four areas/themes looking at; project impact; methodologies employed by the project; Management and Administration; and Recommendations and Future Development.

2.1 Aims of the Evaluation

The overall aim was to conduct a summative evaluation of the FSCEP project to determine the outcomes and impact of the FSCEP project as well as an examination of the methodologies, management and administrative processes adopted to support its operation.

The FSCEP project is located within the Targeting Educational Disadvantage Project (TED) of the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) of Mary Immaculate College (MIC) Limerick. The FSCEP project is part of a wider ongoing approach to providing educational support to schools through TED and the CDU. Other projects that TED has undertaken include the Primary Liaison with University Services (PLUS) and CUR le CHÉILE

networks as well as other research intervention projects such as the Working Together for Positive Behaviour Project, Voice and Choice, School Age Childcare Curriculum resource and Celebrating Difference: Promoting Equality.

The following evaluation objectives were designed for the FSCEP project using the expertise and experience of prior educational work and with the intention that learning from this project will feed into and inform future projects and developments within TED and the CDU, impact on National policy and practice, and inform teacher education.

Project Impact
- To assess if the FSCEP project has successfully accomplished its original aims and objectives.
- To examine whether the project benefited the schools, families and communities that it targeted.

Methodologies Employed
- To analyse whether the methodologies adopted by the Targeting Educational Disadvantage (TED) project, the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) and Mary Immaculate College (MIC) to administer the project were successful.
- To test whether the processes and instruments designed to administer the project achieved their individual aims and were appropriate and beneficial to the programme under evaluation.
- To examine if the communication approaches assumed by the FSCEP project to work in conjunction with the participating schools were appropriate, beneficial and transparent.

Management and Administration
- To evaluate the role of the FSCEP project Management, Partnership Development Coordinator, the Project Support Workers and any other staff contributing to the programme.

Recommendations and Future Development
- To make recommendations regarding amendments and additions that should be made to the processes, instruments and methodologies to ensure the smooth and formal implementation of the programme should it be renewed in the future.
- To highlight any additional elements that may have contributed to the success and /or failure of the FSCEP project.

2.2 Methodology

Evaluation Framework
The first stage of the evaluation process was the development of a simple evaluation framework (see Appendix One). The framework was modified slightly as the process got underway in order to facilitate and respond to situations and individual schools.

Evaluation Design
The original design of the evaluation was to develop four separate stages focusing on developing a framework; reviewing documentation; data collection and analysis, and the write up phase. However, limiting time constraints meant that the practice was to work on the four stages concurrently depending on when and where data was available to use.

Stage One Inception Phase
This stage focused primarily on collating background data about the work of the FSCEP project. It involved initial contact meetings between the consultant and the organisation and the reviewing of relevant background documentation.

Initial interviews with FSCEP project staff and management and other identified primary stakeholders were used to establish the following;

- To finalise the evaluation format and evaluation framework;
- To identify all the current stakeholders that needed to be consulted during this evaluation;
- To establish the key consultation questions that should be asked;
- To devise the questionnaires and interview formats.

Stage Two Consultation

This stage focused on the fieldwork and gathering of data to determine the following evaluation outcomes:

- To determine the identified benefit of the project to key stakeholders including schools, parents, pupils and communities and project management;
- To identify the strengths and weaknesses of the project;
- A review of methodologies being used:
  - Administration of the project;
  - Feedback and support;
  - Areas for improvement;
  - Areas that worked well;
- To identify the relevance of the project in relation to each local site context;
- To identify the level of communication between management and sites.

It was envisaged that a mixed methods approach to data collection would be used at each site. Although site visits were not as practical as originally envisaged due to end of term activities a range of approaches were used to capture the project impact.

The following methods were used at all the sites to gather baseline data and background information.

- Initial telephone contact with each school Principal;
- Documentation review and desk research of each school activity applications;

The background data was supported by further on-site data collection, evaluator observation of activities and qualitative questionnaires for parents and teachers, telephone interviews with parents, teachers and principals.

- Parent Questionnaire. This focused on a simple ranking exercise with parents invited to list 6 benefits of the project, it also asked for overall comments on the FSCEP project and possible changes / improvements to the project Due to the nature of end of term activities a convenience sampling was used in collaboration with the schools. This resulted in a sample of 21 responses in total from across 5 schools from parents who had been actively involved in the project through a number of activities.
- Teacher Questionnaire. This questionnaire focused on the four areas of the project from the perspective of the schools – their relationship and support from MIC; the benefit of FSCEP project to the school; the benefit to parents and the benefit to the community. In each school staff actively involved in the project were invited to complete questionnaires, this resulted in 15 forms from across 4 schools.

Each Principal was also interviewed using a semi-structured format, which focused on reflecting over the four years, and looking for noticeable impacts at family, child, school and community level.

- Individual semi-structured telephone interviews with 2 of the Principals and one member of staff across 3 different schools;
- Individual semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 3 Principals;

Interviews and informal chats with parents at the Celebration Days and school performances also looked at the impact of the project on both parents and children and the potential for sustainability of the project once FSCEP project funding finished.

- Individual telephone interviews with 2 parents;
- Mini focus group discussion with 3 parents;

The evaluation process has also supported its data collection through using a triangulation approach as much as possible in order to verify the data collected through the research and FSCEP project feedback mechanisms, in order to monitor project progress and to ascertain evaluative indicators of achievement.

The FSCEP project data was verified using a mixed methods approach, which consisted of;

- Participant observation of school performances put on for the FSCEP project and the general public (at the end of year four);
- Participant observation of a FSCEP project managed focus group session;
- Data collected from questionnaires;
- Informal 1:1 interviews with Principals, parents / Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme representatives / teachers;
- Verification interviews with TED project staff.

The evaluation process also used a continuous feedback mechanism on draft and final report versions to ensure consistency between the formatting of the action research and the evaluation reports. This process was also used to ensure accuracy and agreement amongst the FSCEP project team on all aspects of the evaluation findings.

Consultations
Where possible face to face meetings were preferred and this was facilitated for two schools that were available for meetings with the FSCEP project at a workshop in June. Additional interviews were held with members of the TED project, the CDU Director and Chair of TED and unstructured interviews with four of the Principals were also conducted in addition to the semi structured interviews.

Analysis & Formation of Recommendations/Report Write Up
Time constraints on the evaluation process limited the input from the project stakeholders, however, a number of draft reports were circulated with opportunities for feedback and close liaison was maintained with the project during the finalising of the report and the drafting of the recommendations. Within the timeframe there was constant communication with TED and FSCEP project personnel and management, who read multiple drafts of documentation. This greatly enabled the research process as individual, team and management feedback was made available to the evaluator.

2.3 Ethics Framework
An overall ethics framework using internationally recognised evaluation standards from the Irish Sociological Association of Ireland as well as evaluator's guidelines from the Joint Committee on Standards on evaluation endorsed by the American Evaluation Association underpinned the evaluation process.

Participation in the evaluation interviews and questionnaires was organised through the schools and MIC and was entirely voluntary. Names of volunteers were forwarded to the evaluator and times arranged at the convenience of the participants.

No recording mechanism was used at any interview and names and identities of schools have been coded throughout the report. All questionnaires were anonymous, although the evaluator knew the identity of the school.

The evaluation process aimed to work closely with the FSCEP project management and FSCEP Partnership Development Coordinator to ensure that all appropriate stakeholders were consulted and that the evaluation process encapsulated the full cross section of work being achieved.

3 >> PROJECT BACKGROUND

The FSCEP project has been operating for four years (2005 – 2009). It was initially funded under the Dormant Accounts fund for the first two years with subsequent funding from the Health Education Authority (HEA) SIF Strand One Funding. The funding for the FSCEP project was the largest awarded by the Dormant Accounts. The project was recognised as being highly innovative at project application stage and this reflects the potential gravitas of this project and its outcomes.

The project is located and managed within the Targeting Educational Disadvantage (TED) project, established in 1998, housed under the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) of Mary Immaculate College (MIC) in Limerick.

3.1 FSCEP Project

The FSCEP is a pilot project, which has been running across five schools in the mid-west region of Limerick. The project explored the dynamics of home-school relationships and is underpinned by a rationale that the child-family-community- school relationship plays a central role in determining a child's progress in school. Programmes are designed by parents and teachers and cover an array of four curricular areas including literacy, numeracy, arts and sport education. The project also worked in partnership with the Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) schemes, the Schools Completion Programme (SCP), local Family Resource Centres (FRCs) and local Community Development Projects (CDPs).

3.2 Policy Background Educational Partnership

The five schools in the FSCEP project are all located within RAPID and CLÁR areas.

3.2.1 RAPID and CLÁR Programmes

Three of the schools are in RAPID areas of Limerick city whilst the other two are in CLÁR regions of West Clare.

The project recognised at its inception that educational partnership approaches were potentially beneficial in both rural and urban settings and sought to maximise the involvement of parents and the community with schools across both contexts.

> **Kelleghan et al (1995) estimate that approximately 16% of the school going population is educationally disadvantaged. They note that, whilst the greatest concentration of educational disadvantage is located in Dublin, in absolute numbers the greatest percentage of disadvantage (60.7%) is found in rural areas (Educational Disadvantage Centre, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra page 2)**

3.2.2 Educational Support Interventions

The term educational support programme has been used throughout this report rather than the traditional term of educational disadvantage. This is because educational disadvantage tends to favour a problem-based approach; the FSCEP project and other TED projects in this area focus on solution centred approaches. Within educational support programmes pupils often require a range of different supports since 'educational disadvantage' is often linked to a range of different situations, often with a focus on poverty alleviation.

> **A key message of the evidence summarised here is that equality of educational opportunity cannot rely solely on better delivery of the school curriculum for disadvantaged groups, but must address multiple aspects of disadvantaged children's lives. (Hirsch page 2)**

The root causes of educational disadvantage are complex, and relate to factors both inside and outside of the formal education system.

> [Educational disadvantage] is a multidimensional problem and not simply an education-related issue. (CPA Poverty Briefing 2003 Educational Disadvantage in Ireland page 1)

According to the Combat Poverty Agency 'educational disadvantage' can encompass:

- The welfare needs of the children not being met (diet, sleep etc.);
- High participation costs of education (clothes, books, meals etc.);
- Lack of family/community tradition in education;
- The failure of school curricula to reflect and validate the cultural backgrounds and learning styles of all learners;
- The failure of the education system to address the needs of minority groups (e.g. Travellers, people with disabilities etc.);
- Barriers facing adults seeking to return to education (transport, childcare etc.).
(CPA Poverty Briefing 2003 Educational Disadvantage in Ireland page 2)

Regardless of the causes of disadvantage the impact on children is that they derive less benefit from the schooling structures and system than their counterparts and peers.

> [Educational disadvantage is]…the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools (Irish Gov 1998:32)

Although Irish government policy recognises the concept of educational disadvantage, it is less clear how government policy is being developed and, perhaps more importantly, being funded to develop and implement work in this area.

> Unfortunately the present lack of co-ordination and continuity in the variety of schemes and initiatives that have been put in place under various Governments results in a loss of strategic planning and long-term development in tackling educational disadvantage. Added to the ever more serious problem of under-resourcing and failure to expand effective programmes this amounts to a failure to really tackle disadvantage. (INTO Policy Document 2004)

As with other aspects of poverty alleviation work in Ireland, most of the development work has been initiated within communities and individual schools. Whilst this has created pockets of innovation and potential models of good practice there has been no systematic or wider approach to try and link schools and develop a larger / national model of good practice in tackling educational disadvantage.

The MIC and TED/CDU have utilised their existing work of linking schools and working collaboratively across schools, to design the FSCEP project. The FSCEP project has been implemented across five schools within five different contexts in order to assess the potential for replication and the development of a wider model of educational partnership as a means of addressing educational disadvantage in Ireland.

The FSCEP project acknowledges that it is the combined impact of factors within the home, in the community and in school, which determine the nature of 'educational disadvantage', experienced by children and the subsequent types of education support intervention required. The FSCEP project also locates the causes of educational disadvantage within an ecological or systematic understanding as outlined by Tormey:

> Tormey proposes a radical reconceptualisation of how educational disadvantage is understood. Rejecting the traditional medical model, which views educational disadvantage 'as a disease' which resides in the individual, he argues that educational disadvantage is brought about by 'a series of active processes' (1999:29). Tormey identifies discontinuity between the home and school environments as one of the processes by which children are disadvantaged (ibid:42). (Higgins, 2008:36)

The FSCEP project focused specifically on addressing Tormey's identifier linking the home and school environments, whilst acknowledging that both are inextricably linked to wider community environment.

> By adopting an ecological framework the FSCEP opted project was designed to work across and within the sites of home, school and community in order to support the key stakeholders in the child's life and to maximise the children's learning accessibility (Member of management committee)

The FSCEP project has a strong empirical framework underpinning its work, based on previous work of TED within MIC. It is also supported by a strong research element established both in other works and through its own Action Research component of the project.

> The relationship between the child-family-community and the school is seen as playing a central role in advantaging or disadvantaging children at school (Bourdieu and Passerson, 1977; Tizzard and Hughes, 1984; CMRS, 1992; Kellaghan et al, 1993; Tormey, 2003).

> A core strategy for addressing educational disadvantage, therefore, is the development of a partnership model between families, schools and communities. (Dormant Accounts Application Form FSCEP March 2004 page1)

3.2.3 Models of Good Practice

The approach adopted by FSCEP project is in line with current Irish policy on tackling educational disadvantage. Current policy thinking within both the Department of Education and Science (DES) and the government advisory body on Combating Poverty, advocates for an integrated and multi-level response for educational support programmes.

> {Responses should} Ensure that integrated multi-level responses, involving the home, school, adult education, community and relevant services, are at the core of any local response to address educational disadvantage (CPA Poverty Briefing 2003 Educational Disadvantage in Ireland page 3)

The DES also notes that such an integrated approach is often absent in many school-planning processes.

> The DES study notes that strategies to involve parents in their children's learning were only occasionally included in school planning documents and that parental involvement in policy formation or in contributing to and organising learning resources for the school was limited (NCCA (2005) p5)

Developing a model that includes multi-sector responses from community members, parents and the school is also a complex process that is highly dependent on the quality of personal relationships and the trust between all the different partners.

> Even where organisations have agreed to work in partnership, there may be issues of competition, misunderstanding or mistrust between them, and there may be historic differences in purpose and culture. Leadership across a range of organisations is therefore difficult to enact, and the stability of individual institutions may seem to be threatened by partnership working. (Briggs, 2009 page 1)

Briggs also outlines the requirements of any successful partnership approach. These factors need to underpin the work at all stages of development from planning through to implementation and review.

> Organisational factors which are beneficial to collaboration are those which in a number of ways enable partner institutions to 'mesh' together: a perception of mutual benefit to each organisation and its learners, a willingness to understand different cultures and purposes, and to accommodate difference; a preparedness to change and to learn together for mutual benefit (Briggs, 2009 p11)

The project addressed a complex issue using a multi-layered approach. As a demonstration project it aimed to have a positive impact on educational attainment for children living within both rural and urban contexts. The findings from this project will have implications for all groups and schools working in similar contexts in Ireland.

3.3 Aims & Objectives of FSCEP
The core aim of the project was;

> **The development of sustainable educational partnership practices across school, families and communities in order to enhance the learning outcomes for the child. (Summary Report 2008)**

The nine core objectives of the FSCEP project (as listed in the Dormant Accounts application form) have been subdivided into three broader themes to facilitate the reporting and feedback in the evaluation report and avoid too much repetition, since there are obviously close connections between some objectives.

Learning (children & parents)
- To support schools, families and communities to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes and behaviours to work together in partnership to address the learning needs of their children;
- To enable schools and families in disadvantaged contexts to recognise their reciprocal influences on children's learning;
- To improve children's attendance at school;
- To improve standards in schools by developing an effective system-wide project that will develop children's and parents' literacy, numeracy, abilities in the creative arts, sports skills and other social skills.

Family School Community Partnership
- To cohesively bring together the work of a number of sectors by forming a multi-agency partnership and to promote an effective and efficient use of expertise and resources;
- To provide opportunities and supports for school staff, pupils and families to meet in contexts that promote shared understanding of partnership.

Development Model
- To develop an holistic and integrated systems level approach in dealing with educational disadvantage that will inform changes in areas that interface with school processes and structures e.g. teaching styles, cultural development, school organisation, curriculum development and other areas;
- To develop and disseminate a model of good practice along with the outcomes of the FSCEP project in contexts and ways that will make them accessible to policy-makers, researchers, practitioners and ultimately communities, families and young people.

4 >> FSCEP PROJECT OVERVIEW

The FSCEP project is a series of educational partnerships between MIC, five schools, local community groups, statutory and voluntary organisations and parents. Each school was supported by MIC to develop a local educational partnership approach to designing and implementing a variety of activities. These activities aimed to foster positive parent – school relationships, to foster the development of skills, to develop closer links to the community and ultimately to have a positive impact on pupils' learning.

4.1 School Sites
The five school sites listed below volunteered to participate in the FSCEP project. Two of the school are located in a CLÁR region and three are located in RAPID areas. Each school is described in more detail below

along with a general breakdown of the activities they organised during the four years. The school descriptions are taken from their original application forms and may differ slightly to the action research document.

4.1.1 Schools in RAPID Areas
The RAPID schools are located in different areas across Limerick city. All are located within local authority housing estates. At various times these areas have suffered from poor investment and planning, poor amenities, difficult societal issues, high rates of long-term unemployment often spanning many generations, and anti-social behaviour and criminality often linked to the drugs trade.

The following presents case studies of each of the schools located in RAPID areas

School A
This is an urban junior school with an approximate enrolment figure of seventy children up to the age of 8 with the following classes; Junior Infant, Senior Infant, First Class (x2) and Second Class.

There are currently five mainstream teachers, one resource teacher, one learning support teacher, a resource teacher for Travellers and a home school community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator. There is an administrative Principal and an Assistant Principal.

There is also support provided through two special needs assistants, a caretaker and a secretary.

	CASE A: 11 staff including resource personnel and 70 children
Literacy	◦ Shared reading (2007/08) ◦ Write a Book Project (2007/08) ◦ Story sacks 2 (2007/08)
Numeracy	◦ Maths for Fun (2007/08)
Creative Arts	◦ Music therapy (psychological dev in young children) Junior infant and senior infant every week. Children and parents (Sep – Dec 05) ◦ 'Oliver' production (2007/08) ◦ Music for Fun (2007/08) ◦ Parent-Child Art Partnership (2007/08)
Environment	
Sport Skills	◦ Soccer League (2007/08)
Other Skills	◦ Summer camp (2005/07) ◦ Reach for the Stars (2006/07) ◦ Stage Making (target male parents) ◦ School concert ◦ Pocketful of Memories

Table 1 Case A Staff & Activities

School B
This is a large urban school with an approximate enrolment figure of two hundred and twenty four children up to the age of 12 with classes from Junior Infant through to sixth class.

There are currently thirteen mainstream teachers, five resource teachers, one learning support teacher, a home school community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator and an early start teacher. There are also four special needs assistants.

There is an administrative Principal, a deputy Principal and two Assistant Principals. The school also has a full time secretarial service and part time caretaking services.

CASE B: 21 staff and 224 pupils	
Literacy	• Reading Packs (2005 /06) • Story Bags (2005 / 06) • Early Start (2005) • Shared reading (2006/07/08) • You, Me & ABC (2006/07/08) • Literacy Alive in the classroom (2007/08)
Numeracy	• Maths for Fun (2005 / 06/07 /08) • Science Discovery (2006/07/08)
Creative Arts	• Christmas Cakes involving parents, outside cookery teacher (Sep – Dec 05) • Crotchet project (senior girls with parents and community), outside tutor (Sep – Dec 05) • Confirmation / 1st Communion arts & music (2006) • Mural mosaic (2006/07/08) • Card making (2006/07/08) • Music for Fun (2007/08) • Resurrection Rock (2007/08) • Mixed Media Exhibition (2007/08)
Environment	
Sport Skills	• Horse Riding (2006/07/08)
Other Skills	• School concert (parents input) (2005) • Our Community (photos & article with CDP) (2006) • Summer Camp (2007) • Theatre Week (2007/08)

Table 2 Case B Staff & Activities

School C

This is an urban infant school with an approximate enrolment figure of seventy children. There are currently five mainstream teachers and a home school community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator as well as a teaching Principal.

CASE C: 5 staff and 70 pupils	
Literacy	• Shared reading (2006/07/08) • Literacy Links (2007/08)
Numeracy	• Maths for Fun (2005/06/07/08)
Creative Arts	• Music workshops and concert (Sept 2005 – Mar 2006) • Art & Craft projects (recycling emphasis) (Sept – Dec 2005) • Summer show (2007/08) • Community Arts project (2007/08)
Environment	• Craft display in local shop – recycled materials (2006)
Sport Skills	
Other Skills	• Summer camp (2006 / 07) • Photo display of all projects (2006) • Reach for the Stars concert (2006)

Table 3 Case C Staff & Activities

4.1.2 Schools in CLÁR Region

The CLÁR schools are located in areas that are recognised as being in need of investment across a range of areas including, health, education, community development and enterprise.

School D

This is a large rural school with an approximate enrolment figure of two hundred and ninety-five pupils.

There are currently twelve mainstream teachers, seven resource teachers, one language teacher, a special class teacher and a home school community liaison co-ordinator. There are also nine special needs assistants, a part-time secretary and a full-time caretaker.

There is an administrative Principal and a Deputy Principal.

	CASE D: 21 staff including resource personnel 295 pupils
Literacy	❯ Shared reading (2007/08)
Numeracy	❯ Chess project (2007/08)
Creative Arts	❯ Arts & Crafts workshops, senior to 2nd classes & parents with local artists (Sept – Dec 05) ❯ French cuisine (2007/08) ❯ Boinéid na Cásca (2007/08)
Environment	❯ Horses (2005/06)
Sport Skills	❯ Physical Activity for Junior Infants (2007/08) ❯ Yoga for children (2008/09) ❯ Dancing for Life (2008/09)
Other Skills	❯ Leisure activities and board games (2005/06) ❯ School Concert (2007/08) ❯ Floor Time (2007/08) ❯ Summer Camp (2007) ❯ Intergenerational Learning project (2007/08/09) ❯ Seachtaín na Gaeilge (2007/08/09) ❯ Making a successful transition (2007/08) ❯ Intercultural Project (2008/09) ❯ Zambia Project (2008/09)

Table 4 Case D Staff & Activities

School E

This is a small rural school with an approximate enrolment of twenty-eight children from junior infants to sixth class. There are two mainstream teachers (one of whom is the Principal), one resource teacher, two special needs assistants and a part-time secretary.

	CASE E: 6 staff 28 pupils
Literacy	◉ Shared reading (targeting parents involvement in homework) (05/07/08/09) ◉ Oxford Reading Tree (2008/09)
Numeracy	◉ Maths for Fun (2005 / 06) ◉ Chess Club (2006/07/08)
Creative Arts	◉ Drama & Mime local artist (Sep – Dec 05) whole school (inf. to 6th class) twice a week. 　◈ Made all own props from recycled materials ◉ School Pageant (2007/08) ◉ Musical Appreciation (2007/08) ◉ Cookery Workshops (2008/09)
Environment	◉ Willow tunnels (2005/06/08/09) ◉ School Garden project (2006/07) 　◈ Picnic Area built (2007/08)
Sport Skills	◉ Irish Dancing (2007/08) ◉ Swimming & water safety (2007/08) ◉ Step Dancing (2007/08)
Other Skills	◉ French classes (2006) ◉ Parents / Guardian coffee morning (2006/07) ◉ Christmas celebration (2006) ◉ School concert (2007/08)

Table 5 Case E Staff & Activities

4.2 Project Management & Administration

The project was managed by MIC and supported by a combination of advisory and management partnerships.

4.2.1 MIC Support

As already stated the FSCEP project was embedded within the Targeting Educational Disadvantage (TED) project, which is located within the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) of Mary Immaculate College (MIC). The project was both a research and an intervention project and as such drew on a wide range of internal support structures within MIC. These included the CDU and TED as well the Research office, the Education Faculty and the Learner Support Unit (LSU).

The FSCEP project was also ably supported through the college administration and finance structure. This ensured financial accountability and reporting structures were maintained. This was particularly important since, in common with many external-funding bodies, ADM/POBAL and HEA reporting structures are quite significant and can be intensely time consuming.

The FSCEP project recruited its own partnership support workers for the first two years. During the subsequent years schools sometimes employed facilitators with particular expertise to deliver some of the programmes. The Partnership Development Coordinator was supported through a series of team, management and advisory structures, which are all explained in more detail below.

4.2.2 Team Meetings

Regular team meetings, often held twice a month in MIC, supported the Partnership Development Coordinator. The meetings discussed many of the practical details of FSCEP including vetting funding applications, and supervising the research progress. They provided a panel of expertise, which consisted of the Partnership Development Coordinator, the TED Co-ordinator, the former TED Co-ordinator, the TED Chair,

or another member of TED staff. At all times there were at least two TED personnel working with the FSCEP Partnership Development Coordinator.

4.2.3 Management Meetings

Management meetings consisted of members of the FSCEP Team and representatives from schools, PAUL Partnership and MIC. The role of this meeting was to hear feedback from the team meetings and oversee the FSCEP project at a more strategic level. The five principals attended the FSCEP management meetings twice a year.

The management meetings also focused on the research as well as funding and reporting requirements but these meetings also provided opportunities for sharing of good practice and planning. Schools were encouraged to discuss not only specific programmes which they were running but to reflect on why a specific programme or initiative was successful or challenging to implement.

4.2.4 Advisory Group

The FSCEP project was also supported through an interagency advisory structure. This structure was developed as part of the sustainability strategy for the FSCEP project so that links and communication were maintained with a number of agencies working in the area. These agencies would also have contact with the schools involved in the project or would have an interest in the locality. They included organisations such as the PAUL Partnership, Barnardos, local CLVEC and representatives, the National Parents Council, HSCL, the Health Service Executive (HSE) and Youthreach.

The advisory group met twice an year in the early years and provided a forum whereby the educational partnership could be discussed in relation to other developments occurring in the region

4.2.5 TED Steering Committee

Members of the FSCEP project management team reported to the TED steering committee, and to the Director of the Curriculum Development Unit. Both the TED Chair and the TED Coordinators were members of the FSCEP management team at various intervals during the four-year time span of the FSCEP project, and this greatly facilitated information sharing and support.

In turn the Director of the CDU, who was also Chair of TED in the final two years of the FSCEP project, reported to the Dean of Education and Faculty of Education.

4.3 Link with schools

The Partnership Development Coordinator was recruited at the start of the project and continued throughout the four years. His previous experience in both teaching and as a HSCL Coordinator enabled MIC to offer a consistent and regular support resource to the five schools. The level of support was identified as being very positive and contributed to building relationships and getting the project off the ground at school level.

> being the kind of man you are ... easy to work with … didn't shove your methods down our throat (Principal feedback focus group 09)

The overall support from MIC was widely appreciated by the five schools and especially the understanding that MIC has with practitioners, through the combined expertise of the CDU and the TED project and also the individual experience of the staff involved.

> {MIC staff }… were teachers [and their] own insight gave them an insight into our work (Principal feedback – focus group 09)

4.3.1 Communication with Schools

Communication with the five schools occurred through a variety of forums and other methods. Some of the methods used by the project are outlined below;

- **Annual Newsletter** – this was developed in partnership with the five schools and gave each school an opportunity to state areas of interest for themselves, as well as for the project management to communicate directly to schools and give emphasis to particular aspects of the educational partnership process.

- **Management Meetings** – these included representatives from the schools (2 of whom were Principals) to report on progress from the school perspective and feed into the ongoing project design. All five school principals attended management meetings twice a year.

- **Celebrating Partnership Days** – these events were facilitated by members of the FSCEP management team and provided a forum whereby each of the schools could witness activities and meet members of the other schools as part of networking and sharing experience of the partnership process. These events were attended by parents, teachers, principals and members of Boards of Management (BOM).

- **One to One support** – Schools within the FSCEP project were supported through meetings, presentations at staff meetings and on-going phone support. Some of these interactions were formal and involved inputs at staff meetings, or formal meetings with staff in the school. Other contact would have been less formal and involved the exchange of information over lunch or coffee in the school staff room.

- **Project applications and feedback evaluation forms** – All the schools undertook a formal application process to access the project funds for individual programmes. Applications were assessed against the criteria of developing or strengthening educational partnerships and each school completed follow up evaluation forms.

4.4 Action Research Model

The FSCEP project used an action research model in order to inform the intervention aspect of its work and review the approach being taken throughout the four years. The following definition highlights the key component of action research, which is to inform current working practice.

> **Research, which is orientated towards bringing about change, often involving respondents in the process of investigation. Researchers are actively involved with the situation or phenomenon being studied. (Robson, 2002)**

The action research model that was used was primarily an ethnographic approach, in other words the researcher, located in MIC, worked also as a Partnership Development Coordinator to the FSCEP project. He interacted with the schools, families and community organisations in both capacities. Responsibility for compiling data was also given to schools and facilitators through journals and evaluation sheets. In addition the researcher gathered data through interviews and questionnaires.

> **Various qualitative approaches for the collection of data were used such as participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews and the use of reflective journals. All approaches were guided by an awareness of the importance of reflexivity in the analysis of data and in the presentation of findings. (BAICE conference paper)**

Reflexivity was actively encouraged throughout to ensure that undue bias from researcher values, culture and other assumptions did not impact unduly on the research process.

The research has been documented in a separate academic report at the beginning of this publication. The evaluation is focused on the use of the action research process to provide feedback and inform the ongoing developments of the FSCEP project.

5 >> EVALUATION FINDINGS

The following section considers the findings that have emerged from this evaluation process. It covers the key aspects of the aims and objectives of the project as well as the broader and more general aspects of the project.

The first section focuses on the impact on children, families and communities from the overall FSCEP project. The coding used for the quotations throughout section 5 does not match the coding given for schools in section 4, this is to help ensure the anonymity of the participants.

5.1 Impact on Children, Families and Communities

One of the key objectives of the FSCEP project was to have a positive impact on children's learning. There were, however, 2 distinct areas of impact that the project sought to address, one in relation to the attendance and levels of participation of learners and the second to increase levels of attainment and achievement for learners.

5.1.1 Attendance and Participation of learners

There were two types of learner responses that the project had identified that impacted negatively on educational attainment – levels of attendance and levels of participation / quality of engagement in activities.

Attendance

The project stated that one of the objectives was '**to improve children's attendance at school**'. However poor attendance may be due to multiple factors. A Department of Education and Culture (UK) leaflet aimed at encouraging parents to ensure that their children attend primary school regularly, lists some of the following reasons that they have identified as reasons for non-attendance in primary school children:

- Not being in the habit of going to school regularly;
- Parents or carers expressing negative views about the school in front of their children;
- Children believing that their parents are uninterested in their education;
- Children believing that being sent to school is a punishment;
- Staying up late at night and not getting up at a regular time in the morning;
- Disruption or trauma at home;
- Being bullied or being a bully (www.lewisham.gov.uk).

Since many of the above mentioned issues, should they be present within the five sites, would not be sufficiently addressed through the FSCEP project's activities then the objective is probably more specific and aimed at improving attendance where the reason is due to lack of interest (by the child or parent) and/or fear of failure due to low self-esteem or lack of confidence in ability.

> **[poor attendance] at school may be due to factors across the home, school and community environments. One of the principals in an urban school noted 'a measurable difference in attendance which could not be attributed to the FSCEP activities alone' (School C)**

Since it is difficult to monitor the reasons for non-attendance in younger children due to many of the reasons listed above, a more reliable indicator of impact would be to consider the relative quality of engagement in activities and the subsequent learning outcomes (which could not be achieved if non-attendance had been high).

> **Poor attenders made sure they were in school to bake their cakes (Teacher evaluation form 2007)**

There were several indicators emerging throughout the findings that highlighted an improvement in parental relationships. These were at many levels - across parents, between parents and children, and between parents and teachers, the school and the community. The importance of these relationships can also be linked back to some of the factors highlighted above that impact on non-attendance. If the parents find schools a positive environment, then this message is more likely to be communicated to their children.

The parents' questionnaires asked to list the 6 main areas of impact of the FSCEP project. Many parents listed improved relationships:

> **Brought parents and children together (Parent Questionnaire B)**

> **Social interaction between pupils and parents (Parent Questionnaire A)**

> **Get to know people in the community (Parent Questionnaire A)**

The FSCEP project however, went further than providing social forums it sought to develop a meaningful and equitable relationship between the various stakeholders, which in turn would impact on the wider family-school collaborative approach.

> **Made parents more able to approach the teachers (Celebration Day Parent response)**

Educational partnerships create a special form of dialogue between all stakeholders. Adults, either as parents or teachers must negotiate respectful relationships between each other. Also, respectful relationships must be negotiated between all the adults and children.

Part of this respect may be through how they address each other but significantly, this respect is manifested through a collaborative consultative process through which the various stakeholders value each other's responsibilities, opinions and talents. (FSCEP Management)

The impact of the FSCEP project on attendance / participation can be illustrated in a simple table as shown below. This table has been developed using the emerging evidence and the progression in relationships developed over the four years of the project

{Attendance / Participation} Primary Indicator	Assumptions – ● Weak links between parents / schools affirming work and value of school
Secondary Indicators	_Level 1_ Parental / student attendance at activities, wide variety of activities _Level 2_ Parent / Family enjoyment, children's enjoyment _Level 3_ Positively related contact between parents and teachers Collaborative approach to planning / participation in lessons and school projects _Level 4_ Collaborative approach in dealing with behavioural and attendance difficulties

Table 6 Impact Indicators Attendance

In the table the primary indicator is attendance / participation, this can be difficult to determine since participation can also be level of active engagement in classes as well as physical presence in the school. Attendance numbers also do not identify the reason for changes and are often dependant on a variety of factors. Instead the FSCEP project aimed to impact on strengthening family school links in order to affirm the work of the school.

Through this relationship it intended to instil a sense of ownership amongst parents that would reflect positively on children and encourage attendance at school and/or a shared response to dealing with behavioural and attendance difficulties between parents and teachers. It also aimed to encourage increased enthusiasm and enjoyment for the activities in school.

Not all parents participated at each level but the table illustrates the different levels of impact that the FSCEP project was able to reach.

5.1.2 Attainment & Achievement

One of the objectives of the project was to support children's learning and especially to witness improvements in literacy, numeracy, arts, sports and other social skills. In section four and in Appendix Two there is a clear breakdown of the activities that each of the schools undertook as part of the FSCEP project.

All the schools engaged in activities across all the sectors and as the FSCEP project progressed, the projects and activities also developed in complexity. The scope of activities was indicative of the creative approaches that many of the schools applied to developing the partnerships.

> **Learning partnerships are activated across diverse locations including school environment, both within classrooms and across the broader school context including the yard and stage arenas, and 'beyond the school gates' in such diverse contexts as sports facilities, children's homes and a variety of community locations. (Summary Report SIF 2008)**

Literacy

Literacy improvement was a key outcome for the project since it is one of the core subjects underpinning progress in other areas of the curriculum. Literacy outcomes therefore were similarly not confined to one area of the curriculum although several programmes did specifically focus on developing literacy skills.

> **Literacy not only involves competency in reading and writing, but goes beyond this to include critical and effective use of these in people's lives, and the use of language (oral and written) for all purposes (Literacy Development Council of Newfoundland and Labrador (cited in www.unm.edu) Valenzuela (2002))**

All the schools used the Shared Reading programme during the FSCEP project. It encouraged parents to support their children in reading and homework. There was a variety of other direct literacy intervention projects such as: You, Me & ABC; Story sacks; Literacy Alive in the classroom and Literacy Links.

> **Literacy side, saw different perspectives and systems (Parent Interview E)**

Many of the schools also used a broader integrated literacy approach using songs, plays, compiling local histories and books. It was evident that each school adopted very creative, and indeed sustainable approaches to supporting literacy. These activities took place across different contexts and were intergenerational.

The emphasis for monitoring each activity was on how well the activities were conducted and reflective practice on how they might be improved in the future. However, another indicator of impact was also the level of engagement of parents in the activities, for example in many of the projects the parents level of engagement was quite high and involved a high level of interaction with the children and taking the lead in many of the activities.

> **Parents may have been tentative at the beginning but really opened up and embraced the experience (Teacher questionnaire C)**

This level of engagement can also be linked to improvements in literacy levels where the underlying assumption of low literacy is due to a lack of reinforced learning in the home.

The following table shows the primary indicator of literacy and the underlying assumptions that this project has addressed. Since measuring literacy levels accurately is complex and doesn't identify what action has improved literacy levels, a series of secondary indicators is used to determine what level of impact the project has reached and how far the assumption has been addressed.

[Literacy] Primary Indicator	Assumptions – ⦿ Literacy levels low ⦿ Lack of reinforced learning in the home / opportunities for reading in the home
Secondary Indicators	*Level 1* Attendance / involvement of parents & family members in literacy activities in the school *Level 2* Pro-active involvement in activities using literacy in schools *Level 3* Developing literacy materials for use in the home *Level 4* Feedback on use of materials at home

Table 7 Impact Indicators Literacy

The schools would be able to determine how many children were potentially affected through monitoring which parents attended and which classes were involved in the programme. There are also other multiplier effects to consider such as the role of the parent in the wider community e.g. did they have the potential to influence other parents and other children.

The duration of the project over four years would also see changes in which parents became involved and also whether siblings of the first programme would have attended subsequent programmes over the four years.

Numeracy

The engagement of parents and children in maths-related activities was successfully achieved across all the schools. The Maths for Fun programme in particular seemed to be a popular option to engage parents and improve confidence in children.

> **Children are looking to have the Maths for Fun programme continued. She noted that the games are excellent and have helped the children with their class Maths. The positive attitude has made a difference and children are gaining confidence (Management Committee June 2006 Teacher Feedback)**

There were also several benefits to engaging parents in the Maths for Fun programme. The first was that parents began to see the educational value of the games and many parents went on to purchase games for their own children to play at home. This has an additional impact of influencing the numeracy skills of other members of the family including older and younger siblings and extended family members.

> **Parents see the benefit of the games … parents using the same maths language as the school (Interview Principal School D)**

Another benefit was to streamline the maths language being used with children, such as standardising the use of 'minus' or 'takeaway'. This would have the benefit of supporting children doing homework and avoid unnecessary confusion.

Another approach was through the chess programmes which highlighted the innovative approach of schools in developing numeracy and logic related thinking.

External Evaluation Report of FSCEP Report

Many research papers have showed that there are benefits of learning chess and also how learning chess could enhance a student's ability in solving math problems. Chess is an excellent conduit to encourage children to explore art, number sense, spatial visualization, geometry, logic and much, much more. Playing chess = Training deductive reasoning, ineductive reasoning, and critical thinking.(www.math&chess.com) date accessed 11th June 2009

Some of the pupils successfully entered a chess tournament and competed within and across schools. It was clear that maths skills had been developed and improved within a very short space of time.

The Chess was a very successful project. [Tutor] came to the school and gave the children chess lessons. The kids were also given Chess homework while the project was going on. At the end of the lessons the children took part in a chess tournament, at which some of the pupils from [school name] won prizes. (Team Meeting Nov 07)

One of the strengths of the FSCEP project has been its ability to broaden the curriculum activities without adding to the curriculum topics. In other words greater creativity has been employed to achieve the traditional curriculum goals. Both the Maths for Fun and the chess programmes illustrate that approach.

A table of impact can be developed for the numeracy programme also.

[Numeracy] Primary Indicator	Assumptions – ◉ Numeracy levels low ◉ Lack of reinforced learning in the home / opportunities for doing Maths in the home ◉ Different Maths language used at home and in school ◉ Lack of confidence in Maths ability amongst parents / children
Secondary Indicators	*Level 1* Attendance / involvement of parents and family members in numeracy activities in the school *Level 2* Pro-active involvement in activities using numeracy and numeracy-related games in schools *Level 3* Developing numeracy materials / purchasing games for use in the home *Level 4* Feedback on use of materials at home

Table 8 Impact Indicators Numeracy

The specific focus on numeracy projects / programmes such as the Maths for Fun means that although they are short term and only facilitate a few parents becoming involved at any one time, the level of impact can be immediate for those families. The aim is very different in terms of engagement with parents since the focus is more intense and parents also need to learn the skills and become confident in the activities. Larger projects provided an opportunity to engage more parents and community members at one time, this would not be feasible for the smaller focused projects.

Arts

Over half of the project activities were described as Art activities by the FSCEP project, although many of these had other curriculum elements included within their activity. This was also the area of the curriculum through which many schools initiated their Educational Partnership.

The less intimidating environment and emphasis on fun activities, that didn't rely on literacy and numeracy, appeared to have been used to try and focus and encourage parental involvement in activities. By cultivating intrinsically motivated learning it was hoped that literacy and numeracy attainment would also follow.

There were also many key learning outcomes from the arts projects that linked into other curricular activities. In particular there was a strong emphasis on working on projects such as productions, displays and books. These works focused on developing a range of skills including:

- Teamwork through group projects;
- Developing confidence and self-esteem through performances and public displays;
- Communication and oral literacy through sharing ideas, developing themes and drama work;
- Relationship building between teachers, parents and children through shared ideas and consultation work.

Sports Skills

Sports activities involved on-site activities as well as off –site including swimming and water safety. Sport activities were used to a lesser extent than other activities by schools in the FSCEP project (10% of activities), however, the FSCEP project did not prescribe that each school had to submit a specific number of activities under each category. Selection of activities was dependent on a number of factors including availability of equipment, resources, personnel and skill levels, and perceived relevance in relation to the development of partnership.

In the national context, Government findings indicate that Primary schools are not providing sufficient physical education primarily due to limited equipment and limited access to specialist support, despite recommendations to increase the support available.

> **The Third Report on the Status of Physical Education issued in June 2005 by the Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science recommended that specialist PE teachers be provided at the primary level, and that where a specialist teacher is unable to take a class for PE, class teachers should be sufficiently trained to provide physical education. (Fine Gael 2005 Physical Education provision in Primary Schools)**

Environment

The environment was not part of the curriculum focus when the project application was submitted. However, it is an issue that has developed strongly in the community and is a new interest area in many schools. Many of the FSCEP project schools took on activities that included an environmental aspect including garden projects, designing with willow, craft displays using recycled materials and the green flag initiative.

Many of the parents' questionnaires mentioned the environmental work as a way in which to engage with their children:

> **It made school more enjoyable and helping to improve the look of the school (Parents' Questionnaire D)**

> **Got to work with him in gardening (Parents' Questionnaire D)**

> **Greatly nourish an interest in gardening (Parents' Questionnaire D)**

The potential to link in with the wider community was greater through these activities since they dovetailed into ongoing community activities – using local expertise, involving parents in construction, using community facilities such as shops to display items or local quarries to source materials.

Other

There were many other skills that children, parents and teachers acquired through participating in the FSCEP project activities:

- Increased knowledge of local history and the positive contributions that the local community could make;

- Increased awareness of the skills that parents and members of the community could contribute to the curriculum;
- Intercultural awareness through meeting other members of the community and becoming involved in school exchange visits, including overseas visitors;
- Intergenerational awareness of the different histories of the community as it was documented.

In addition to the outcomes listed above many of the activities provided opportunities for displaying work and performing in a public arena, this had the added benefit of impacting on all curriculum areas through;

- Children's and parents' confidence to perform and develop pride in their local school and community;
- Children's and parents' confidence at seeing their work on display in the community and other environments outside of the school;
- Increased social interaction and networking across the community.

They had succeeded in something and displayed their work to the school and parents. This consolidated the children's sense of self-worth, accomplishment and pride. She has noted also that this confidence is now evident in other curricular areas (Internal Evaluation report 06 p11)

5.1.3 Special Educational Needs

The FSCEP project aimed to work with communities that were experiencing levels of disadvantage. Whilst the particular needs of individual families and children were not highlighted in the project there was consistent feedback through the evaluation that one group of learners did benefit specifically through this project.

This group comprised of children who experienced a physical, sensory or learning disability. Many comments referred to the range of activities offered, which meant that children with special educational needs could participate and be supported by parents and their peers in a rich nurturing educational context:

[parents] had interaction with children with Special Needs, which they wouldn't normally have done. (Parent Interview School A)

school has a high number of special needs children –[FSCEP provided a] range of activities that they wouldn't have been able to do (Interview Principal School E)

The level of participation and quality of engagement also improved for some children with special educational needs, again linked to the more varied activities and the different stimuli provided through different interactions:

sometimes difficult getting her into school, but always happy when activities were on (Interview Parent School A)

5.1.4 Families Impact on Learning

The added value of involving parents and the community in the FSCEP project meant that there was the potential to achieve much more than schools doing the activities without involving parents and community members.

The parents' Questionnaire used, as one of its tools, a simple ranking method to identity the most frequently identified benefits of the programme (full results in Appendix Three). The responses (total number 20) shown below have been categorised under the following headings in ranking order.

THEME	Number of Responses
School Link (strengthened)	13
Learning through enjoyment / variety of activities	11
New skill development	10
Making new friends / contacts (between parents / parents' & children)	9
Parental involvement in activities	8
Contact time with child	7
Relationship with teachers	6
Child's socialisation	6
Child's confidence	6
Environmental link	5
Teamwork	3
Creative Arts	2
Networking	2

Table 9 Parents' Ranking Exercise

All the parents who participated in the interviews and questionnaires spoke very positively of the experience of the FSCEP project. Parents interviewed also confirmed that feedback was positive from other parents that they knew had taken part in the FSCEP project:

> **Parents all found it very positive and beneficial.. looked at it with enthusiasm wasn't a burden having to come in (Parent interview school A)**

One of the key aspects of the educational partnership was to encourage parents to feel confident within the school environment and to be more aware of school activities in order to positively contribute to the decision-making processes and become actively involved in their children's learning:

> **developed a more positive interaction between parents and children (Principal school D)**
>
> **made us more aware of what goes on in school (parent questionnaire B)**

This relationship was crucial to the success of the project because it illustrated a mutual and respectful relationship between parents and teachers to support the child's learning:

> **School, home and community partnerships that are committed to shared decision making lead to a high level of parent involvement. Empowering families to help solve problems, discuss fiscal priorities and develop policies that are more child/parent friendly sends a powerful message about collaboration, equity and access. (Working Together: Toolkit for New Mexico School Communities www.cesdp.nmhu.edu/toolkit)**

One of the benefits of having an established relationship between parents and teachers was that difficult issues such as children's behaviour problems could be tackled in partnership as well:

> **Parents are coming in more frequently ..fantastic managing challenging behaviour in partnership (Interview Principal School D)**

Parents commented on the space the project provided for them to spend 1:1 time with their child and improve the quality of relationship between parent and child:

> **It helped me bond with my child (Parent Case D)**
>
> **We got to see how he interacts with other children on a daily basis (Parent Questionnaire A)**

The FSCEP project also identified that '**schools and families …. recognise their reciprocal influences on children's learning**'. These influences are obviously different for each educational partner and needed to be explored across all the partnerships. However, sometimes there was clarity on the differences and also acknowledgement of how one supported and developed the other:

> **School learning is you are taught reading, writing maths, but at home you are taught a lot more social interactions, how to behave, life skills etc. (Internal Evaluation report p 22 Parent Interview)**

> **You 'need to put an effort in to help children achieve' as 'children pick up on parents expectations' (Internal evaluation report Parent Interview)**

There also needed to be overlap between parents and teachers' roles so that children could be supported at home to complete homework, continue reading or complete other projects:

> **[Teacher discovered]..more parents do art at home with them now and I believe that is the reason why we won a competition against the whole country and judged by an esteemed artist (Internal evaluation report p 11 ML Teacher journal Feb 06)**

The project aimed to impact into the home environment and parental involvement strengthened the chances that home related conversations would involve the school and what was happening in the child's life:

> **'We had a lot to talk about at home' (Parent's Questionnaire C)**

Level of Engagement
The FSCEP project involved parents in a variety of activities across the four years. The level and type of engagement experienced by the parents/schools developed as the project progressed. This progression has been identified below as a series of levels. They illustrate how the FSCEP project helped to positively impact on the quality of relationship and helped schools to develop the skills to empower parents to contribute to the school policy.

Not all parents engaged with the project at all the levels or at all times in its lifespan. However by having parents at each level schools had the option to develop key relationships with parents across all aspects of the school activities. These aspects ranged from support at school performances through to active engagement in the planning of school activities.

Parents Engaging with the School System **(Primary Indicator)**	*Level 1 –* Entering school premises, enjoying a cuppa, watching activities *Level 2 –* Engaging in sessions, attending FSCEP project wider events, intercommunication with teachers *Level 3 –* Volunteering to lead activities, teamwork with teachers *Level 4 –* Actively promoting FSCEP project in the wider community, initiating new activities

Table 10 Impact Indicators Parental Involvement

The Educational Partnership included community as well as family involvement. Families and schools are part of a wider local community and one can support and help to develop the other. Although the project was not developing 'community schools' the ethos of community schools can be used to demonstrate how this partnership could change traditional school and family attitudes towards one another:

> **A community school differs from a traditional school because the various partners are not conducting business as usual. They are working together towards common results; changing funding patterns; transforming the practice of their staffs; and working creatively and respectfully with youth, families and residents to create a different kind of institution. (Partnerships for excellence www.communityschools.com date accessed June 12th 2009)**

Within the community school context in the USA, schools and parents are focused on developing the school for the benefit of the children. Community organisations and partnerships take that focus beyond the classroom and into the wider world. Many of the schools felt challenged by the community aspect and initial applications focused primarily on parental involvement. However the FSCEP project management continued to highlight the need for community involvement in the activities and this was included in most schools:

> **The [Easter] show took place in [school B]. Parents from two classes were invited to watch. The hall was filled to capacity. It was noted that there was a particularly good turn out of fathers on the day. There were also members of the community in the audience. (Team Meeting April 2008)**

Some schools used local coaches or instructors who were recognised by the children in the local community, which continued links through conversations in the street and children recognising the local facilitator. Other schools became aware of parents' skills, which they had not been aware of previously:

> **4/5 parents did a dance in the show…there was one parent who was a very good poet and I wouldn't have known that…[another parent was a] good artist which I didn't know about (Interview Principal school D)**

The projects that involved visits to places in the community, or projects about aspects of the community, managed to find clear links for the community involvement, especially since many parents also took on community roles and could share their knowledge and experience of the local environment with the children and the school, especially in the history and local environment projects:

> **[I could] share my knowledge with my child and community (Parents' Questionnaire A)**

However, this was also reciprocated as parents found new links to the community through the school projects:

> **A new family who recently joined the community have been very involved in the garden project. They feel more integrated into the community through their work with the school. (Team Meeting May 2008)**

The community involvement was not the only element of community partnership; there were other important ways in which the FSCEP project could impact on the community development of their area. The first was by developing and encouraging stronger ties within the community, for example, many parents might not know other children in the area or even on their street:

> **I got to meet her friends and their parents while seeing where she goes to school every day (Parents' Questionnaire)**

The activities that involved performances and displays in community buildings also supported children's understanding that school and community were integrated areas. Positive learning experiences through these activities were ascribed to both school and community environments and built a sense of ownership both for parents and children:

Bag packing in the local supermarket happens every year as a fundraising event for one school. One teacher noted that it's normally very difficult to get parents involved but this year they had tremendous support (Internal Evaluation report p26 (SG Teacher Journal)

Furthermore, the FSCEP project supported summer schools for children. These were sometimes located in school buildings but more often within community settings. They were sometimes staffed by teachers but frequently staffed by members of the local community.

In a similar way to the parent's involvement level the community engagement can also be illustrated through the use of an impact table. Again in the progression not all members of the community participate at all levels. This work will always be ongoing, however, recognising the different levels would enable progress and progression in developing community links to be recognised.

Acceptance of School Approach within Community (Primary Indicator)	*Level 1 –* Parents attending activities *Level 2 –* Other extended family members attending activities, links to community projects *Level 3 –* Community approaching school seeking to collaborate on projects *Level 4 –* Awareness amongst other schools and agencies of the approach and feedback affirming their acceptance

Table 11 Impact Indicators for Community Involvement

5.2 A Model of Practice for Schools- Holistic and Integrated Systems Level Approach

The Model of Practice developed through the FSCEP project is a multi level approach that aimed to develop an educational partnership between family- school and community. It also aimed to actively involve parents in the planning and implementing of activities and support the organisational culture of the school as well as influence policy and practice in MIC.

Feedback on this model has been divided into these three areas. It is an integrated model and therefore there will also be overlap between the different sections.

5.2.1 Educational Partnership in Schools

The FSCEP project focuses strongly on developing an educational partnership approach across the programme activities. This message was strongly reiterated to schools and the role of the Partnership Development Coordinator was clearly to support schools to maximise the potential for developing this approach.

The following learning outcomes were identified by the project within the 2nd year of the project:

- Schools have embraced new teaching methodologies and different learning styles (active learning using all senses);
- The promotion of practitioners as participatory action researchers, reflective teachers;
- Improved understanding of partnership – the promotion of partnership as a rights issues as well as a means of off-setting educational disadvantage (Progress report Sep – Dec 2006)

The focus on the educational partnership continued to be a priority for the project throughout the four years with success being attributed to programmes that showed strong parental and community involvement at both design and roll-out stages.

Evidence of this strong involvement was often taken as being demonstrated through the active presence of parents / community in the activities during school time:

> **I hoped that some parents would come in to learn the game [chess] with their children. This didn't happen, but I know they played games with them at home (2009 School Evaluation sheet)**

Two key aims of the project, however, were '**To enable schools and families ……to recognise the reciprocal influences on children's learning**' and '**….to work together in partnership to address the learning needs of their children**'. It is important to note that if the interpretation that reciprocal learning and working in partnership is equated only with performances in school time, it would restrict acknowledging the wider impact of the FSCEP project across time and contexts:

> **Huge benefit to the school in providing projects which embraced the new curriculum and greatly enhances the children's learning experiences bringing them to a wider level- in using community and the wider world in many of the areas covered in the projects (Teacher Questionnaire School A)**

This acknowledgement is perhaps the primary cultural shift required in schools and which some teachers were still grappling with. Others, however, had acknowledged the benefit of moving the focus away from solely school-based activities and making the partnership more egalitarian:

> **It was a different type of project and involved a lot of outside school hours time for us all no…. .because it was not classroom based, it meant we as teachers were meeting parents on a more social, even level. (Teacher evaluation form 2007)**

A key indicator that the partnership approach is working is the impact that the activities are having in the family and community environment of the participating children. This factor was always acknowledged by the FSCEP project in their documentation:

> **One element of family environment, the presence of conversations at home between parents and children about 'current school experiences' …is a better predictor of student achievement than either family income or family education (cited in Coleman, 1998, Dormant Accounts Application Form FSCEP March 2004 page 3)**

Activities that demonstrated an enthusiastic and involved level of participation by parents would be indicators that activities undertaken by the schools would impact at home since shared reference points for future conversations are being developed i.e. both parents and children can remember 'such and such happening':

> **Parents really enjoyed gardening with the children. It was an extremely positive experience for both parents and children (Teacher Questionnaire School C).**

> **The parents appreciated the time spent with their child. They worked together following and giving instructions. The parents were very interested in becoming more involved in other projects and activities within the school (Teacher Questionnaire School C).**

> **Becoming more part of the school / more involved in school activities (Parents Questionnaires A).**

The pressure that parents were placed under to be present also caused difficulties for some of the schools, with both children's and teachers' expectations raised that parents would attend and yet these expectations were not always met due to the very realistic factors in people's lives like work and family commitments:

> **A commitment from parents to be involved every week would have been great….However in today's busy world that is not always possible (Teacher evaluation form 2007).**

Other schools noted that different activities brought in different adult members of the children's families and community. Sometimes other members of the family became involved where parents were not available:

> Started a crotchet club and this brought in some parents I had never seen attend before…[also] had aunts and uncles attending activities (Interview Principal School D).

> Grandparent to child project will definitely be repeated especially given the changing role of grandparents with parents working (Interview Principal School E).

5.2.2 Planning in Schools

Planning the activities was not the most difficult aspect of the project, as teachers are required to plan activities for their own lessons and are already encouraged in many schools to be creative in their design:

> There was no shortage of ideas coming through for future projects, some aimed at seasonal events such as St Patrick's parade, Easter celebrations, religious celebrations (Confirmation and First Communion) gardening and sporting activities, while the music / performance projects are seen as more long-term and will continue as they are at present (Progress Report Dec 2005).

The FSCEP project provided schools with the opportunity to include parents and community representatives in the design of these activities and to empower parents to make decisions. Parental and community attendance at the planning of activities was an easy indicator to monitor since it required a presence that could be counted:

> ………held a planning session with parents. 19 parents were present (Internal evaluation report p2).

However, the FSCEP project has always focused on and documented the nature and quality of parental involvement in the activities:

> [Re]the planning and strategies of projects and proposals. There has been a systematic change, parents are now requesting and developing projects, they are bringing the ideas to the teachers (Team Meeting Jan 2008).

Teachers were also encouraged by the FSCEP project Partnership Development Co-ordinator to actively include parents in the rollout of activities as well as the planning stages. This was easier to achieve in some activities than others and often required creative design and the inclusion of the concerns of parents in the planning of activities:

> My main challenge and I suppose worry, was that we wouldn't have as much parent participation as we would have hoped for. So with this in mind, our first Tuesday took place very informally outside of the classroom. We went on a photographic tour of the community and recorded the areas of most importance to the parents and children. The first day was a great success as I felt parents were at ease in their community and were therefore able to direct the walk and give input into the taking of photographs (Teacher's input at FSCEP presentation June 2007).

> If I had the opportunity to take part in a similar project again, I would be more experienced in terms of the organisation of the projects i.e. I learned a lot about consultation with parents and colleagues regarding timetabling etc. (Teacher Questionnaire School B).

This type of approach is an additional challenge to teachers who have to acknowledge both parent and student learning outcomes and design activities to ensure participation with both groups. At some stages of the project this did take its toll as teachers felt under pressure:

> **Teachers need to be minded. The reality is that people are very busy in schools. They really do want to develop partnerships. From networks we are hearing there is an element of teachers feeling sad and tired. Teachers need to be supported (FSCEP Management Nov 08).**

As with most forms of consultation the process is important and time consuming. The aim was not merely to submit an application but to enter into a constructive dialogue with a variety of stakeholders. It was important that each application reached a level of agreement and enthusiasm that could be maintained over the course of several months for each project and over four years for the FSCEP project:

> **The consultation process takes time and delays the submission of proposals (Management Meeting Nov 07).**

> **A lot of planning and consultation has happened for the Write a Book project. This will be part of a history of {housing estate name} before it is demolished. Parents are collecting articles as well as their own stories (Management Meeting Nov 07).**

The longer timescale for many of the larger projects meant that parents and other family / community members could make a contribution in their own time as the longer timescale provided greater flexibility and time to arrange practicalities in advance. Other advantages were the increased links that were established throughout the project lifetime including linking to other interagency groups in the area:

> **While there is enormous effort needed on behalf of teachers to design and facilitate large-scale projects there are also great benefits. This involved the opportunity to collaborate with Local Education Committees (LECs) who represent a diverse range of educational partners (FSCEP Management).**

The larger projects helped to give greater scope for individual interests to come to the fore and parents' expertise to be utilized:

> **Today is a celebration of the partnership of pupils, parents and teachers, which forms the spirit of {school name} School (June 2006, Reach for the Stars Programme).**

> **Forging home school links and the benefits will be ongoing and wide-ranging (Teacher Questionnaire School E).**

5.2.3 Schools Organisation

The educational partnership aimed to inform changes in areas that interface with school process and structures. The evaluation report has looked at three interface areas; teaching styles; cultural development and curriculum development. However, there is obvious crossover between the three areas and some of the points mentioned below apply across all the headings.

Teaching Styles

There have been several examples already in the report whereby teachers have expanded and developed their existing approach to teaching. Whilst some teachers may not have readily identified any change in their teaching methodologies they were clear that the FSCEP project encouraged a greater involvement of parents and this had led to a subsequent change in culture and opinions;

> **Parental participation significantly benefited our school as it changed attitudes, opinions and pre-conceived ideas on both sides (Teacher Questionnaire School A).**

The teachers valued the availability of facilitators through the FSCEP project. These facilitators brought specific expertise in arts, crafts, dance, mime, music and gardening. This enabled teachers to have access to expertise that would not necessarily be present in the school:

it showed me the importance of having a skilled person to share his/her talents with children (Internal Evaluation report p19 Teacher Journal Nov 06).

One of the greatest impacts on teaching approaches was to widen the scope of activities that teachers could use to deliver their curriculum:

> Allowed the school to engage in projects and activities that it would otherwise have been unable to due to lack of personnel and/or resources (Teacher Questionnaire School B).

> The children got the opportunity to do sewing and gardening this year – this would not've been possible if it wasn't for the FSCEP project (Teacher Questionnaire School C).

The link between teaching styles and planning is more evident when using an educational partnership approach. Many of the changes that occurred in teaching style occurred in the planning and consultation approaches used by teachers. The physical change of classroom, often moving to outside locations, automatically changed the teaching styles. However, many teachers took this in their stride and didn't appear to be disturbed by working in very different situations.

> As a teacher involved in all the projects I don't think they really 'changed' my teaching methods. Most projects were short term involving community and family (Teacher Questionnaire School A).

The smooth transition of teachers accepting that parents and community would just become involved in their lessons is the direct result of the approach adopted by MIC and replicated through the schools. It helped to overcome any doubts:

> [I was] sceptical at the beginning …overcome by enthusiasm of teachers and enthusiasm of parents (Interview Principal School E).

Cultural Development

There are perhaps two elements to cultural development within the project; the first was to acknowledge the wider cultural differences within families and children in the school. The second was to identify the culture of the school and its differences to the wider community environment.

The biggest change that impacted on schools was in relation to changes to the school culture. These changes were needed if adults, other than teachers, were to be included in helping with the delivery of the school curriculum either as family members, as additional resource expertise or as community representatives:

> The project has certainly promoted a relaxed atmosphere in [school name] Parents are coming into the school freely to help out, 'fathers introduced themselves…parents having tea and scones in and out of school. .inside one mother stayed after the dressing up and I found her reading with a group of children in the resource room (Internal evaluation report p13 Facilitator journal March 07).

> Made us more aware of what goes on in school (Parent Questionnaires).

> It changed our school environment entirely having an open-door policy and gave parents confidence in leading their children's learning and empowered them greatly which I hope will be an ongoing benefit (Teacher Questionnaire School A).

Some of the changes were more focused on challenging the schools' current relationships with parents, which perhaps had occasionally mimicked the teacher-child relationship that is the culture most familiar to the school. The following extract relates to a discussion on a programme application form that stated that the school was going to embark on home visits in preparation for Confirmations. The project had identified its own concerns in an earlier Team Meeting:

External Evaluation Report of FSCEP Report

It was felt that the parents should be given an option of a home visit or if they would prefer to come to the school, and to also make it more inclusive of children of different religions … (Team Meeting Dec 2008 recapping prior meeting concerns).

A subsequent team meeting noted that;

The proposal has been renamed 'Reach Out and Touch', and will include a pack containing advice/materials on the transfer from primary to secondary school, along with a gift pertaining to the sacrament of confirmation. Telephone contact will be made to each home, to arrange a suitable time and date for visiting. An alternative arrangement for parents who wish to meet in the school will also be made available (Team Meeting Dec 2008).

The broader culture of different families was reflected more subtly through the activities such as pony riding in some schools.

Pony riding in [school name] recognised the cultural importance that horses have for some children in the area (Teacher Journal Internal Evaluation report 2006).

Changes in the cultural attitude of the community were also noted as the project progressed.

Certain projects more than others promoted community participation. An initial reluctance on their behalf turned to an attitude of embracing any efforts on behalf of the school to include the wider community – with particular success involving our local tidy towns committee (Teacher Questionnaire School A).

Other cultural differences were integrated into the overall approach of many of the activities including some of the following listed in the table below:

TRADITIONAL SCHOOL CULTURE	CULTURAL CHANGES
School Day 9 – 3	❯ Parents working in the school environment ❯ Out of hours meetings with parents ❯ Evening rehearsals / performances
Classroom Based Activities	❯ Wider school environs ❯ Outdoor locations ❯ Community venues
Teacher Led	❯ Outside facilitator ❯ Other expertise / parents
Planning by Individual Teachers	❯ Link to other teachers / timetable ❯ Parents' involvement ❯ Facilitator involvement ❯ Partnership Development Coordinator involvement
Review of Session by Individual Teacher	❯ Inter school forums ❯ Parents' feedback ❯ MIC link/ facilitation by MIC ❯ Teacher journals
Planning by Individual Curriculum Subjects	❯ Project based curriculum ❯ Increased cross curricular links

Table 12 School Culture Indicators of Change

Curriculum Development

Both the teaching styles and the cultural development changes also impacted on curriculum development. In particular the emphasis on reflective practice through the use of journaling encouraged a more critical analysis that also incorporated aspects of the three areas:

> **It {journal} allows teachers the chance to examine / reflect on their own teaching (Internal Evaluation report).**
>
> **{one teacher was} surprised how the children were so able for more difficult songs….perhaps we should challenge them more (Internal Evaluation report p 20 Teacher Journal Feb 06).**

The larger projects provided opportunities for cross-curricular planning and broadened the scope for including new approaches. By using contacts amongst parents and the wider community a more interactive project could be developed without incurring huge expense:

> **The advantage of a small school is the close knit community. A new stone picnic area is near completion. This project dates back to the summer when {facilitator} was with the school. In extracts from journals, it is important to notice participatory democracy in this project. The children made a trip to a quarry, the workplace of one of the fathers. They drew a plan to scale with measurements. FSCEP is bringing elements of active learning to schools (FSCEP Management meeting Nov 07).**
>
> **We built on our HSCL programme and extended links with the wider community. So as well as having parents into the parents' room we brought them into their children's learning environment (Teacher Questionnaire School B).**

The use of creative arts as a mechanism to integrate other areas of the curriculum is an issue that has been noted already, especially in the larger projects, which included concerts and musical productions. The longer timescale involved with larger projects also provides more opportunities for people to become aware of and involved in the activity, which in turn provides additional opportunities for learning:

> **The children love to let parents know about the activities they are involved in and talk about them at home. The project also demonstrated a link to curriculum with history lessons on dolmens. Some Polish workers from the quarry were involved as well which added a multi-cultural dimension (FSCEP Management meeting Nov 07).**

Since all the activities involved a time input in planning, consultation and implementing the activities, it is more practical if the activities are seen as part of the overall timetable and can complete aspects of the core curriculum:

> **Programmes seem to operate best when integrated into the curriculum and not seen as add ons (Sep – Dec 2005 Progress report).**

The integrated approach, with an emphasis on cross curricular projects can be clearly identified as a mechanism through which effective partnership can be nurtured, since there are greater opportunities for flexibility and often a longer timescale in which to develop activities and encourage engagement.

5.3 Action Research Approach

The model of educational partnership that has been developed by the FSCEP project is fully documented in an academic report at the beginning of this publication. The reason for using this approach was to capture as much feedback as possible at intermittent stages in the project's lifespan, and to use this information to inform practice. Data was collected by the Partnership Development Coordinator and members of the management team, through interviews, focus groups, questionnaires and through regular contact with the FSCEP project

schools. Activities were observed on a regular basis and feedback sheets were collected on all the activities funded through the FSCEP project.

For this evaluation there are two areas in the research that are of interest: firstly to determine if the components of the model of practice, as stated in the application form, have been implemented. Secondly, to determine how the feedback from the action research was utilised and whether this was achieved in the most appropriate and timely manner.

5.3.1 Action Research Findings
There were three broad thematic areas that emerged through the research. These were:

- Theme A referred to the development and/or enhancement of the school ethos, mission and/or culture and how those elements influenced working in partnership with families and communities.

- Theme B, contained findings relating to the more measurable, logistical elements of working in partnership i.e. the presence of school policies, processes, procedures, organisational structures and practices, and how they impacted on partnership processes.

- Theme C, contained findings under the theme 'teaching, curriculum development and learning styles' - this section outlined how partnership enhanced educational outcomes for children, families and schools.

The project was both a research and intervention project and aimed to establish the context that would best support children's literacy and numeracy attainment as well as their arts and sports skills, using a partnership process:

> **While we did not have baseline on e.g. literacy levels with which to subsequently compare data, but we did not set out to specifically measure literacy outcomes, we set out to create the context and support the context in which literacy /numeracy etc. attainment would be supported through the partnership process (FSCEP Management).**

Several factors, as mentioned earlier in the report, impact on pupils' levels of attainment including levels of participation and attendance. Despite the complexities in establishing exact indicators of success there are many verifiable indicators of secondary indicators for both participation levels and attendance within the project schools:

> **We cannot claim that our project affected attendance as there are many variables which impact on same yet teachers tell us that they could see improvements in attendance on days when specific FSCEP project funded programmes were running (FSCEP Management).**

Secondary indicators would include pupils actively engaging and enjoying the programmes and active engagement in activities by parents as well as improved teacher parent relationships:

> **The children really enjoyed and benefited from being involved in each of the projects (Teacher Questionnaire School C).**

> **Visible improvement in parent/ teacher relationships (Teacher Questionnaire School C).**

5.3.2 Framework Underpinning FSCEP
The framework that the FSCEP project used to underpin its work was supported by a variety of academic works, all of which highlighted the benefit of educational partnerships and the need for strong community, family and school links. This approach was recognised as important for all schools not just for those located in particular areas, see sections 3.2 and 4.1.

Cultural Changes
The framework can also be developed further in light of the FSCEP project since several aspects of cultural changes have been identified through the project;

- School culture and attitude of staff towards parents (being open to working in partnership, listening to parents concerns and welcoming parents into the school);
- School culture and approach to working with outside expertise and facilitators;
- School culture of wanting /not wanting to take children into community or link with community based activities;
- Parents' culture of wanting /not wanting to be involved in children's education;
- Parents' culture of feeling /not feeling welcome/intimidated by the school environment.

The educational partnership process impacted on all partners and similarly involved changes in culture and practice on all sides. It also involved taking risks and being willing to do something different. It would be imperative that the entire school staff was fully supportive of implementing this initiative.

5.3.3 Inequality Strategy

The Dormant Accounts application, which supported the first two years of the FSCEP project, required each applicant to state how their project would impact on inequality. The FSCEP project highlighted their intended inequality strategy, which is outlined below. The strategy outcomes were named in the application form; the indicators for assessing that strategy have been added by the evaluation.

	STRATEGY (OUTCOME)	INDICATORS
1.	Target Educational Disadvantage	Schools located within RAPID and CLÁR areas
2.	Positive intervention projects	Types of activities
3.	Providing equality of opportunity	Variety of activities
4.	Literacy & numeracy focus	List numeracy & literacy activities
5.	School skills improved in supporting educational disadvantage	Changes in practice (evaluation and research findings)
6.	Social skills developed	Quality of relationships developed / interactions (research findings)

Table 13 Inequality Strategy

The table above illustrates that the strategy is very practical and easily monitored, and therefore should form a key aspect of any future model. In other projects the broad heading of target educational disadvantage could be replaced with supporting educational attainment since in this project it was really targeted within RAPID and CLÁR area schools.

5.4 Management & Administration

The project was closely managed and supported through several levels of organisation. In particular the MIC Finance Department provided financial tracking support and the project was embedded in the work of both TED and the CDU.

5.4.1 Promoting Model

The project retained a clear focus on its role in promoting and working with educational partnership, and was clearly able to define the work that was and was not within its remit. The following extract is taken from a team meeting considering a response from an outside agency to issue guidelines on parental involvement:

> … noted a request ... about strategies for parental involvement and asked if a handout could be compiled with some practical strategies that can be adapted in their schools. X noted that HSCL is the expert on parental involvement in schools and that we should stick to the term

educational partnership. X will prepare a handout with some of the theory and practical elements of partnership... (Team Meeting Feb 2008).

The FSCEP project delivered several inputs to college staff and advisory and management meetings that highlighted the work of FSCEP project. All these inputs also used a partnership model, including inputs from two practising teachers, parents and pupils:

Some of the presentations that were given are listed below:

- Presentations to student teachers;
- Educational Disadvantage Pedagogical Option;
- Lecture to ECCE students;
- Presentation to Advisory Group;
- PLUS Network;
- Northside Local Education Committee;
- LEC Network;
- PAUL Education & Training;
- MIC staff;
- BAICE Conference Paper;
- Why Not Me Colloquium.

Community links were also used as a way of promoting the project and forging stronger working relationships. One example of such a link was through student work experience and placements in an After School Club next to one of the schools.

Another strength of the inter-agency work was to provide a forum in which to promote the project and the working in partnership model across several agencies. This was particularly noticeable through the Local Education Committees (LECs).

Key Learning: working through the LECs is a key way of promoting partnership activities (Team Meeting February 2009).

5.5 Methodologies and Instruments used in the FSCEP Project
The project tried to minimise the paperwork and administration, especially for the schools:

This [reduced paperwork] was specifically requested by schools who are inundated with paperwork and felt that they did not need another layer to add to existing layers (FSCEP Management).

Two key templates were developed for the FSCEP project, these were the application form for individual programmes and the follow-on evaluation form. Both these forms were to be completed by the schools.

5.5.1 Application Template
The application template focused on general aims and outcomes for each activity applied for, although from evaluative experience defining aims and outcomes can be quite difficult to identify or separate. Since the project was focusing on an educational partnership it might have helped to focus the questions on the key components of that child- family-school-community partnership.

For example –

What is the intended benefit of this activity on each of the following groups?
- Children
- School
- Parents
- Community

This approach avoids the need to differentiate outcomes from aims; it also reinforces the need to consider all aspects of the partnership at an early stage in the activity and should assist in selection criteria by seeing which projects are not genuine partnership projects.

Cross curricular projects could similarly have been complimented by using a table.

Example Gardening Project:

CORE ACTIVITIES	CURRICULUM LINK
Marking out seed beds	Maths
Agreeing design and plants	Communication
How plants grow	Teamwork
Literacy & numeracy focus	Science
Visit to local neighbours garden – keen gardener	Community link
Parent and children sowing seed / plants	Parental link

Table 14 Cross Curricular Links Template

Evaluation Template
Similarly the evaluation template also asked three generic questions:

- The best feature of the activity
- What could have been done differently
- Any general comments

This could also have followed the proposed application format so that learning from the project could be focused on the educational partnership impact as well as the achievements. Although on the surface this may appear an onerous and complex task it can be simplified:

> However, measuring the specific benefits of an intervention demands a complex array of tools. Participant observation and on-going meetings with individual teachers, staffs and parents as well as team and management meetings enabled the Partnership Development Coordinators and the FSCEP project management team to have an on-going insight into the effectiveness of programmes (FSCEP Management).

The following format allows for feedback under the same headings as the application form which keeps teacher's thinking on the various dynamics of the partnership process and its intended impact areas:

How did this activity benefit:
- The children (who took part/other children in school)
- The school
- The parents (who took part/other parents)
- The community
- Any other comments

The feedback didn't need to be detailed since the measurement of impact is amalgamated over the four years.

5.5.2 Summative Evaluation Techniques
The evaluation report used a summative approach which raised the usual issues which would be common to most summative evaluation reports.

- The first hand data collection is restricted in the following ways:
  - Data is only available to be collected from those participants and teachers involved at that particular time in the project history.
  - Earlier participants who may have been involved at the project inception and played an active role in establishing the project are not available.
  - Earlier participants have stayed with the project for the duration but remembering actions from four years ago is less reliable.
  - If the correct data collecting mechanisms are not already in place to record project progress and outcomes especially in relation to impact, the evaluation has no access to any data in these areas.

- Summative reports provide information retrospectively. For some projects this information is better utilised during the project implementation stage, i.e. formative evaluation techniques.

- Project staff and participants are tired at the project end and perhaps feel the exercise is a low priority given the limited options for participants to use the results from the report.

Despite these limitations the use of an action research approach meant that there was a rich selection of data available and that interviews with project staff were also informed by the research rather than relying on anecdotal observations.

5.6 Sustainability

One of the core successes of the FSCEP project will be the impact that the FSCEP project has had on influencing school approaches and practices. Many of the schools and parents felt positive that although FSCEP project in its entirety could not be maintained without ongoing additional financial support there were elements that would be maintained.

> I found the FSCEP project extremely useful in our school setting and would love to see it continued in the future. I feel it was cut short and really the success of FSCEP can only be measured over the long term (Teacher Questionnaire School E).

> It would be great to continue to sustain these projects as they offer huge opportunities to develop children's and parents' skills (Teacher Questionnaire School B).

Parents also spoke of the positive impact that the FSCEP project had and that having established the framework and done a lot of work to get the project established it would be a shame not to continue:

> Groundwork is work (Parent Focus group).

> Partnership idea has a good reputation (Focus Group Principal School B).

The variety of work undertaken and the sense of ownership developed by the FSCEP project were also cited as reasons why many parents and teachers felt that the project would continue to have an impact.

> I think all the work done through FSCEP bore positive results and all the projects were successful for many reasons. The links formed with parents and community will enhance the lives of our children (Teacher Questionnaire School B).

> 5 schools in the parish came together for Christmas celebration [as a result of FSCEP]…the teachers themselves thought it was an excellent idea and should be done next year (Parent interview School A).

6 >> RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations emerging from the evaluation process have been categorised into three broad sections. The first section focuses on tools used by the project during its implementation, the second section looks at the FSCEP programmes and the third section focuses on the sustainability of the project once the FSCEP project funding finishes.

6.1 FSCEP tools
The FSCEP project used a variety of tools and data collecting mechanisms during the four-year process.

6.1.1 Templates
The application and evaluation templates of FSCEP were used to ensure that schools applied for and reported on the activities for which they received funding. It would be important that templates of this kind were used in any future project since they also assist school planning and ensure that partnership discussions are incorporated into the activity before money is handed over.

The format of the templates could have been streamlined slightly to ensure that each component of the partnership; family, school, child and community was considered by the school both in planning and evaluation. However, the key to the design is the simplicity that ensured that all the schools used the forms.

6.1.2 Indicators of Achievement
These are the indicators that the project captured in clear detail both through the research and through the implementation of activities on the ground. These included indicators of activities undertaken, participation numbers, curriculum subjects covered, homework uptake, behavioural changes, relationships developed etc.

Future work or projects need to ensure that this level of data is collected. This project used a substantial qualitative approach to developing indicators of achievement. This was supported through the action research component of the intervention.

6.1.3 Indicators of Impact
These indicators look at the wider context of the project and its environs and seek to determine how far the FSCEP project is reaching out and to determine its scope of influence. These indicators could also include secondary indicator headings and various levels of impact within each area.

All the indicators of impact need to be developed by the project so that both the indicators of achievement and impact that are collected are relevant and meaningful to the project. This level of detail is easier to capture as the project progresses and is less onerous if done little and often.

6.1.4 Educational Partnership Framework
The definition of Educational Partnership (contained in glossary of terms) within an educational disadvantage environment needs to encompass aspects of both the multidimensional aspect of educational disadvantage and also to consider that educational partnership is about encouraging a journey that parents, the community and schools are willing to undertake in order to influence the culture of each to better impact on the child's learning environment.

One of the outcomes of the action research process should be to develop a more culturally appropriate educational partnership framework. This framework should identify the benefit to each of the partners and be flexible enough to be applied within different localised environments.

The outcomes for future educational partnership projects should include outcomes such as those attained through the FSCEP project; integrating parental involvement in children's learning; strengthening community links and ties; improving educational attainment by children; influencing teaching styles and methodologies within schools.

6.1.5 Inequality Strategy

The project developed an inequality strategy, which has proven to be an easy and replicable tool for developing projects. This could be used to underpin other projects run across schools and would help to focus the wider impact indicators such as have been used throughout these evaluation findings.

6.2 FSCEP Programmes

6.2.1 Cross Curricular Links – Integrated Curriculum Projects

Many of the schools developed their FSCEP project programmes to include larger cross-curricular activities. These large projects should also tie into the school curriculum in the same way as the single subject projects. However, linking projects across the curriculum may not always be straightforward to determine. The use of a cross-curricular template (see Table 14) within the FSCEP project application and evaluation templates might support schools in recognising and combining both the curriculum links and the family/ community links of the educational partnership.

6.2.2 Models of Activities

One of the difficulties in attracting parental and community participation is the limited time that people have available to commit to extra activities. Success was more visible in larger scale projects as witnessed by the number of parents, family members involved and the greater community involvement where the scope of involvement was broader and parents and community members had a choice of different ways in which they could play a role in the activity.

As confidence grew in the consultation processes and planning, and as partnership and expectations became clearer, it was easier for schools and parents to define a role for themselves which in turn increased participation levels.

However, shorter more intense projects, such as the literacy and numeracy activities, had a different focus and aimed to facilitate a more qualitative engagement with parents within a closed environment (the classroom). High levels of participation could not be supported at these events.

There are, therefore, different types of engagement activities with different expected levels of outcome. The experience of the FSCEP project can be used to illustrate the range and level of engagement required for different types of activities.

6.3 Sustainability

The project was a multi-level educational partnership between family, school, community, child and MIC. The role of MIC was clearly a leadership role and provided the impetus for transformation within the school environment. MIC worked in partnership with schools, agencies and organisations. There was clear evidence of ongoing support and intervention at all stages of the activities from consultation through to planning, recruitment of facilitators and feedback:

> **However, as part of the closure process schools have been facilitated to address and reflect on the issue of sustainability. While schools recognise that the loss of the FSCEP project means a loss of funds and support they however clearly acknowledge their own responsibility in terms of sustaining and developing partnership process (FSCEP Management).**

6.3.1 Existing Relationships Between MIC and Schools

The existing work of TED was a precursor to this project and relationships and trust had already been developed with the individual schools and MIC through other collaborative work and will continue through other projects as the work of MIC and TED continues to focus on supporting educational interventions. Schools were not pressurised to commit to the project and a process of self-selection assured the project of having committed and interested schools for the four years, even though initial commitment was only for two years.

The FSCEP project was therefore able to start implementing activities very quickly, which would not be as viable an option for other projects, seeking to replicate the FSCEP project, who did not have prior working relationships established with the schools. MIC has long standing relationships with organisations that became involved in the management of the FESCP project. These relationships are highly valued by MIC, TED, and the CDU.

6.3.2 Future School Activities

The integration of the FSCEP project within TED and the CDU ensures that the learning from this project is assimilated into future work of the college.

Feedback from many of the schools would imply that whereas the FSCEP project in its entirety would not be continued, key aspects of the work would be. Schools all stated a keenness to continue engaging with parents and maintaining an open door policy within their school. The FSCEP project could formalise this further by suggesting that schools write up and display a Parent - School involvement policy that is displayed in a prominent location within the school.

Many schools also stated that the FSCEP project consolidated existing work they were doing such as, links with the community, parental engagement, the work of the HSCL and other support interventions. Four of the schools had HSCL coordinators and one had a school-based community learning programme which offered adult and child-based activities. The process of educational partnership is another aspect of all that work and therefore it is not an isolated add-on project that is dependent entirely on MIC for its continuation. This would strengthen the chances of elements of the work being continued in the future.

7 >> CONCLUSION

The FSCEP project established a core aim to develop sustainable educational partnership practices across school, families and communities in order to enhance the learning outcomes for the child. The evaluation report highlights how this was achieved across a number of parameters at different levels across the school, family and community environments.

In particular there are four key areas of impact that the project has endeavoured to influence these are;

The FSCEP project has enhanced the learning environments of the schools through supporting teachers and principals in their work with families and community, supporting the development of programmes and providing resources. The FSCEP project has further supported schools to develop approaches to consultative planning of activities and actively encouraged schools and teachers to engage with parents and community members in a variety of different ways. As a result of the FSCEP project the culture of many of the schools has changed to become more open and receptive to the needs and concerns of parents and many schools have actively encouraged the presence and input of parents in everyday school activities.

- The FSCEP project has impacted on the learning environment of the homes, through acknowledging the talents and skills of parents and providing them with opportunities to further develop skills specific to supporting their children's learning. This has resulted in parents actively participating in activities alongside their children and promoting the dialogue and conversation of school into the home environment. The enthusiasm and commitment of parents has established a positive role model for children as they see them, whether through their own family members or those of friends, supporting the school and the work that it does.

- The FSCEP project has impacted on the learning environment of the community through strategically nurturing partnerships between the schools and community organisations. It has also helped to raise the profile of the schools amongst the community and to reinforce to children that there is interconnectedness in their lives through the school, home and in other community activities.

- Finally the FSCEP project has impacted on the learning environment of the child by supporting and facilitating the key stakeholders in the child's life to work together to develop effective, strategic educational partnerships. These partnerships have encouraged a variety of fun and learning activities that have supported all children regardless of their ability. It has encouraged the development of social and personal skills including self-esteem and confidence as well as aiming to improve literacy and numeracy attainment and arts and sports skills amongst children. The children have been exposed to a wide variety of community organisations and venues including the facilities of MIC. Throughout the project there has been a clear message of expectation that the children will progress and develop further skills throughout life including the possibility of returning to MIC as students in the future.

- The project aimed to develop a multi-level model of educational partnership. The various levels of impact and engagement highlighted throughout this report indicate the extent to which this was achieved. It would be important therefore that the findings from this work were disseminated and used to influence policy within education in Ireland. It would be equally important that a receptive audience be found from within the policy-making structures of government in order to ensure that both the political will and the financial resources to implement this approach are forthcoming in the future.

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