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# Family Support

## Direction from Diversity

*Edited by John Canavan, Pat Dolan  
and John Pinkerton*



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# Developing Reciprocal Support among Families, Communities and Schools

## The Irish Experience

*Sandra Ryan*

Schools have long been entrusted to provide young people with the education they need to prepare them for their future role in society. It has become increasingly clear, however, that schools alone cannot educate and socialize children and prepare them for life. Based on over thirty years of compelling research evidence, there is increasing and widespread support for the involvement of families in the education of their children. '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, p.1). It is important to note, however, that it is a misperception to infer that any type of family involvement leads to 'all good things for students, parents, teachers, and schools' (Epstein 1996, p.223). Rather, as Epstein has emphasized, different types of family involvement such as she defines them 'are expected to affect different outcomes for students, parents, and educators' (p.223) and further research is required to determine 'whether and how results of particular types of involvement generalize over time' (p.224).

This chapter takes up the theme of support between families and schools. It examines the concept and relevance of family support in the context of education and, in particular, in the context of educational disadvantage. Initiatives in Ireland to address educational disadvantage are briefly outlined, as are recent government policies relating to such initiatives. One specific initiative, the Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme, is examined in detail as an expression of a reciprocal model of the family-school relationship and examples from an evaluation of this scheme are drawn upon

to illustrate this model. The benefits and barriers to family-school involvement are discussed in the context of the HSCL scheme and lessons from that experience are described. Finally, the chapter outlines challenges to developing effective family support in the educational context.

### Definition of educational disadvantage

In Ireland, as in other countries, various terms such as 'educationally disadvantaged', 'marginalized', and 'at risk' have been used to describe the combination of low socio-economic status and low scholastic achievement in students. While there have been few attempts to define the term educational disadvantage (see Boldt and Devine 1988) the use of many of its correlates, as above, has implied a discontinuity between children's home and community experiences and the demands of schooling (see Ogbu 1982).

Over the past thirty years or so there have been definite changes in emphasis to the way that disadvantage has been considered. Early thinking reflected what was termed the 'deficit' approach. Students were regarded as being disadvantaged if, because of sociocultural reasons, they entered the school system with knowledge, skills and attitudes that make adjustment difficult and impede learning (Passow 1970). A main assumption underlying the deficit approach was that the home of a child in a low-income community often failed to provide the experiences and stimulation necessary for adaptation to the requirements of school and for success within the school system (Kellaghan *et al.* 1993).

As thinking developed and further work and research was done in the area of educational disadvantage, it was recognized and acknowledged that the knowledge, skills and attitudes that children bring with them to school reflect the demands and experiences of their environments and should not be judged to be inherently inferior to those required in school. Rather, the differences between the cultures of home and school were recognized and the child was supported in adjusting to the school environment (Kellaghan *et al.* 1993). This view was referred to as the 'difference' perspective.

Current thinking on educational disadvantage is rooted in the concept of partnership and empowerment. The role of the family as the primary educator of the child is recognized and that right has long been enshrined in the Irish Constitution (Ireland 1937, Article 42.1). The concept of partnership implies that families and teachers (and indeed other relevant parties) should co-operate around the common goal of fostering and enhancing the child's learning. The principle of empowerment is centred on the concepts of power and control and the belief that people can control their own lives and change their circumstances (Kellaghan *et al.* 1993). Five tenets of a well-

known empowerment programme, the Family Matters Project (Cochran and Dean 1991; Cochran and Woolever 1983) are cited in Kellaghan *et al.*:

First, all families have strengths and these, rather than deficits, should be emphasized. Second, useful knowledge about child rearing resides in parents, communities, and social networks, not just in experts. Third, different family forms are legitimate and can promote healthy children and healthy adults. Fourth, fathers should be integrally involved. And fifth, cultural differences are both valid and valuable. (Kellaghan *et al.* 1993, p.94)

Recent initiatives in Ireland to combat educational disadvantage are largely grounded in this approach, known as the 'empowerment' model. Various programmes have been developed that have attempted to address the problem of educational disadvantage (see ESF Programme Evaluation Unit 1997; Kellaghan *et al.* 1995). One contention in relation to such programmes, however, is that the lack of continuity between home and school presents difficulties for children that contribute to poor school achievement (Powell 1989).

In the context of social support research, Tietjen (1989) describes this phenomenon in relation to children's development of certain competencies relevant to their ecological circumstances:

The nature of children's social relationships also influences the kinds of opportunities and experiences they will have, and hence the competencies they will develop. When congruence between the function of the child's network and the demands of the ecological context does not exist, support is inadequate, and vulnerability results. (Tietjen 1989, p.38)

There often exists a lack of congruence between children's home circumstances and the requirements of schools. Our schools, by and large, reflect the values and expectations of middle-class society. This poses a difficulty in the context of disadvantage in that the demands placed on children may not be realistic in light of their home circumstances. The competencies that are valued are not those which these children bring with them from their own ecological context. One of the problems is that schools and teachers may lack familiarity with children's home backgrounds. This may mean that teachers therefore cannot help pupils to integrate home and school experiences and cannot take account in their teaching of the categories of meaning that children bring with them to school (Kellaghan *et al.* 1995).

Much work has focused on identifying adaptations which are required of both homes and schools that incompatibilities between them might be

reduced. This has been accomplished largely through the development of specific home-school linkage strategies (see Booth and Dunn 1996; Kellaghan *et al.* 1993).

Such discontinuities between home and school are often a manifestation of parent-family characteristics and experiences that mediate their willingness and ability to engage with the school. Eccles and Harold (1996) outline eight such characteristics that are likely to be important:

1. Social and psychological resources (e.g. social networks; time demands; parents' general mental and physical health; community resources; parents' general coping strategies).
2. Parents' efficacy beliefs (e.g. parents' confidence that they can help their child with schoolwork).
3. Parents' perceptions of their child (e.g. parents' confidence in their child's academic abilities; educational and occupational expectations and aspirations for the child; parents' view of the options actually available).
4. Parents' assumptions about their role in their children's education and the role of educational achievement for their child (e.g. what role the parents would like to play in their children's education and what they believe are the benefits to their children of doing well in school).
5. Parents' attitude toward the school (e.g. role they believe the school wants them to play, both at home and at school; the extent to which they think the school is sympathetic to their child and their situation; their belief that teachers only call them in to give them bad news about their child or to blame them for problems their children are having at school versus a belief that the teachers and other school personnel want to work with them to help their child).
6. Parents' ethnic, religious and/or cultural identities (e.g. the extent to which ethnicity, religious and/or cultural heritage are critical aspects of the parents' identity and socialization goals).
7. Parents' general socialization practices (e.g. how the parent usually handles discipline and issues of control).
8. Parents' history of involvement in their children's education (e.g. parents' experiences with the school in relation to their children; parents' experiences with schools which, in turn, affect their

attitudes toward, and interest in, involvement with their children's schools and teachers).

Schools are only one of the contexts in which children spend their lives, and schools on their own cannot hope to succeed with children who are marginalized or at risk. Unless schools can harness the support of families, they will not maximize their potential in working with the children in their care.

### Relevance of family support to education

Determining the relevance of family support to education and to the role of schools is largely dependent on our construction of what schools are intended to accomplish. Should schools play a role as equalizing institutions in our society or do they tend to be more responsible for magnifying differences between children from wealthy and impoverished backgrounds than for overcoming these differences? The equity gap relates both to the opportunities children are provided with and to the outcomes they achieve.

While there will always be achievement differences on average between groups of students, these gaps have tended to be much greater than they need to be (Slavin 1997). This is particularly evident if one examines the participation rates in third-level education in Ireland of young people from low-income families. Schools can no doubt have a powerful impact on the educational success of all children. Furthermore, school processes affect children and their families in various ways (see Alexander and Entwisle 1996; Gamoran 1996). While no single policy or programme can ensure the school success of every child, a combination of approaches can (Slavin 1997).

The terminology 'family support' has not been widely used in the context of education in Ireland, but has recently begun to appear in relation to specific intervention programmes (e.g. Ryan 1998; Schuerman and Rossi 1999). While the term 'family support' may not have been commonly used, much of the work that has been carried out in educational contexts has related to the development of family-school links, the development of family involvement in children's schooling and in their learning, and the support of parents and families around such involvement.

In the context of the Child Care Act 1991, the purpose of family support is 'to promote the welfare of children in vulnerable families and to minimise those circumstances where a child may have to be received into the care of a health board...because of severe family problems or family breakdown' (Gilligan 1995, p.61). Gilligan further outlines aspects of family support as promoting children's welfare and normal development in the face of adver-

sity, enhancing the morale, supports and coping skills of all and maximizing the resilience of children and families in the face of stress 'particularly by securing their integration into what hopefully prove supportive institutions such as the (extended) family, the school, and the neighbourhood' (Gilligan 1995, p.61).

Schools have the capacity to act as supportive institutions for children and families and have a responsibility to do so in the context of what is outlined as their main role to promote children's social, emotional, academic and personal development (see Ireland 1992, 1995).

The influence of the family on a child's learning begins long before the child goes to school and extends well beyond the scope of the school. The significant influence of the family on the care and education of the child has long been acknowledged by educators. Over two centuries ago, Pestalozzi (1747–1827) stated that 'the teaching of their parents will always be the core' for children. He saw the teacher's role as providing a decent shell around the core (Pestalozzi 1951, p.26). Research studies in the 1960s and 1970s provided evidence that family variables were more powerful than school variables in predicting academic performance (Coleman *et al.* 1966; Jencks *et al.* 1972).

The identification of home and family process variables (see Bloom 1964, 1981; Iverson and Walberg 1982; Kalinowski and Sloane 1981; Marjoribanks 1979) served to better explain the complex behaviours that characterize children's family experiences and provided further supporting evidence for the importance of such variables in the child's social, emotional, intellectual and physical development.

A more recent review of studies found several near-universal family strengths that pertain directly to their children's education (Moles 1993):

- Parents are the first and foremost teachers of their children.
- Families have vast opportunities to influence children by instruction and by example.
- All parents want their children to do well in school and have good futures.
- Parents want to work with the schools to aid their children's education.

While these family strengths may exist as a potential in each family, there are numerous families that experience increasingly difficult conditions. Many parents have not had the experiences that would enable them to provide the nurturing, structure and security needed to protect their children and to support their learning, either at home or in school (Lloyd 1996). It is in

recognition of this need to strengthen and support families that various initiatives such as the Utah Center for Families in Education (see Lloyd 1996) and the Family Involvement Partnership for Learning (see Moles 1996) have emerged in the USA.

Based on their research into the effects of family involvement on children's academic achievement, Henderson and Berla (1994) advance six major conclusions:

1. The family makes critical contributions to student achievement; efforts to improve children's outcomes are much more effective if the efforts encompass the children's families.
2. When parents are involved in their children's learning at school, not just at home, children do better in school and stay in school longer.
3. When parents are involved at school, their children go to better schools.
4. Children do best when their parents are enabled to play four key roles in their children's learning: teachers, supporters, advocates and decision makers.
5. A comprehensive, well-planned family–school partnership fosters high student achievement.
6. Families, schools and community organizations all contribute to student achievement; the best results come when all three work together.

These conclusions provide support for the notion that school initiatives on their own cannot compensate fully for extreme differences across families in well-being, lifestyle, attitudes and values, but parent involvement programmes and home–school partnerships show that motivated parents can learn to be more effective in supporting their children's schooling. By teaching parents how to help their child (e.g. by reading to/with them, listening to their reading, asking them about school), by helping them to understand the school's expectations for their children, by opening lines of communication in both directions, and by making parents feel welcome and respected, schools may make a difference for low SES parents (see Lareau 1987).

There is no doubt that the school is one of the significant institutions in the lives of children and, as such, has the potential to make a real difference to them. If one considers that children spend, on average, 13 per cent of their waking life up to 18 years of age in school (Walberg 1984), the potential for

maximizing such contact is highlighted. However, it is also clear that schools should not work in isolation. They are embedded within the context of the wider community. Work with the child cannot ignore this wider context, the most important aspect of which is the family. As part of their efforts to work with children at risk, however, school staff need to be aware of other resources within the community that are also working with families. The roles should be complementary.

### **Initiatives to address educational disadvantage in Ireland**

Since early in the twentieth century, there have been limited schemes in Ireland to provide children in need with food, schoolbooks, clothing and footwear (National Economic and Social Council 1993). Over the past two decades a range of additional educational initiatives to address educational disadvantage have been introduced.

#### *Designation of schools in disadvantaged areas*

In 1984 a scheme for providing additional funding to schools in disadvantaged areas was set up. Indicators used to identify a disadvantaged area included: numbers of children living in rented local authority housing; numbers of children whose parents were unemployed; numbers of families holding medical cards; and school inspectors' assessment of needs (National Economic and Social Council 1993). Grants were paid to schools for the purchase of books and equipment and for the development of home-school-community liaison.

#### *Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme*

In 1990 the Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme was introduced as an initiative to counteract disadvantage by increasing co-operation between schools, parents and other community agencies in the education of young people (see Ryan 1994, 1995). The scheme is staffed by a teacher who acts in the role of co-ordinator of programme activities within the school and the community on a full-time basis.

The co-ordinator collaborates with parents to identify their needs in relation to the programme: e.g. parenting courses, courses in curricular areas, self-development or assertiveness courses. The main thrust of the scheme is preventive. Co-ordinators are discouraged from responding to crisis situations. Their role is to establish relationships with parents and to develop trust. Since many parents have had negative experiences of school and since very often they are contacted by the school only in relation to their children's difficulties, it was felt that the HSCL scheme should avoid such negative

associations. Therefore a definite effort is made to promote positive experiences.

#### *Early Start preschool programme*

In 1994, as part of the government's Local and Urban Renewal Development Programme, a pilot preschool programme, Early Start, was established in eight centres in seven disadvantaged areas. Language and numeracy skills are given priority in the curriculum and parental involvement is also considered central to the work of the preschool units. The units are staffed by teachers and child-care workers who work in teams of two and develop and deliver the preschool programme to a maximum of 15 children of 3 years old.

#### *Breaking the Cycle initiative*

In 1996 the Breaking the Cycle initiative was introduced to schools in urban and rural areas. The initiative is multifaceted in that it involves allocation of additional resources, a reduction in class size (maximum 15 pupils in the urban scheme), appropriate curriculum adaptation and the development of five-year school plans.

#### *The 8 to 15 early school leavers initiative*

In 1998 funding was allocated for preventative and intervention measures to combat early school leaving. Consortia including primary and post-primary schools, youth and community services, area-based partnerships and statutory and voluntary agencies submitted proposals for funding of programmes integrating in-school and out-of-school actions for young people in the 8- to 15-year-old age group who are considered to be at risk of educational failure. Fourteen project areas (eight in city areas, four in town areas and two in rural areas) were selected to pilot the initiative.

Projects have developed a variety of programmes and specific actions to target the needs of the young people. Parental and family involvement is promoted, as is integration of services, improvement in school attendance, behaviour and attainment, and provision of support for school staff (Ryan 1998). Individual projects may include a wide range of elements. Among these are homework support, individual and group counselling, remediation, meal and transport provision, family support, school attendance monitoring, in-career development and supports for school staff, summer schools, off/on campus provision for children experiencing difficulty, art therapy, outdoor pursuits and others (Ryan 1998).

In the Education Act 1998, the Irish government's commitment to addressing educational disadvantage is again outlined. The Act includes

provision for the setting up of an educational disadvantage committee 'to advise on policies and strategies to be adopted to identify and correct educational disadvantage'. The setting up of such a committee can be viewed as further enhancing the support of the government to tackle the problems associated with educational disadvantage.

### **Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme as family support**

The Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme embodies many of the key principles of effective family support as outlined by Gilligan (1995). One such principle is that family support 'must address the family's definition of the need or problem' (p.71). The work of HSCL co-ordinators is based on their assessments of family needs as presented to them by the parents themselves. Co-ordinators also work with parents to help them develop their concept of need and such needs have been seen to evolve over time (Ryan 1994). For example, many parents of post-primary pupils did not initially identify a need for themselves around parenting issues, but subsequently recognized this need as a result of other activities in which they had participated and resulting out of their discussions with each other and with the co-ordinator.

Another principle identified by Gilligan (1995) is that family support must be 'supportive', not 'threatening, alienating, or demeaning' (p.71). The HSCL scheme is built on the principle of partnership defined as 'a working relationship that is characterized by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate' (Pugh 1989, p.9) (see Department of Education 1997; Ryan 1996a). This working principle that permeated the HSCL scheme also reflects Gilligan's principle of a professional orientation as 'respectful ally' rather than 'patronising expert' (p.72).

Another key principle is that 'family support must be offered and available on terms that make sense within the lived reality of its target users', which results in an emphasis on a 'low-key, local... "user-friendly" approach' (Gilligan 1995, p.71). The work of HSCL co-ordinators with parents reflected this principle in several ways. At the outset of the scheme, it became apparent that groups of parents existed who tended to feel threatened and fearful of all school activities. There were various underlying reasons for this, the main one being a lack of literacy skills among such parents and a fear that this would be exposed and cause them embarrassment. As a result, a range of non-threatening courses and activities began to emerge from co-ordinators' discussions with such parents. These included self-development courses (e.g. relaxation, assertiveness) and leisure activities (e.g. aerobics, crafts, sewing,

knitting, art) and were designed to help foster and strengthen relationships between the co-ordinator and parents and among parents themselves (Ryan 1994). This philosophy and approach also served to 'enhance rather than diminish the confidence of those being helped', another of the key principles posited by Gilligan (1995).

Another aspect of meeting conditions that were acceptable to parents was reflected in the way in which co-ordinators went to great lengths to offer courses and activities at parents' convenience. This varied somewhat from area to area and the specific arrangements (e.g. timing and duration) were worked out between the co-ordinators and parents. One example of parents' lived reality that was common in all areas was the need for child-care support to enable parents of young children to participate in scheme activities. Arising out of this, crèche or child-care facilities were established in conjunction with HSCL activities.

Other aspects of Gilligan's principles are also evident in the HSCL scheme: the fact that activities were located within reasonable proximity to parents' homes; the fact that parents were free to participate or not and to the extent they desired; the fact that courses and activities were based on parents' expressed needs and wants made them more enticing and attractive and also contributed to parents' own sense of benefit from such involvement. Finally, the fact that the HSCL scheme is focused within schools means that it inherently 'wraps around' the 'child-rearing stage of the family' (Gilligan 1995, p.72).

One aspect of family support that does not underpin the HSCL scheme is the notion of dealing with families 'when they are under stress' and of being responsive and accessible for families who need support 'when they need it' (Gilligan 1995, p.71). While HSCL co-ordinators are sometimes called upon to address an immediate problem (e.g. a child who expresses certain fears and concerns, either verbally or through his/her behaviour that are directly related to a family crisis situation), this would not be viewed as the central role of the co-ordinator. Since a main aspect of the HSCL scheme is to promote positive contacts with families, the involvement of co-ordinators in crisis situations for which other professionals (e.g. social workers) are better equipped to respond is not generally felt to be a main focus of their work. Rather, the co-ordinator's role is viewed as one of liaising with the relevant professionals in the area so that a comprehensive approach may be taken to addressing and resolving the problem. Because of the nature of the work of schools, it seems reasonable that co-ordinators should not become involved in addressing needs of parents that can be better addressed by professionals who are specifically trained and experienced in dealing with such issues. The



important role for the school would seem to be to co-operate as far as possible in supporting such work.

### Benefits of family support and involvement

When school and families work together in partnership, the benefits that accrue are reciprocal and complementary. By working closely with families, schools can accomplish the task of developing and enhancing children's learning more effectively. In turn, parents who feel supported in their involvement in schools gain in confidence, self-esteem and the ability to participate and thus become more effective in their engagements with their children. Of course, ideally, the ultimate winners in this situation are the children. Figure 8.1 presents this relationship in diagrammatic form.

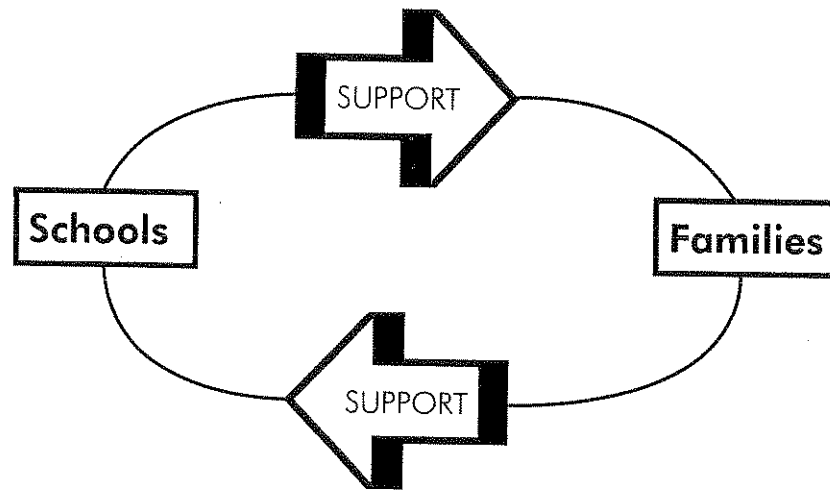


Figure 8.1 Reciprocal nature of the relationship between schools and families

A further aspect of this reciprocal relationship is based on research evidence that school practices influence family involvement. Teachers' practices to involve families are equally or more important than family background variables for determining whether and how parents become involved in their children's education (Epstein 1996). Furthermore, family practices of involvement are as or more important than family background variables for determining whether and how students progress and succeed in school (Epstein 1996). Research evidence shows that if schools invest in practices to

involve families, then parents respond by conducting those practices, including many parents who might not otherwise become involved on their own (Dauber and Epstein 1993; Epstein 1986). Another benefit for both families and teachers of parent-teacher involvement is that teachers who frequently involve parents rate them more positively in terms of their helpfulness and follow-through with children at home. Such teachers also tend to stereotype single and less formally educated parents less than is the case for teachers who are not frequently involved with parents (Becker and Epstein 1982).

Subject-specific links have been found between the involvement of families and increases in achievement by students. Results from research suggest that specific practices of partnership may help boost student achievement in particular subjects. Based on the efforts of teachers to involve parents in mainly reading and English-learning activities at home, Epstein (1991) reported increase in involvement by parents on reading activities as well as improvements in the reading scores of students whose parents were involved. Students' mathematics scores were not affected. A similar finding emerged from follow-up of achievement testing of pupils in six selected HSCL schools. Reading scores of first- and third-grade pupils were found to have improved, but no changes were observed in mathematics scores (Ryan 1996b).

Another benefit of the partnership relationship that emerged within the HSCL scheme was the improvement in parent-teacher relations. Since parents were around the school more as a result of the HSCL scheme, they had more contact on an informal basis with teachers. This led to a breaking down of fears of both groups and more friendly exchanges. There was less conflict and greater co-operation and consultation. Parents tended to feel less threatened when they needed to meet their child's teacher. Parents and teachers began to understand each other better. Parents now had a definite purpose for being in the school and took responsibility for activities (e.g. organizing an open day or a social night).

The findings on benefits to parents and families and to schools (the next two headings) are based on evaluation of the HSCL scheme during the first three years of its implementation in schools (Ryan 1994, 1995).

#### *Examples from HSCL of benefits to parents and families*

The findings here are based on the responses of parents who were involved in the HSCL scheme. Co-ordinators were also asked to describe their perceptions of effects of involvement on parents. In general, they provided supporting evidence for the findings reported by parents (see Ryan 1994). It should be noted that at the outset of the scheme, numbers of parents who

were involved were relatively small, but this increased during the three years. Furthermore, not unlike similar programmes worldwide, the vast majority of involved parents were mothers.

Parents were overwhelmingly positive about their involvement in HSCL activities and noted their enjoyment of such involvement in the school and in courses and activities. This was very important in the context of their lives, which often lack opportunities to fulfil their own interests and enjoyment in a meaningful and beneficial way. An increase in their understanding of schools and of how schools were supporting and enhancing their children's learning was another benefit noted by parents. They also stated that they had an increased understanding of the difficulties faced by teachers, something that helped them to appreciate and understand the work teachers were doing and its context.

Enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem and an increased interest and self-efficacy in relation to children's education were also recorded as benefits that accrued to parents. They noted that they had acquired certain skills to help them engage in their children's learning, both at home and in school. Co-ordinators supported this finding and reported their perception that 'parents had more confidence in themselves as people, in their own skills and abilities, and in their role as educators of their children' (Ryan 1994, p.134). Furthermore, these parents 'were eager to learn for themselves, willing to try out new things, and would persist with whatever activity they had started in the school' (p.134).

Parents also noted a reduction in their fears of schools. Because they were increasingly in the school and meeting staff, both formally and informally, parents benefited from a welcoming aspect of the school that they may not have experienced previously. As a result, their negative connotations around school as an institution gradually dissipated. Parents welcomed increased opportunities for involvement in their children's education. Involvement in the learning process occurred both within home and school. Parents were encouraged to work with their children at home. Examples of such practices included paired reading programmes and helping with homework. Parents were facilitated in this activity by the provision of courses in the school to help them (e.g. courses in Irish or maths). Activities in the school included work both in the classroom with teachers (e.g. working with a group of children while a teacher worked with another group) and outside the classroom (e.g. parents took groups of children for computer activities, arts and crafts, dancing).

Parents also commented that their parenting and home management skills had improved as a result of their involvement in HSCL activities. Co-ordinators

confirmed that some parents had become more conscious of the needs of their children and were more aware of good parenting practices to guide children's behaviour. Co-ordinators in some schools also reported improvements in parents' practical home management skills (e.g. children said that their mothers were more adventurous with food recipes following cookery courses) and, in some cases, that children's diet had improved.

The development of networks of support among parents was a very positive aspect of their involvement for many parents. Co-ordinators referred to this as the development of 'mutual support networks' (Ryan 1994, p.135) through which parents made friends, shared problems and began to break the isolation that often surrounded them. This was seen as an important development in that parents began to realize that they shared problems in common with others and that help and support were available from other parents and from the co-ordinator. Co-ordinators also reported improvement in the coping skills of parents. They were perceived to have become more assertive, to have started taking responsibility for their own lives and to deal with ongoing problems in the home more effectively. Another benefit was that the co-ordinator had the time to meet parents informally and to get to know them and develop a relationship of trust. Through these interactions, parents were encouraged to discuss their perceptions of the school and to make suggestions about school policy. An example of this was parent involvement in the development of a discipline code for a school. This proved very successful in that parents had a vested interest in encouraging their children to uphold the discipline code.

The co-ordinator served as a resource to parents in several ways. He or she had the time to meet parents and to talk to them and, as such, became a contact person for them in the school – someone they could approach in relation to needs or problems. The co-ordinator also served as a link with other services within the community and could work with families and identify and address parents' educational, leisure and support needs. In some cases this was done in collaboration with outside agencies or individuals. In other cases the co-ordinator provided the course or activity within the school (e.g. helping with homework, Irish, maths courses).

#### *Examples from HSCL of benefits to schools*

Many benefits of the HSCL scheme also accrued to schools as a result of parent involvement. One of the important aspects of the HSCL scheme is the opportunity it affords teachers to meet and get to know the parents of their pupils. In spite of the fact that the school day is highly structured, with little time for staff to interact even among themselves, the very fact that parents are

in schools means that teachers meet them, see them in corridors and, in many cases, work with them. Principals also mentioned an improved, more friendly atmosphere in the school and improved relationships with parents.

Teachers gained a better insight into the home circumstances and difficulties faced by families. This helped them in relation to their interactions with the children of these families and they were reported to show more sympathy and tolerance to children (Ryan 1994, p.102). Teachers also became more aware of parents' attitudes and aspirations and gained a greater appreciation of parents as individuals with needs and talents of their own.

Attendance at parent-teacher and other meetings improved where it had previously been very difficult to encourage such attendance. As a result of improved parent-teacher relations, problems became easier to deal with, parents were easier to contact and teachers found that parents approached them more openly and were not so much on the defensive. At a more general level, teachers suggested that if parents are involved in and enjoy activities in school, then they are more likely to be involved with children at home and to support the teacher's work. It was clear from teachers' comments, however, that support for the teacher was more obvious and more practical if parents were involved in classroom-based activities. A major benefit to teachers accrued when the number of pupils they had to deal with was reduced because parents took children for computer activities, for junior infant activities or for reading and writing. These practices allowed the teacher to give individual attention to 'weaker' pupils. Teachers found such assistance particularly useful when children were being taught a new concept; the presence of a parent to monitor the progress of most children allowed the teacher to repeat the concept with pupils who needed additional help. When parents helped in the classroom with activities such as arts and crafts or knitting, the children got to do a lot more than they would have done without the parents' assistance. Such assistance eased the workload of the teacher so that teachers frequently referred to the parent in terms of 'an extra pair of hands'. Teachers also derived a sense of support from knowing that a group of parents was available and willing to help on request.

Paired reading was one activity that reached parents which teachers would not normally see (i.e. parents who would otherwise not have approached the school). Parent participation in paired reading was considered to be a support to teachers' work in school. Some teachers noted a preference for activities that involved greater support from parents at home (e.g. completion of homework) rather than having parents involved in other activities in school.

Teachers reported being more aware of what was happening in the community and an increase in the school's profile in the community. In many instances, there appeared to be a more positive attitude towards the school. There was also improved liaison between schools and some community agencies and individuals. Finally, in some schools, there was an improvement in the morale of teachers, parents and pupils. This would be expected to be a significant development in schools where, often, morale can be low as a result of the difficulties that permeate the lives of families in disadvantaged areas.

### **Lessons from HSCL about family support**

Several lessons about the development of parental involvement and the fostering of supportive relationships with parents became apparent as a result of the work of co-ordinators in the HSCL scheme. First, it is crucial to consult with parents in relation to the development of programmes. Otherwise, it is difficult, if not impossible, to match the programme content and methods with the needs and characteristics of parents. What are perceived to be parental needs may not match their own perceptions and, if this is the case, they will not become involved.

Related to consultation of parents, their involvement must have an inherent meaning for them or they will not engage in the programme. Unless parents are convinced that they will derive some benefit (even at the level of enjoyment) from an activity, they will not become involved. Co-ordinators found that using parents' own children as a focus for an activity (i.e. if parents felt their child would benefit from their participation) was probably the most effective approach to elicit and maintain the parents' support.

The building and maintenance of relationships of trust with parents was one of the most difficult aspects of the co-ordinators' work, but also proved to be the cornerstone upon which all other success was based. Co-ordinators found that establishing such relationships was a slow process which required ongoing, frequent, positive interactions and collaboration. Collaborative links with parents also provide a means for parent involvement in decision making and, in addition, may influence parents' interactions with their children. Co-ordinators learned to maximize the potential of such links in terms of spin-offs for other aspects of their work.

At the outset of the scheme, co-ordinators found that they had to work hard not to become entrenched in some of the more intractable problems faced by families. This has been identified elsewhere as a possible pitfall in work of this nature. It is important to remain cognizant of the fact that there will always be some problems which can be solved best by other professionals. This prevents the school personnel from losing focus on the needs of

children in relation to their development and learning, which should be the school's main concern (Powell 1989).

### **Barriers to effective family involvement and support**

In order to develop the potential for family involvement in schools and schools' potential role in family support, the barriers to such family involvement that exist in schools at present must be acknowledged, addressed and eliminated. This includes recognizing that school environments may discourage family involvement. A variety of factors contribute to this. The previously predominant institutional culture of schools was one that placed little value on the views and participation of parents. Schools and teachers traditionally concentrated on the needs of children with little, if any, reference to their family life and circumstances. Furthermore, teachers and principals lack adequate time and training in relation to family involvement. Another aspect of this is a lack of policy support within schools that precludes any recognition of teachers' efforts to work with families (Swick and McKnight 1989).

A second major barrier to family involvement in schools relates to the demands of family and household responsibilities (Ryan 1994). This issue is tied in with changes in family demographics and increases in the number of lone-parent households. This factor, combined with lack of time for teachers in which to meet with families, can inhibit the development of supportive relationships between families and schools (Swap 1990).

A further barrier to family involvement in children's schooling is the negative attitude towards such involvement on the part of both teachers and parents. Most teachers do not know most parents' goals for their children; nor do they understand the information parents would like to have in order to be more effective in engaging in their children's learning (Epstein 1996). For example, various studies have shown that most parents want to know how to help their own children at home (Moles 1993). Further, most parents do not know what most teachers are trying to do each year in school. A belief held by some teachers is that parents are neither interested in participating in their child's education nor qualified to do so. For their part, parents sometimes feel intimidated by school administrators, staff and teachers, feeling that they lack the knowledge and skills to help educate their children (Ryan 1994). Teachers may lack confidence to work closely with families and, because of their lack of experience in this area, may feel that they would not be able to motivate parents to become more involved (Epstein 1991).

Fourth, what is defined as family involvement varies widely and is variously acceptable by both parents and teachers (Krasnow 1990). Trad-

itionally, parents attended school meetings and helped out at various other functions such as concerts and sports days. The White Paper on Education (Ireland 1995) stated the government's commitment to promote 'the active participation of parents at every level of the education process' (p.140), and the statutory requirement for school boards of management to promote the setting up of a parents' association has since been put in place. However, while a small number of schools have moved on to involving parents in certain aspects of decision making (e.g. discipline policies, school closures), as yet the practice of such involvement remains far removed from the level of participation espoused in the White Paper. The requirement that all school boards of management 'develop a formal home-school links policy' (Ireland 1995, p.141) will hopefully contribute to the fostering of relationships between schools and families.

Finally, a lack of preparation and support for teachers in working with family members raises another barrier to effective family involvement and support. In order to work effectively with families, teachers clearly need certain skills, knowledge and positive attitudes about family involvement (Burton 1992; Davies 1991; Edwards and Jones Young 1992). Teachers' requirements regarding the context and conditions for such involvement should also be a major consideration in any move towards developing collaborative relationships with families (Ryan 1994).

### **Challenges for education in relation to effective family support**

Education in isolation cannot even begin to tackle the intractable problems of disadvantaged communities. To be effective, work in this area must be multifaceted. There is a need, therefore, for greater co-ordination of services at all levels within the system, from local to national. In recent years, there has been increased evidence of collaboration between government departments in examining policies at national level (e.g. National Anti-Poverty Strategy process). However, this collaboration needs to be taken further so that true collaboration also permeates work at local level.

Recent developments in this area have posited the integrated-services approach as one way to resolve the lack of collaboration between agencies working with disadvantaged families. The integrated approach 'is seen as a way of tackling problems inherent in the relationship between home, school, and community in circumstances where educational disadvantages persist' (Cullen 1997, p.5). Integrative strategies include networking, co-ordination, co-operation and collaboration around administrative and service functions within agencies and also intra-agency and worker-family collaboration (see

Cullen 1997). There is much to be learned from the experiences of other EU countries and the USA in the development of integrated services.

Schools as institutions have traditionally operated in isolation, as indeed have teachers within schools. There is a need to introduce changes in school organization so that family support can be better promoted and become an effective aspect of the work of the school. For example, the standardized curriculum that is recommended for schools can lead to the inclusion of some students while excluding others. Linked to this, students are stereotyped according to their success in school – success that is defined in very limited terms and based on limited criteria. Some work has examined ways in which schools can be more flexible in meeting the needs of disadvantaged students and their families (e.g. Gitlin, Margonis and Brunjes 1993). Such strategies require further exploration.

Another aspect of changes at school level is reflected in the recent requirement for the development of a home-school links policy in every school (Ireland 1995). Family involvement and support is more likely to occur when school policies encourage it and school administrators support teachers and acknowledge their efforts in relation to this work. There is a need for the provision of comprehensive professional development opportunities for teachers in fostering parent and family involvement. Such opportunities must be ongoing to expand educators' abilities to reach out to parents and communities. Furthermore, family involvement and the development of effective strategies to foster and build on such involvement should be an integral part of all teacher preparation.

Another challenge in the area of the development of family involvement and support lies in the fact that the most needy families are also the most difficult to engage. There is a need for the examination of different approaches and strategies to address the needs of such families. This is also linked to the need for integration of services and a collaborative approach to working with families to enable them to reach a readiness for school involvement. A related point is the need for an additional understanding of the nature and effects of fathers' participation in school and family partnerships (Epstein 1996).

Finally, if we are to learn from the work that is being done, there is a need for better designed studies in the area of collaboration between families and schools (Epstein 1996; Moles 1996). Longitudinal studies would be of particular help in determining long-term effects, as well as a better understanding of short-term ones. There is also a need for evaluation of school programmes and practices in fostering partnerships with families (Moles 1996). Such evaluations should address questions about the mechanisms and

nature of the changes wrought through various aspects of programmes. Furthermore, issues in implementation should help to determine the most effective strategies for carrying out particular intervention ideas (Bierman 1996).

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