Early Childhood Staff’s Understandings and Practices of Parent Involvement in Private Early Childhood Services: an Exploratory Study

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Early Childhood Staff’s Understandings and Practices of Parent Involvement in Private Early Childhood Services: An Exploratory Study

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Supervisor: Anne Fitzpatrick
Submitted: February 2010
Abstract

In modern Western society growing numbers of parents are employed in the labour market and while they work, parents and early years practitioners (EYPs) share responsibility for raising children. Attention to the quality of children’s and families’ experiences in these settings is increasing rapidly (Walsh, 2003; OECD, 2006). Parent involvement, has been identified as an indicator of quality, and the benefits that accrue from this involvement for children, parents and EYPs have been widely reported.

Most parents are interested and want to be involved in their children’s development, learning and education but how EYPs view parent involvement is an important factor in encouraging or discouraging their involvement. This exploratory study aimed to investigate EYPs’ views on parent involvement. An additional aim was to identify the types and levels of involvement practised and to explore EYPs’ views about what was needed to implement parent involvement. A link has established between highly trained, experienced personnel and parent involvement (Ginsberg & Hermann-Ginsberg, 2005) and this study also aimed to establish the qualifications, training and experience of the EYPs surveyed.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model was used as a theoretical framework as it demonstrates how influences not directly connected to children, such as interactions between parents and EYPs, may positively or negatively affect their development. The study was conducted in two stages, non-participant observations and data was gathered by means of a self-administered postal survey.

Generally, positive views about parent involvement were expressed, and while parents were involved in joint decision-making about individual children, they were not involved as full partners as described by Pugh & De’Ath (1987). Many of the practitioners confirmed they held qualifications but there was a wide diversity in the type and level of these qualifications. In addition, a minority had training to involve parents. Evidence from the data would lead to the conclusion that EYPs had a traditional understanding of parent involvement and were unaware of what working in partnership entailed.
DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis which I now submit for examination for the award of Master of Philosophy, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

This thesis was prepared according to the regulations for postgraduate study by research of the Dublin Institute of Technology and has not been submitted in whole or in part for an award in any other Institute or University.

The work reported on in this thesis conforms to the principles and requirements of the Institute's guidelines for ethics in research.

The Institute has permission to keep, to lend or to copy this thesis in whole or in part, on condition that any such use of the material of the thesis be duly acknowledged.

Signature Maria Mc Dermott Date 1st February 2010
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Anne Fitzpatrick for her guidance, support and kindness throughout the process; my wonderful family, Fergus, Barry, Alison, Mark and Bryan; my extended family; my friends; and my fellow postgraduates in the Dublin Institute of Technology.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION
1.1 Introduction

In modern western societies, preschool children spend increasingly more time in formal early years services while their parents work (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 2000; Urban, 2004). However, parents are their children’s first and primary educators and most parents want to be involved in their children’s development, learning and education (INTO, 1997; Whalley, 2001; Martin, 2003). There is growing interest in both the role parents can and might play in their children’s early years services and also in the quality of children’s experiences in these settings.

Nationally and internationally parent involvement has been identified as one of the indicators of quality in the provision of childcare services (OECD, 2001; Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield, & Nores, 2005). Research demonstrates the very positive effects that result when parents and teachers work together in the interests of children, and these collaborative relationships have moved to the forefront of education practice and policy initiatives (Whalley, 2001). In addition, families who receive frequent and positive messages from teachers tend to become more involved in their children’s education than parents who do not (NAEYC, 1999).

Supporting young children’s early development and learning requires practitioners to form partnerships with parents (OECD, 2001) but a key factor in parent involvement is how it is perceived by early years practitioners (EYPs), which will be reflected in levels and types of involvement practised (Abbott & Rodger, 1994; Lindon, 1997; McBride, 1999). However, EYPs may lack the skills, knowledge, attitudes and strategies to involve parents (deAcosta, 1996).

Early studies support the position that all types of parent involvement are beneficial (Baker & Soden, 1998), however, a consensus has not been reached regarding how involvement is defined or described (Bridge, 2001; Elliott, 2003). Little research has been carried out in an Irish context on the broad topic of parent involvement, particularly how working parents are involved in their children’s preschool services (Walsh & Cassidy, 2007). This study aims to fill part of this void.

The aim of the study is to explore EYPs’ beliefs about parent involvement, and to establish if and how they encourage, implement and sustain involvement in practice. EYPs’ views
on a wide range of key issues surrounding parent involvement will also be investigated including their beliefs about the benefits, barriers and problems associated with involvement. Research has demonstrated the importance of staff training, particularly training to involve parents, so a further aim is to establish EYPs’ levels of, and views regarding their training needs to involve parents.

1.2 Background and rationale for the study

Historically, in Ireland, the State had minimal involvement in the provision of childcare as it was viewed as the private responsibility of the family. There was little demand for out-of-home care, as the majority of mothers worked full-time in the home (Coolahan, 1998). In the early 1990s, as a result of social, economic and demographic changes, increased numbers of parents were employed in the labour market, particularly mothers of young children. This resulted in a rapid expansion in demand for childcare services. The government reacted to this crisis situation in childcare by publishing a number of key reports, policies and legislations. [The government’s response is discussed in chapter 2].

International research has identified parent involvement as a crucial element and indicator of quality in the provision of childcare services (Powell, 1998; OECD, 2001; Schweinhart et al. 2005). In some countries, parents have a statutory right to be involved in planning, evaluation of activities and in management of the early years services their children attend (OECD, 2001). In Ireland, a parent’s right to involvement in their children’s education is enshrined in the 1937 Irish Constitution, the Child Care Act (1991) and the Education Act (1998). In addition, the importance of involving parents has been stressed in a number of key policy documents. [These documents are discussed in chapter 2].

International influences on childcare in Ireland, and relevant to this study, include the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) and ‘Quality Targets in Services for Young Children’ published by the European Commission Network on Childcare in 1996 with the aim of enhancing the quality of early years services. [These influences will be discussed in chapter two].

Training has been highlighted as a key factor in the provision of quality services and international research highlights a link between training and the promotion of parent involvement (Burchinal et al., 2002; Wilkins & Walker, 2002; Ginsberg & Hermann-Ginsberg, 2005). In Ireland, against the background of increased use of childcare services,
childcare training developed on an ad hoc basis, resulting in a wide range of courses and qualifications. In addition, many practitioners lack training to involve parents, given the types and levels of training currently offered. However, many official documents highlight the importance of formal training and parent involvement.

In addition to the background factors discussed there are additional reasons for undertaking research at this time. Research highlights how individual children's development does not occur in isolation but is influenced by the context in which it occurs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This ecological perspective highlights how relationships both within and between settings, for example, home and preschool, or between adults, parents and practitioners, can affect children's development. This perspective supports the rationale for this study by highlighting how relationships between EYPs and parents may affect the involvement of parents in their children's ECCE and consequently the development of children.

Since the 1960s, the benefits of high-quality early education have been well documented. Research with disadvantaged children in United States confirmed life-long, cognitive and social benefits for children, particularly when parents were involved (Schweinhart et al. 2005). Further research has shown that all children benefit from parent involvement, particularly when families and schools work co-operatively as partners (Keyes, 2002). It is now widely accepted that parent involvement should be part of professional practice in all ECCE services (Walley, 2001; Fleer, 2003; NAEYC, 2005; Schweinhart et al., 2005).

In contemporary Irish society childhood is seen as a private family affair, but in reality, childhood is becoming more managed and controlled by institutions outside the family (Hayes, 2002). In addition, attention to children's and families' experiences in these settings is increasing rapidly (Walsh, 2003; OECD, 2006). At this time of rapid expansion in the use of childcare both nationally and internationally, and the fact that little research has been conducted in Ireland on parent involvement, this study will provide baseline data on EYPs' beliefs and practices in this area.

An audit of research on ECCE in Ireland 1990-2003 (Walsh, 2003) identified gaps in a number of areas that are particularly relevant in the context of this study: quality; parents and families; staff training and qualifications. The most recent audit (Walsh & Cassidy, 2007) highlights great strides taken to address these deficiencies but they confirmed that a
gap in research on parent involvement still exists. In addition, parents’ and EYPs’ attitudes were cited as the most significant factor in the development of partnership.

This study is a follow-up to one conducted by Martin (2003) undertaken in the Dublin Institute of Technology. This study, which focused mainly on the views of parents whose children were aged between 0-3 years, found evidence to suggest the absence of a common understanding of the concept of parent involvement among EYPs while confirming there was very little evidence of parents and EYPs sharing accountability and responsibility for services.

1.3 Aims and objectives of the study

- The aim of this study is to investigate EYPs’ beliefs about parent involvement in early years services, including if and why they believe involvement is important; how they would like parents involved; and the reasons they believe parents might or might not be involved.
- How practitioners view the role parents can play may be reflected in how parents participate in early years services so an additional aim is to identify the types and levels of involvement practised; to examine how EYPs encourage, implement or sustain involvement and the types and level of problems, if any, practitioners experience when parents are involved.
- A further aim of the study is to identify EYPs’ general views on key issues surrounding parent involvement including their perceptions of their training needs and the skills required to involve parents effectively.
- Overall, the aim of the study is to add to the Irish and international body of knowledge and research on parent involvement in early years services.

There are three main objectives in the study:

- The first objective is to establish baseline data on EYPs’ understandings of parent involvement
- A further objective is to establish the types and levels of parent involvement practised in a sample of early years services
• The final objective is to establish baseline data on EYPs’ views on key issues surrounding parent involvement including the skills, attitudes and training they need to facilitate parent involvement.

The study was conducted in two stages. Non-participant observations and a self-administered postal questionnaire was completed by EYPs employed in a sample of private early years services, providing full-day care, mainly for working parents, in the Dublin region.

1.4 Definition of key terms

In this section a definition of key terms, as used in this study, are presented.

1.4.1 Parent involvement

For the purposes of this study, any connection between parents and EYPs constitutes involvement.

1.4.2 Partnership

In this study, ‘partnership’ describes a form of involvement where parents and EYPs jointly share responsibility for the care and education of children. Both parents and EYPs are credited with expertise and knowledge, which is communicated on a two-way basis and decisions regarding any issues in relation to the child, are made jointly (Dale, 1996). [The terms parent involvement and partnership are discussed in greater detail in section 3.2 of the literature review].

1.4.3 Parent

The term ‘parent’ in this study refers to the child’s primary caregiver and educator. This includes the father and/or mother and/or guardians of the child (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004).

1.4.4 Early Years Practitioners (EYPs)

Early Years Practitioners in this study, refers to those working mainly with children in early years services, including managers, and supervisors. Practitioners may have a range of experience and qualifications, from post-graduate level to those holding no formal
accreditation (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004). In the literature, EYPs are often referred to as ‘teachers’, ‘staff’ or ‘workers’.

1.4.5 Understandings

‘Understandings’, in this study, refers to EYPs’ beliefs or views of the concept of parent involvement.

1.4.6 Early Years Services

In Ireland, most early years services are classified as ‘private’, and in this study early years services refers to private services providing full-day care. Full-day care describes services for preschool children, from birth to six years, operating on a daily basis, for more than five hours per day to facilitate working parents. For example, services operate from Monday–Friday, opening from 8.00am to 6.00pm. It is assumed that children would generally attend for up to seven hours per day.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

The context for the study is provided in Chapter Two. The development of early years services in Ireland resulting from improved economic conditions, social and demographic changes, changing attitudes towards childcare and EU policies is described. The chapter concludes with an overview of current policy and practice in childcare provision.

Chapter Three examines the literature on the concepts of parent involvement and partnership. Theoretical perspectives on parent involvement and models of best practice are described. Focus is also placed on the issue of quality reflecting the current emphasis on the quality of children’s experiences in early years settings. The benefits that accrue to children, parents, EYPs and society resulting from parent involvement are described. Disadvantages are also noted. Factors that help or hinder parent involvement are examined. Consideration is also given to the skills required to effectively involve parents. The status and morale of EYPs has also been included in the review. To conclude, gaps identified in parent involvement research are presented.

The research design and sampling framework are outlined in chapter 4. Data was generated by observations conducted in two early years services and by means of a self-
administered postal questionnaire. Ethical issues and methodological limitations are also considered.

The results are presented in chapter Five. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 11) was used to analyse quantitative data. Themes were generated from qualitative data by identifying key words and patterns in response to specific open-ended questions. This exercise allowed the researcher gain a deeper insight into respondents' perspectives, attitudes and beliefs. The first section of this chapter presents a demographic profile of the participants while the second details their beliefs about a number of issues including: why they considered involvement important; the reasons parents get involved and how they would like parents involved. The benefits, disadvantages and practices of parent involvement are also included. Beliefs about staff's role in parent involvement and their general views on issues surrounding parent involvement are then presented. Issues that arose when completing the survey are also included. To conclude, a summary of the results are presented.

Drawing on the literature, the findings are analysed and discussed in Chapter Six. The implications of the findings are also considered. Themes discussed in this chapter include: staff’s limited understandings of parent involvement; links between staff preferences and the practices of parent involvement; factors that may have influenced parent involvement, including the knowledge, skills and attitudes of staff and how they viewed their role, communication, power and status, confidence and stress, the influences of children and of gender and organisational factors. This chapter highlights inconsistencies in reporting involvement practices by EYPs employed in the same service and between quantitative and qualitative data. Finally, limitations to the study are discussed.

In Chapter Seven, conclusions are drawn from data collected in the study. In addition a number of recommendations for future policies, practices and research are presented.
CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT
2.1 Introduction

The influence of time and context are important considerations in any study of childcare, because how it was viewed in the past and how it developed will have a major influence on its current status. Time and context are also important in the development of policies and practices in relation to the involvement of parents in their children’s ECCE.

Historically, in Ireland, there was little demand for out-of-home care as a majority of mothers of young children did not participate in the paid labour market. There was a widely held belief that mothers should remain in the home to care for their children (OECD, 2004). Mothers’ primary position, as homemakers, was enshrined in the Irish Constitution. Article 41.2 of the 1937 Constitution highlights the importance of their role:

'...In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home the woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved'

This view of mothers as homemakers, and the fact that childcare was considered a private family matter rather than an issue of public concern may help explain the State’s reluctance to become involved in the provision of childcare. The marriage bar¹, may implicitly illustrate how childcare was promoted as the exclusive responsibility of mothers. The number of children in the family also influenced women’s participation, as evidenced by figures which highlight that nationally 65.8% of women without children were in employment in 2000, reducing to 51% for women with one child, to 40.8% for women with two or more children in 2001 (OECD, 2004). In addition, as most women worked in jobs that required minimal qualifications, the lower wages paid to women may have influenced them to work within the home (Collins & Wickham, 2001).

As a result of social and economic developments, this situation changed significantly, with a dramatic increase in the numbers of mothers of young children employed in the paid labour market. This resulted in large numbers of preschool children being educated and cared for in early years services while their parents worked.

¹The Marriage Bar prohibited the employment of married women in the public service and obliged women employed in the service to retire on marriage. The Bar was lifted in 1973.
International research highlighted the importance of parent involvement in early years services. In Ireland, the importance of parent involvement was given statutory underpinning in the Education Act, 1998 and its significance, particularly at the preschool level, was highlighted in the Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Childhood Education (DES, 1999). The National Childcare Census (DJELR, 2002:81) reported that 52.6% of early years services had a policy on partnership with parents, 26.5% had a written policy.

This chapter examines national and international influences that resulted in childcare becoming a public issue in Irish society and consequently, the issue of parents’ involvement in their children’s early years services. The formal qualifications and training of EYPs are also highlighted.

2.2 Development of state involvement in childcare for all children

Historically, childcare in Ireland was fragmented and services developed in an ad hoc, unregulated manner over the years. With the exception of children who attended infant classes in national schools or who were in disadvantaged circumstances or deemed ‘at risk’ the state had minimal involvement in the ECCE sector. The National Childcare Strategy (DJELR, 1999:10) states: ‘no government has had a coherent approach to national childcare policy and governmental childcare initiatives over the years have been reactive rather than proactive’. Individuals and organisations in the private, community or voluntary sectors provided childcare services in response to local demand (OECD, 2004).

The official involvement of the State begins when children attend formal schooling and despite the fact that compulsory education begins at six, virtually all five-year-olds and more than half (56%) of four-year-olds attend primary schools (OECD, 2002:30). Hayes (1995) suggests that the tradition of children attending school before the compulsory age, and the low participation of mothers in the workforce, may have contributed to a lack of public concern about and demand for, high-quality early years services.

However, the state provided education and care for disadvantaged preschool children. In Dublin, the Rutland Street Project was established in 1969 to cater for three to five-year-old children. Nationally, the Early Start preschool educational programme for three-year-old
children was introduced in 1994/95 in 40 primary schools in designated areas of urban disadvantage. The aim of this programme was to enhance children’s overall development and future educational attainment. Despite its very low coverage, one of the positive outcomes from Early Start was parental satisfaction with and involvement in the programme (OECD, 2002). The Health Board Nurseries, under the 1970 Health Act, also support ‘needy’ families by providing grants towards the operating costs of centres and contributing to organisations supporting families. Ireland’s Second Report to the UNCRC (2005) confirms that since 1970, 700 children and 400 parents have been supported and have benefited from services provided by the Health Boards.

Childcare for all children became an issue for public debate during the 1980s and 1990s, resulting from economic growth and prosperity, social and demographic changes, and growing awareness of the educational and social benefits of quality childcare for all children and their families. A key consequence of economic growth was a rapid rise in female participation in the workforce, particularly mothers with young children. This resulted in a dramatic increase in demand for childcare services, availability of which had been affected by the implementation of the Childcare (Pre-School Services) Regulations (1996) and their 2006 amendments. Parents returning to training and/or education, flexible working patterns, and a rise in the number of lone parent families to 178,000, 86.4% of whom were lone mothers with children (DJELR, 2002:23) also resulted in increased demand for childcare. In addition, demand for childcare was influenced by international research highlighting the benefits of quality early years services not only for children but for families and communities in terms of health, educational attainment, socialisation, participation in training, employment and job creation (OECD, 2004).

The government responded to the rise in demand for childcare services by developing policies and legislation related to ECCE. The Children’s Act (1908) was the first major piece of legislation in the area of childcare in Ireland. This Act was not reviewed until the passing of the Child Care Act (DOHC, 1991). The National Childcare Strategy (1999) was considered

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2 The implementation of the Pre-School Regulations (1996) led to a reduction in numbers of services, as services, unable to meet the cost of implementing the regulations (for example, physical changes, and/or compliance with adult/child ratios) closed and childcare personnel left the sector to work in other areas of the labour market.
the first systematic attempt by an Irish government to develop a broad policy that specifically addressed the issue of childcare (DJELR, 2002).

2.3 Feminisation of the labour market

Ireland’s economic growth and prosperity during the 1990s led to a drop in the unemployment rate from 11.9% in 1997 to 4.6% in 2003 (UNCRC, 2005). This resulted in an increasing demand for labour particularly in the services sector, which is labour intensive and dominated by women. Feminisation of the labour market was a notable feature of the employment pattern, as a dramatic increase was recorded in the numbers of women in paid employment, from 40.1% in 1994 to 55.8% in 2004 (Central Statistics Office, (CSO), 2004). The OECD (2004:9) suggest that the ‘pull’ of the labour market together with the ‘push’ from the housing market that resulted in dual income households, had a substantial effect on women’s employment.

Female participation was predicted to grow to 807,000 by 2011, an increase of 37%, (DJELR, 1999:56). In the period January-March 2010, a participation rate of 52.7% was achieved with 941,500 in employment, (CSO June, 2010:13). Married women’s participation increased from 43.3% in 1998 to 47.6% in the first quarter of 2002 (DJELR, 2002:24) with 54% in employment between January-March 2010 (CSO, 2010:13). The greatest rate of increase was among young mothers (Collins & Wickham, 2001) with 51.1% of women whose youngest child was aged 0-3 and 52% of mothers, whose youngest child was aged between 3-6 years, in employment (OCED, 2006:351).

Female participation in the workforce was not only influenced by economic considerations but also by social and demographic changes (DJELR, 2002). Changes included: higher educational qualifications of females; a drop in the fertility rate; rising house prices; women having a choice to participate in the labour market (Collins & Wickham, 2001) and equality legislation (UNCRC, 2005). Women’s increased participation in the labour force was not only considered a key consequence of the economic boom (Walsh, 2003; UNCRC, 2005), but also an important factor in the rapid economic growth that Ireland experienced during the 1990’s (Russell et al., 2002).
However, while women were encouraged to return to the workforce or offered training to update their skills, Hayes (2002:71) suggests the state had no plans in place to increase childcare services to meet their needs, asserting that the response was: ‘uncoordinated, reactive and fragmented’. Availability, costs and quality childcare were identified as key issues in the context of the major social and economic changes taking place (UNCRC, 2005). Lack of good quality, affordable childcare was identified as the primary reason many women could not return to the workforce (Canavan, 2000).

Attitudes changed as legislators realised the crucial role ECCE could play in facilitating parents’ participation in the workforce (DJELR, 1999), particularly mothers of young children. To meet the demand for childcare services, the government began the implementation of a seven-year strategy mainly through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (2000-2006) (EOCP). The EOCP was replaced by the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) (2006-2010) which was launched in January 2006 with a funding allocation of €575 million and a target of 50,000 new childcare places. The NCIP is part of the new National Development Plan 2007-2013. The National Women’s Council of Ireland (2005) suggest that facilitating and maintaining high levels of female employment was a primary factor in increased statutory investment in childcare. However, the high cost of private childcare for parents who work full-time may have resulted in a consumer/client relationship between parents and EYPs. This study is being undertaken to examine if full-time working parents see themselves as consumers whose role is limited to purchasing childcare (Dahlberg et al., 1999).

2.4 International influences on policy development relating to quality ECCE in Ireland

Since the early 1990’s Ireland has been part of a number of initiatives to promote the welfare of children, such as, the UNCRC and EU Regulations.

2.4.1. Influence of the UNCRC on policy development

Ireland ratified the UN Convention in 1992, which Hayes (2002) suggests was the most notable international influence on policy development in Ireland, setting the foundation for all
subsequent developments in the ECCE sector. Articles 5 and 18 are directly concerned with parents and families, providing a framework for the relationship between children, parents, the family and the State. Article 5 highlights the state’s duty to respect the rights, responsibilities and duties of parents and families to provide appropriate direction and guidance for their children. Article 18 asserts that states should provide appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their childrearing responsibilities.

The importance of the UNCRC in relation to this study is that it acknowledges parents’ rights to support in their child-rearing function while also confirming the State’s responsibility to provide childcare services and facilities for working parents. The importance of parent involvement was also highlighted and under the terms of the Convention, staff are obliged to involve parents. The initial report on the implementation of the Convention, *The First National Report of Ireland* was submitted by the Irish government in June, 1996. This Report considered the provision of childcare a private matter for parents. The Report also highlighted the government’s awareness of the contribution childcare could make to promote equal opportunity in employment. In order to facilitate this, the government together with the social partners, undertook to progress the development of facilities for working parents and those seeking education or training opportunities. *The Second National Report of Ireland* (2005) described childcare provision as a continuous source of concern, highlighting the fragmented nature of policy development and lack of coordination of service delivery. However, the importance of parent involvement in the Early Start programme and the role of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in promoting parent involvement were also highlighted (UNCRC, 2005).

2.4.2 Influence of the EU directives on policy development

A number of EU directives and guidelines have impacted on the development of quality childcare services in Ireland. In 1996, the European Commission Network on Childcare published a 10-year programme ‘40 Quality Targets in Services for Young Children’, which the Irish government aimed to achieve through measures introduced by the National Co-
ordinating Childcare Committee. A number of targets, cited in the *National Childcare Strategy* (DJELR, 1999: 100-103) are relevant to this study:

Target 17: The educational philosophy should be drawn up and developed by parents, staff and other interested groups.

Target 22: At least one tenth of the working week should be non-contact time allocated to preparation and continuous training.

Target 26: A minimum of 60% of staff working directly with children in collective services should have a grant eligible basic training of at least three years at a post-18 level. In addition, all staff, not trained to this level, should have a right to access such training, including, on an in-service basis.

Target 27: All staff in services working with children should have the right to continuous in-service training.

Target 34: Parents are collaborators and participants in early years services. As such they have a right to give and receive information and the right to express their view both formally and informally. The decision-making processes of the services should be fully participative, involving parents, all staff and where possible, children.

The *National Childcare Census* (DJELR, 2002:17) cites European Employment Guidelines (2001) which proposed that member states design, implement and promote family friendly policies, including providing quality, affordable and accessible childcare services to support women’s and men’s participation in the labour market.

### 2.5 National developments in response to international influences and increased demand for quality childcare

From an earlier position of minimal involvement in early years services, the Irish government responded to the growing interest in childcare, during the early 1990s, by introducing new legislation and issuing a number of key reports. The area of ECCE was addressed in
legislation with the passing of the Child Care Act (1991) which is the main legislation governing the care and protection of children.

With the rapid expansion in the ECCE sector the Government produced a number of key reports since 1998, which brought ECCE into the mainstream of policy making. A number of reports highlight the importance of parent involvement and staff training in the development of policies and services in relation to ECCE. Reports and initiatives include:


- **National Childcare Strategy Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare (1999)** established key objectives to meet the crisis in the supply and demand for childcare services and began the implementation of a seven-year strategy. Aspects of this Strategy have been implemented mainly through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP), particularly the work on quality and childcare supply and the establishment of the County Childcare Committees (National Economic and Social Forum, 2005) (NESF). The significance of this strategy in relation to this study is its recognition that the development of quality childcare services depend on the active involvement and the development of co-operative and collaborative relationships between all those involved, including children, parents and service providers, among others. Also relevant to this study is the emphasis placed on the calibre, skills and continuing professional development of EYPs as constituting a quality service.

- **Ready to Learn, White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999)** was mainly informed by the report of the National Forum for Early Childhood Education (1998). The White Paper (1999) which is central to current policy developments focused on children from three to six years and provided a framework to support and develop the educational needs of preschool children, particularly disadvantaged children or those with special needs. The White Paper
proposed changes in early years services such as, improvements in quality and the introduction of a Quality in Education (QE) mark. The significance of the White Paper in relation to this study is its emphasis on the need to support and stimulate the involvement of parents in the educational process, highlighting the importance of partnership between parents and teachers, citing the Home-School Liaison Scheme. It also proposed that a programme of staff training and development be devised, with input from parents, early childhood education providers and other partners in education.

- Our Children Their Lives: National Children’s Strategy (2000) set out a ten-year programme aimed at improving the quality of children’s lives. The National Children’s Office, established in 2001 to implement the National Children’s Strategy is responsible for the preparation of Ireland’s national reports on the implementation of the UNCRC. The publication of the National Children’s Strategy and the establishment of the National Children’s Office were measures undertaken by the government to progress the implementation of the UNCRC within a ten-year frame. The National Children’s Strategy provided for the appointment of the First Ombudsman for Children in 2004, whose role is to promote the rights and welfare of children with a specific function of promoting the UNCRC.

- Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning, Model Framework for Training, Education and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (DJELR, 2002) is of particular significance to this study. This document identified issues related to staff that affect quality including: initial and on-going training, qualifications, experience, professional development, and the recognition and promotion of leadership and vision, while also stressing the importance of practitioners keeping up-to-date. This framework sets out occupational profiles and descriptors ranging from basic, intermediate, experienced and advanced, to expert practitioners at the highest level, including the core skills required at each level. Establishing and maintaining appropriate relationships with parents was included as a key task in each of the occupational profiles while the recognition of experiential learning was considered an important aspect. The framework envisages improved status for the sector resulting from the creation of occupational profiles and core skills, professionalisation of the

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4 This document will be known as the Model Framework (2002)
role, via appropriate education, training, a structured career path and accreditation of prior learning, thus attracting and retaining high-calibre staff.

- ‘Towards a Framework for Early Learning’ (2004) was launched by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). This was the first consultative document focusing specifically on learning throughout early childhood from birth to six years. Particularly relevant to this study is the emphasis on the importance and influential role of parents as children’s primary educators while also highlighting how effective communication between parents and practitioners enhances children’s learning. The document also stresses the importance of parent involvement and staff training.

- The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 led to the establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI). The remit of the NQAI is to establish and maintain a framework of qualifications for the development, recognition and award of qualifications, based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence acquired by learners (NQAI, 2006).

- Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland Report (2004) was published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It was envisaged that this Report would inform national policy and programme development in the sector, including the involvement of parents (UNCRC, 2005).

- The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was established to implement the recommendations of the White Paper (DES, 1999), to develop quality standards for the ECCE sector and was responsible for the overall co-ordination and development of early childhood education. The CECDE was also responsible for undertaking and/or commissioning research which was undertaken in many areas including parent involvement. The CECDE conducted an audit of research on ECCE 1990-2003 and updated in 2007. Parent involvement was a category audited and parents and families was one of the largest categories within the Second Edition of the Audit (Walsh & Cassidy, 2007). The CECDE developed and published Siolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2007) which outlines the principles of ensuring a quality experience,
while highlighting the importance of valuing and supporting the role of parents. (The CECDE closed in 2008).

- In January 2006, the *National Childcare Investment Programme* (NCIP) (2006-2010), under the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC), replaced the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (2000-2006) and provided €575 million over the lifetime of the programme. The NCIP aimed to implement a new childcare training strategy with the provision of accredited training courses for 17,000 EYPs by 2010. Investing in these programmes could be seen as a government response to what was perceived by parents and providers as a crisis in childcare.

- The first *National Childcare Census* (DJELR, 2002) was undertaken by the State in 1999-2000, and information gathered informed the development of national and local childcare plans over the course of the National Development Plan (O’Donoghue, 2002). The census reported that partnership with parents was strong in terms of supplying parents with information, encouraging their participation in outings and parent open days. It also reported a wide diversity in the type and level of qualifications held by EYPs.

- While childcare services had largely been unregulated, childcare was brought into the public arena by the implementation of the Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations (1996) and quality is now regulated through the Child Care (Preschool Services) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (2006). The Regulations set out minimum standards for services and provide arrangements for the notification and inspection of childcare facilities. The Regulations stipulate that parents should be provided with information regarding the Regulations and on the service provided. Regulation 8 advises that there should be a sufficient number of suitable and competent adults working directly with children in services, recommending that centres should aim to have at least 50% of staff with a qualification appropriate to the care and development of children. However, the level or type of qualification was not stipulated. In practice, O’Kane (2005) reported some improvements in the quality of preschools that may relate directly to the implementation of the 1996 Regulations.

- Many community and voluntary organisations involved in the sector have been strengthened through government and EU funding. For many years these organisations have been providing for the training needs of their members. The Irish Preschool Play Association developed a
‘Quality Improvement Programme’ supporting services and has become a FETAC (formerly National Council for Vocational Awards) approved centre, offering training for childcare-related FETAC Major and Minor Awards. The National Children’s Nurseries Association (NCNA), High/Scope Ireland and Childminding Ireland have also been supported. Barnardos, a charitable organisation established to help vulnerable children, have supported quality through training and the development of resources for best practice in ECCE. They have also cooperated with FÁS to produce a model of training and self-assessment. There has also been a growth in graduate courses for example, the Dublin Institute of Technology.

2.6 Government investment in ECCE

The National Childcare Census (DJELR, 2002:41) reported that nationally 15,809 children, from birth to six years, attended full-day facilities. In addition, the Quarterly National Household Survey (First Quarter, 2005) reported that 82,600 families, or 40.3% of all families with preschool children, regularly relied on non-parental childcare arrangements during normal working hours (CSO, 2006:1).

Measures recommended by the government to develop childcare as a sustainable sector included: the provision of grants; tax relief for employers and individuals; funding at local level; childcare subsidies; improvements to Family Income Supplement (FIS)\(^1\) and increased ceilings for lone parent payments (DJELR, 1999). Ireland’s Second Report to the UNCRC (2005) highlighted how the Government had removed benefit-in-kind taxation for free or subsidised childcare provided by employers in order to address supply and cost difficulties. In addition, Canavan (2000) confirmed that a 100% Capital Allowance on the construction costs of childcare facilities had been introduced. However, despite these policies and initiatives, there is still no explicit, overall policy incorporating ECCE or the implementation of plans regarding the delivery of services (French, 2005).

Ireland rates low in relation to its investment in ECCE and in its commitment to implement policy to improve our international position (NESF, 2005). The NESF Report highlights that the Irish government invests 0.2% of its national income GDP in ECCE compared to an

\(^1\) Family Income Supplement (FIS) is a weekly tax-free payment for families, including one-parent families, at work on low pay.
OECD average of 0.4%. A cost benefit analysis of providing a universal preschool service against the long-term benefits would result in a return of €4.60 to €7.10 for every Euro invested (NESF, 2005: X111). The cost to parents as a proportion of earnings are among the highest in the EU with an average of 20% of their earnings spent on childcare compared to 8% in other European countries (NESF, 2005:38). Recent figures published by the European Commission confirm that a typical Irish family with both parents working and two children under the age of three spend 29.2% of their net income on childcare costs (Smyth, 2008).

2.7 Qualifications and training of early years practitioners in Ireland

In Ireland, training to work in childcare is largely unregulated. Training developed in an ad hoc basis and there is a wide diversity in the type and level of qualifications with substantial numbers of EYPs having no formal qualifications (OECD, 2004). With increased emphasis on quality, the formal qualifications and training of staff were raised as issues needing consideration.

Nationally, in a sample of over 5000 EYPs one-third were found to have the equivalent of FETAC\(^6\) level 5 qualifications (DJELR, 2002). The National Childcare Census reported that 1.5% of staff employed in early years services held an NCEA degree; 15.3% had NCEA qualifications, 3.6% at level 1, and 11.8% at level 2 (equivalent to FETAC levels 4 and 5 respectively) and 23.1% held no formal qualifications (DJELR, 2002:61,67). The census also reported that a sizeable number of staff had undergone some form of training or development during the year prior to the census being undertaken. The most frequently mentioned courses were First Aid (19.4%) and Health and Safety (10.1%) while courses concerned with management issues were least frequently mentioned (DJELR, 2002). Training to involve parents was not specifically mentioned in the list of courses undertaken by staff. The OECD (2004) considered that low levels of training, remuneration and staff retention were significant problems, and suggested that the regulatory framework in place appeared weak in comparison to other countries, as it did not include sufficient incentives to train, employ qualified staff, or continually improve expertise. However, O’Kane (2005) reported that training levels had increased while a survey of the educational attainment of the workforce, commissioned in

\(^6\) Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) is the national awarding body for further education and training.
2007/2008 found that 41% of staff had attained a FETAC Level 5 qualification in childcare and only 12% had no formal childcare qualifications (DES, 2009).

The National Childcare Strategy (DJELR, 1999) proposed the development of a national framework of qualifications (NFQ) covering formal and informal training programmes with accreditation for prior learning. It was suggested that the NQAI give consideration to the particular training needs of the ECCE sector, using the Model Framework (DJELR, 2002) as a basis for this work. The occupational profiles presented in the Model Framework were reviewed by the NQAI and the CECDE to determine if these profiles were still relevant, matching them with appropriate awards levels in the NFQ. The Basic Practitioner, as described in the Model Framework (2002) was linked to Level 4 in the NFQ, the Intermediate Practitioner was equated to level 5, the Experienced Practitioner to level 6, the advanced Practitioner to level 7/8 while the Expert Practitioner was related to Level 8/9 (DES, 2009).

The National Childcare Census (DJELR, 2002) describes the average salaries of staff employed in childcare facilities as ‘poor’ highlighting that the tradition of low salary levels acts as a disincentive to those interested in working in the area. The NESF (2005) stress that high levels of staff turnover are a frequent feature of practice, resulting from unfavourable terms of employment linked to issues of training and qualifications and the low status of childcare. However, low status may result in EYPs lacking an incentive to acquire or improve their formal qualifications, to participate in training programmes or to involve parents in the lives of their children.

2.8 Summary

In this chapter, the influence of time and context were demonstrated in a number of ways. Firstly, economic growth and prosperity resulted in a change from a majority of mothers working full-time within the home to a position where approximately half of all mothers of young children are now employed in the labour market.

Secondly, from a position where childcare was viewed as the private responsibility of the family, the state having minimal involvement, attitudes changed as legislators, employer representatives (IBEC) and Unions (ICTU) realised the crucial role childcare could play in
facilitating the involvement of both parents in the labour market. Resulting from the international emphasis on quality and on the necessity to involve parents, the formal qualifications and training of staff were raised as issues needing consideration. However, many practitioners lacked or had minimal qualifications and also lacked training to involve parents. The government responded to a crisis situation in the demand for childcare and to the lack of training and formal qualifications of EYPs by publishing legislation, introducing key reports and implementing the NCIP (2006-2010) with the aspiration to provide training courses for 17,000 EYPs by 2010. Since 2010 the state is providing free preschool for all children in the year prior to their entry into national school. These measures were introduced not only to comply with the UNCRC and EU directives, but also to facilitate the employment of mothers of young children and to improve the quality of children’s experiences.

Thirdly, the influence of time and context were demonstrated in relation to the involvement of parents in their children’s education. Formerly, parents were virtually excluded from schools but presently, their right to involvement in their children’s education and care are highlighted in policy documents and in legislation. International research stressed the benefits of quality childcare. Parent involvement was identified as an indicator of quality and the current aspiration is to have parents involved in a partnership relationship with educators at all levels of the education system. This study aims to examine EYPs’ understandings and practices of parent involvement and to explore their attitudes towards a wide range of issues related to the involvement of parents in their children’s early years services.

Chapter three reviews the literature on parent involvement in their children’s education and care.
3.1 Introduction

Researchers, policy makers and practitioners highlight the importance of parent involvement in their children’s education, particularly the benefits that accrue when parents and EYPs work together in the interest of children. This chapter examines the research literature on key issues relating to the involvement of parents in their children’s early years services. A broad range of research is included in this review to reflect the fact that most research is focused on parent involvement in the school system despite the numbers of children participating in early years services (Rous et al., 2003).

There is a general consensus that parent involvement is beneficial, however, involvement is not clearly defined or described in the literature. In addition, while terms such as parent involvement and partnership are used interchangeably there are major differences between these terms and the first section of this review explores these differences. This is followed by a brief overview of the history of parents and staff working together. Models, philosophies and theoretical perspectives on parent involvement are then discussed. The issue of quality is also included to reflect the current emphasis on the quality of children’s experiences in out-of-home group care. Benefits and disadvantages of parent involvement are also highlighted.

Factors that help or hinder parent involvement are explored. Factors relate to the policies of the service, the skills, attitudes, confidence, experience and status of staff, educational differences between parents and staff and the expectations of parents. Strategies to encourage parent involvement are explored. Leadership skills and communication strategies and practices are also investigated. To put this study in context, an international perspective on parent involvement is included in this review. To conclude, issues are raised regarding the limitations of previous parent involvement research.

3.2 Concepts of parent involvement/partnership

The terms parent involvement and partnership are widely used in ECCE and despite increasing emphasis on the topic and on the necessity of staff involving parents, a consensus has not been reached as to what involvement constitutes (Elliott, 2003; Martin, 2003). Confusion exists regarding activities, goals and desired outcomes from various involvement practices (Baker & Soden, 1998). For example, research has not specified which type of involvement benefits children’s learning (Bridge, 2001). In addition, terms
such as partnership, collaboration, participation, engagement and involvement are used interchangeably, but the distinction between these terms impinges on the roles parents and staff adopt (Keyes, 2000; Harris & Goodall, 2007). Moreover, while the term parent involvement is used, there is an expectation that mothers should be the involved parent, and mothers are always expected to be available for child-related duties (Crozier & Reay, 2005).

Definitions of parent involvement vary. Yeates et al. (1990) describe involvement as any connection between parents and EYPs while Rennie (1996) believes involvement requires the actual day-to-day participation by parents in the life and work of the service. Parent engagement is described as ‘all opportunities available to parents to contribute their voices in various ways to the services providing care and education for their under-school aged children’ (Elliott, 2003:14). However, while ‘parent engagement may take different forms and operate on different levels. Not all parents can or want to be involved in the same way’ (OECD, 2001:124). In addition, effective parent engagement does not mean that parents should substitute for professionals or professional services (OECD, 2001).

Currently, policy makers and researchers advocate partnership relationships between parents and staff at all levels of the education system. The goal of partnership is to create relationships between families and early years services in which each partner recognizes the strengths, needs and uniqueness of the other (Rous et al., 2003). Partnerships are described as ‘relationships among equals, with mutually agreed upon explicit goals, clearly negotiated roles, and decision-making authority equitably distributed among participants’ (Mendoza et al., 2003:70). Partnership is ‘a matter of attitude and spirit based on respect and communication’ (Stonehouse, 1995:187) with true partnerships depending on the quality of the relationships and the perceived benefits to all concerned (Wall, 2003). Partnerships develop when involvement is an everyday occurrence; mutual respect is established; parents and staff are on first-name terms and are used to working and planning together (Rennie, 1996). Genuine collaboration results when families receive the support they need to make informed decisions which involves: consulting parents; initiating two-way communication; determining their needs and expectations and encouraging their involvement by advising them of the opportunities and benefits from their involvement (Erwin & Rainforth, 1996).

Characteristics of partnership include: mutual respect; trust; sensitivity to the perspective
of the other; ongoing open both-ways communication; common goals that are clear and agreed on; teamwork; absence of rivalry or competition; equality, fairly equal distribution of power; recognition and valuing the unique contribution and strengths of the partner; and shared decision-making (Stonehouse, 1995). Parents ‘as partners’ are: active and central in decision-making and its implementation; have equal strengths and equivalent expertise; contribute to as well as receive services and share responsibility, so that they with professionals are mutually accountable (Wolfendale, 1992).

However, ‘partnership both in theory and in practice is a complex and elusive concept’ requiring ‘a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and a willingness to negotiate’, which implies sharing information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989:68). Dale (1996) states:

*The possibilities or constraints of partnership relationships cannot necessarily be understood without an analysis of the personalities involved, an analysis of their roles and their power positioning, and an analysis of the wider systems, structures and policies: such as family network, community or ethnic group membership, social and political policy, and organisational structure*  
(Dale, 1996:17)

Lindon (1997) maintains that because partnership is such a common part of policy statements or written material, it is easy to forget that an active attempt to work with parents was not always part of professional practice. Partnership reflects a move away from the historical view of parents as passive, to a model based on the assumption that parents and practitioners have equally valuable knowledge and equivalent expertise (Dale, 1996; Whalley, 1997) and can pool their strengths and resources to benefit children, parents and practitioners (Keyes, 2000; Mandoza et al., 2003; Rodd, 2006).

The view of parents as partners is to some extent still an ideal as some authors believe that parents’ participation in early years services does not reflect partnership (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989; Laloumi-Vidali, 1997; Moriarty, 2000; Foot et al., 2002). Educators and parents have been slow in promoting partnership and co-operation (Ojala & Opper, 1995). While increased participation enhances partnership between parents and staff, partnership must first be based on a shared understanding of what the roles and responsibilities of parents should be (Foot et al., 2002). Parents and professionals need clarification about the meanings and expectations of parent involvement, as it is not always clear how and to
what extent parents should be involved (Rous et al., 2003). Hirst (1996) asserts that if educators accept that parents' attitudes and involvement greatly influence their child's achievements, what educators mean by parent involvement needs to be considered.

However, many staff have a narrow definition of involvement which includes ways to involve parents in special activities or circumstances (Logsdon, 1998). Parents are viewed as helpers, rather than equal active partners (Whalley, 1997) and despite a range of possibilities, staff working in ECCE in many countries find it difficult to move beyond the marginal engagement of parents (OECD, 2001). In Ireland, while parent involvement in management of community services is common, many services struggle with the idea and practice of parent involvement and a partnership approach (Murphy, 2001; Martin, 2003; OECD, 2004).

Authors highlight confusion regarding the term partnership. Pugh & De'Ath (1989) state:

> 'Are we talking about parents as learners or teachers? Are they buying a service or being asked to finance and run it? Are they consumers, clients or managers? Are they sharing the care of their child with a professional, or being instructed in the fundamentals of child-rearing? Are they being ‘empowered’ to take control of services, or simply being asked to fill a gap in inadequate state provision?'

(Pugh & De'Ath, 1989:21-22)

Dale (1996:12-17) asserts that the term is 'vague and potentially misleading unless defined more specifically'. Mendoza et al. (2003:70) believe the term assumes parents and staff have similar goals; it tends to be defined by the more powerful party with parents often believing practitioners have considerable power over them, while they have little influence over a programme or its staff. Logsdon (1998) maintains that in order to create effective partnerships a broader definition is needed that includes not only what parents can do for their children and practitioners in preschool but also what EYPs can do for parents, children and families in their school, home and work environments.

Partnership may be unlikely for a variety of reasons. Parents may not know how to become involved (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Martin, 2003); they may feel intimidated or unsure if they are not familiar with organisational structures (INTO, 1997); or may worry about taking on responsibilities for which they feel untrained or unprepared (Foot et al., 2000). Logsdon (1998) asserts that when practitioners accept that parents must be rather than should be involved, motivation for creating effective partnerships will
be realised.

In addition, not all professionals know how, or are willing to work in partnership with parents because ‘working with parents in new ways is principally about changing attitudes, perceptions and styles of service’ (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989:45). Partnership requires practitioners to address their assumptions about parents, professionalism and working together, particularly when they are in positions of power (Lindon, 1997). Viewing parents as a resource rather than a responsibility is a prerequisite to partnership, as opposed to involvement, while helping parents understand their children and the parenting role in ways that benefit both, demonstrates a move towards a holistic approach to professional practice (Rodd, 2006).

The importance of on-going sharing of information between parents and practitioners about individual children in the development of partnership relationships has been highlighted. Stonehouse (1995) believes that parents make a major contribution by sharing their knowledge of their child emphasizing that when professionals seek and value parents’ knowledge and perspectives, parents are empowered and feel legitimate partners. However, partnership is more than information sharing. ‘The way parents and practitioners hear and interpret each others’ beliefs is crucial in the development of partnership, as partnership requires shared interpretations and decision-making’ (Karila, 2006:22). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project reported that in settings where outcomes for children were excellent, a special relationship in terms of shared educational aims had been developed with parents, and ‘child-related information was shared between parents and staff, and parents were often involved in decision making about their child’s learning programme’ (Taggart, 2007:6). While the extent of parent involvement in decision-making may reflect staff attitudes about parents ability to make decisions (McBride, 1999), staff may not know how to make joint decisions with parents (Erwin & Rainforth, 1996). However, those who include parents in decision-making have taken ‘a political step towards initiating innovative change in the early childhood field’ (Rodd, 1998:164).

Given the range of definitions of parent involvement/partnership described above and the fact that research confirms that many services struggle with the idea and practise of a partnership approach this present study will focus on parent involvement, defined as any connection between parents and EYPs concerning children.
3.3 History of parent involvement

Traditionally, parents were virtually excluded from schools. This is evidenced by a sign that was commonplace: ‘NO PARENTS BEYOND THIS POINT’ - a white line in the playground that parents were not expected to cross (Rennie, 1996). Parents were viewed as clients, ‘deficient’, and dependent on the opinions of experts, who made all decisions (Wolfendale, 1992).

Since the 1960’s the importance of involving parents in their children’s education has been documented in the literature. Interest in involving parents emerged from two main sources. Firstly, the Head Start programme from the United States, a government sponsored early intervention programme for young socially disadvantaged children and their families was particularly influential. This research highlighted the benefits of quality early years services and concluded that children’s potential was strongly influenced by their environment, and that the benefits from activities undertaken with children lasted longer when their parents were involved (Schweinhart et al. 2005). Methods and practices’ from ‘Head Start’ research, such as community and parent-focused action, have been influential in the overall debate about parent involvement (Wolfendale, 1992). Further research and development programmes have identified benefits not alone for children, but for parents, EYPs and society resulting from parent involvement in their children’s education. The second major influence was the preschool playgroup movement, a parent co-operative that was innovative during the 1960s. Parents played a major role in the organisation and running of these playgroups. In Italy, the Reggio Emilia system of education, that has become recognised and acclaimed, grew out of a parent cooperative movement resulting in open recognition of the relationship between parents, educators and children (Malaguzzi, 1993).

During the 1970s, the notion of the ‘transplant relationship’ emerged, with professionals seeing the benefits of sharing their skills and expertise with parents, helping them become more competent, confident and skilled (Dale, 1996). There was a growing realism among professionals that more progress was likely if parents could understand the process and continue any special work with children at home (Lindon, 1997). However, Edwards & Knight (1994) assert that attempts at encouraging parent involvement during the 1970’s, may have been related to the perception of deficits in the home environment based on assumptions of the superiority of middle-class attitudes and values. Many teachers resisted
the involvement of parents because they believed parents lacked skills and would interfere with their work, as professionals. Teachers discouraging parents from reading with their children at home demonstrates the attitude of some teachers who believed parents lacked skills (Lindon, 1997). Parent’s sole role was their legal obligation to send their children to school.

The INTO (1997) reported that while many teachers supported the concept of parent involvement others avoided contact with parents because they felt threatened by their involvement. This attitude may be evident by the INTO assertion that parent involvement in the work of the classroom should at all times be at the discretion of the principal and the classroom teacher. The INTO (1997) believe parents may have been excluded because many schools operated without formal structures or clearly defined policies on parent involvement or because many teachers received their pre-service education when there was little awareness of the importance of partnership between home and school. Until the late 1970’s, little was heard about the rights of parents, as consumers, to involvement in their children’s education in schools (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989). Presently, in Ireland, a very strong National Parents’ Council represents the views of parents.

During the 1980’s, the concept of partnership came to the fore and was widely discussed in education. Wall (2003) highlights the lasting impact of home-school partnerships established at that time which resulted in positive initiatives, such as parental support groups, use of parental skills and increased attendance at parents’ evenings and open events. In Ireland, the home/school/community liaison scheme was established in 1990 to promote co-operation between the home, the school and relevant community services. The development of positive attitudes towards the involvement of parents may reflect growing awareness of parents’ right to involvement in their children’s education, a right enshrined in the Irish Constitution. The Education Act (1998) refers to children of 6 years and over while the UNCRC (1989) highlights parents’ right to support in child-rearing. However, while the UNCRC obliges staff to promote parent involvement, in a study of early childhood education, Hirst (1996) found that few teachers were aware of the Convention.

3.4 Theoretical perspectives on parent involvement

Of major influence in this study is Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory. This theory presents a socio-cultural view of development, stressing that children’s
development is best understood, not in isolation, but within the context in which it occurs - their family, educational setting, community and society. This theory highlights interconnectedness both within and between settings, resulting in all environments affecting children's development having similar goals. Stonehouse (1995:181) stresses the importance of a move away from the 'notions of sacred early childhood practice and the rightness of practice no matter the context, the culture, or the child'. In practice, a link was established between practitioner-parent communication and higher quality practitioner-child interactions in services as Owen, Ware & Barfoot (2000:414) state: 'positive developmental outcomes are hypothesized where linkages between children’s experiential settings are supportive and characterized by two-way communication between the family and the alternate care providers'.

Using a set of concentric circles, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model illustrates how issues not directly related to children can significantly affect their development. The innermost circle, the 'microsystem', contains the developing child and concerns their relations with important people in their lives, parents and teachers. The next level, the 'mesosystem', comprises connections between immediate environments, for example a child’s home and school.

The third level, the 'exosystem', refers to settings where children do not actually participate but affect children indirectly, such as, parent's workplace. The 'macrosystem' refers to laws, cultural ideologies, customs and values that may affect the child. Later a fifth system, the 'chronosystem' was added, highlighting the influence of time on development that affects the lives of families, such as changes in legislation or how childcare is viewed in society.

An ecological perspective stresses that children’s development is best understood within the context in which it occurs. A social system perspective (Getzels, 1978) highlights the role of the institution, particularly in the kind of parent involvement promoted, while stressing that social relationships can be enacted at an individual or at an institutional level (Epstein, 1995). The social system provides the framework for interactions as it ‘highlights the dynamic and complex nature of parent-teacher partnership and the importance of considering the interplay among all the elements’ and their impact on each other (Keyes, 2002:187).

Adapting Bronfenbrenner’s model Keyes (2002:113) demonstrates the ecology of both the teacher and the parent, highlighting the skill required ‘to bridge the differences that exist’ between them. The staff-parent relationship occurs by assignment rather than choice, their common interest is the child, while staff and parents each bring their life experience to a social system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The social system highlights the institution with its roles and expectations, individual personalities and dispositions and teachers’ and parents’ construction of their role, sense of efficacy, expectations, personal attributes and communication skills (Keyes, 2002). Behaviour is the result of ‘the interplay between the role and expectations and the personalities of the individuals involved’ (Keyes, 2002:186).

In this model, Keyes (2002) also includes Katz’s (1984) role dimensions, which describes differences between parenting and teaching. According to Katz the teacher’s role is specific and limited in function; has low intensity of affect; optimum detachment, rationality and intentionality; impartial; with teachers responsible for the whole group of children. In contrast, the parent’s role is diffuse and limitless in function; there is high intensity of affect; optimum attachment, irrationality, and spontaneity; partial; with parents responsible for individual children. Katz (1984) suggests that while the behaviour of teachers and parents may overlap on each of the seven dimensions, the distinctions described are relevant. Epstein’s six major aspects of parent involvement parenting: volunteering, decision-making, learning at home, collaborating with community and communication (Epstein, 2002) are also included in Keyes’s model. However, Keyes highlights ‘communication’ above all other aspects, particularly first meetings with parents and teachers’ invitations and the crucial role they play in influencing how parent-teacher partnerships develop. (Epstein’s 2002 aspects of parent involvement are discussed further in section 3.5). Using this perspective the family cannot be viewed as separate from the community, or children and families cannot ‘be considered apart from the policies and institutions of the larger society that either enhance or restrain the families’ ability to function’ (Galinsky & Weissbourd, 1992:49). Erwin & Rainforth (1996) assert that one of the greatest challenges facing professionals in early childcare and education is the need to
create meaningful connections among individuals as well as systems.

Keyes’s (2002) model uses two frameworks, the ecological systems perspective and the social systems perspective to highlight difficulties that may be encountered when building and bridging partnership relationship between parents and teachers. This model not only highlights the ecology of the teacher and the ecology of the parent it also highlights the role of the institution, the parent and teachers’ perception of their role and their individual personality dispositions that may affect partnership relationships. Katz’s (1984) model was used to allow comparison be made between the parent and teacher roles. As Keyes (2002:186) states ‘real individuals occupy roles and each individual stamps a role with a unique style’. While Keyes includes Epstein’s (2002) major aspects of parent involvement she highlights the importance of communication above all other aspects which she believes leads to initial parent-teacher partnerships as well as promoting the other aspects of Epstein’s typology. Keyes (2002) hopes that teachers will use this model as a way of thinking about their approach to parent-teacher partnerships, helping them reflect on interactions that have already taken place, while also suggesting that the model provides distance so that teachers can view events not only from their own perspective but also from the perspective of others.

3.5 Models and practices of parent involvement

Pugh & De’Ath (1987) devised a conceptual framework to illustrate different ways parents could relate to and interact with EYPs and pre-school services over time. They suggest the framework should not be seen as a linear progression, as parents may be involved at different levels at the same time or their involvement may change depending on their own or the centre’s circumstances. This framework highlights five levels of involvement: non-participation, support, participation, partnership, and parents in control.

- ‘Non-participation’ is described under two headings: ‘active non-participation’, where a parent decides not to participate, for example, because of work commitments; and ‘passive non-participation’, where a parent might like to be involved but other issues prevent this, for example, lack of confidence.
- Parents may provide ‘support’, by fundraising, providing materials for the centre, attending social events or by endorsing the centre’s philosophy.
- ‘Participation’ they describe as parents involved in or contributing to the centre,
usually under the supervision of staff. Parents may participate as helpers, such as, running a toy library, or as learners, learning about child development.

- Four dimensions of ‘partnership’ are described:
  - Partnership between individual parents and professionals, for example, as co-educators; parents having equal access to information and records; or sharing in decision-making, assessment and planning for their child.
  - Partnership between parents in general and a particular scheme, for example, parents involved in planning and management; sharing in forming aims and objectives.
  - Partnership between individual parents as workers and a particular centre, for example, parents visiting homes or running groups.
  - Partnership between parents and policy makers in the community, for example, parents participating on a Preschool Playgroups Association regional committee.

- Finally, parents ‘in control’ is characterized by relationships where parents determine and implement decisions; select and manage staff; manage resources and budgets; determine the aims and objectives of the centre; and are ultimately responsible and accountable.

(Pugh & De’Ath, 1987).

With a background in the disability sector Dale (1996:12-15) describes three models of partnership, the Consumer Model, the Empowerment Model, and the Negotiating Model but she asserts that these models may be hypothetical in that they propose a relatively new form of relationship between parents and professionals.

The Consumer Model, developed by Cunningham & Davis (1985) and cited by Dale (1996), was one of the first conceptual frameworks for partnership. According to this model parents were given new rights as consumers, to take up or opt out of services and for the first time they were credited as having expertise that was distinct from the professionals. This model assumed that parents could represent their own or their child’s needs but Dale (1996) considered this unlikely if service provision is limited.

The Empowerment Model, proposed by Appleton and Minchom (1991) and cited by Dale (1996) combined the right of parents, as consumers, to choose to engage with services at a level that suited them. To implement this model, professionals needed to consider the different strengths and needs of individual families, the kind of help parents needed to
enable them become partners, whilst actively promoting a parent’s sense of control over
decisions affecting their child. However, parents may also have needed additional powers,
such as increased legal rights, to alter the imbalance of power and control that existed
(Dale, 1996).

The basis for the Negotiating Model was that parents and professionals had separate and
valuable contributions to make and while each may have required the contribution of the
other, their different positions in society may have led to multiple perspectives of the same
situation. This model addressed how different viewpoints could be reconciled to allow
joint activity and decision-making while acknowledging that disagreements may have been
a major factor in parent-professional relationships. However, Dale (1996: 15) asserts that
negotiation can lead to ‘a shared understanding and consensus or a lack of a shared
understanding and dissent’, while also stressing that dissent is not necessarily incompatible
with a partnership relationship.

In an overview of parental involvement in early years services in thirty member countries
the OECD (2001) confirmed that while there were policies regarding parent involvement
in all countries, types of engagement varied. They summarised the types of involvement.
‘Marginal engagement’ is when policy regarding parent involvement is considered
unimportant and official regulations are observed only minimally. In addition, no great
effort is made by early childhood services to engage in regular dialogue with parents.

‘Formal engagement’ is undertaken to comply with official directives or regulations and
may take the form of regular staff-parent meetings or home visits from teachers. This
facilitates a two-way process as parents can be informed of their child’s progress and about
the goals and the objectives of the programme while providing parents with an opportunity
to inform staff about particular strengths and needs of their children. Formal engagement
may take the form of regular consultations with parent organisations, as is the case in
Portugal and the Netherlands or it may include mechanisms to provide regular information
to parents on available ECCE options and supporting them in their role as consumers
(OECD, 2001).

‘Informal, organized engagement’ is frequent, varied and planned, and generally occurs
when children are being left or collected from services. At these times parents are
welcomed and time is provided for them to play with their children and to talk with staff.
In addition, teachers inform parents about their child’s experiences and listen to parents’ expectations and concerns. It is also considered that these informal opportunities to communicate with parents are important, particularly, as many working parents have little time to attend formal meetings (OECD, 2001). Policies supporting informal, organised engagement aim to foster strong parent-child-staff relationships particularly during transition times from home to ECCE and from ECCE to primary school.

‘Participatory engagement’ occurs when a wide a range of parents are regularly invited to contribute to the life of the setting, to participate in activities, to assist directly with young children or lead activities in which they excel. Participatory engagement may be formalised, as in Finland, where written care and development agreements are made in joint consultation between the ECCE staff and parents, individual plans or growth portfolios for children are drawn up and questionnaires and informal daily talks are used to seek feedback from parents regarding their experience of the centre and their children’s development and learning.

‘Managerial engagement’ describes parents engagement in the programme focus, operation, employment and budgetary decisions related to the setting with parents expected to spend several weeks per year actively engaged in a range of activities (OECD, 2001). In Norway every centre must have a parents’ council and a co-ordinating committee of parents, staff and owners to act as an advisory body. In the Netherlands a parent body is required to ensure parents have a voice in policies while in the US, federal legislation for Head Start mandates the right of parents to participate in programme decisions.

The different ways parents are involved in their children’s education have been extensively researched and several classifications have been developed. For example, in the United States, the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) proposed a framework of six types of involvement practices, both school and home-based, to create successful partnerships between parents, schools and communities (Epstein et al., 2002):

- Parenting: assisting families with parenting and childrearing skills
- Communicating: communicating with families about school programmes and student progress and providing regular schedules of notices, memos, phone calls and newsletters
Volunteering: improving recruitment, training, activities, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations

Learning at home: providing information to families about how to help students at home

Decision-making: including families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils, committees, and parent organizations

Collaborating with the community: coordinating work, resources and services for families, students and the school with community groups.

Epstein’s framework highlights ‘overlapping spheres of influence’ when looking at home-school relationships and incorporates a wide span of involvement activities that cover children’s early childhood to their completion of secondary education.

Edwards & Knight (1994) devised a model of involvement activities that may occur at school, in a nursery, in homes or at other sites outside the main educational setting. These activities demonstrate progression both in the levels and types of involvement activities, and in the relationship between parents and staff, from ‘parent as client’ to ‘parent as partner’. However, involving parents in these ways not only depends on the growing skills and confidence of some parents but it may also depend on the ‘willingness of teachers to blur the boundaries between the work of teachers and parents’ (Edwards & Knight, 1994:118). (See Figure No. 3.1 on next page)
Figure 3:1 Continuum of parent involvement practices (Edwards & Knight, 1994)
Models and practices of parent involvement were highlighted in this section. Pugh & De’Ath’s (1987) framework was used to illustrate different ways parents could relate to and interact with EYPs and preschool services over time. Five levels of involvement were highlighted: non-participation, support, participation, partnership, and parents in control. Epstein’s (2002) classifications were used to illustrate a wide span of involvement activities to create successful partnerships between parents, schools and communities. These activities were both school and home-based and covered children’s early childhood education to their completion of secondary school. Edwards & Knight’s (1994) model demonstrated involvement activities that may occur at school, in a nursery, in homes or outside the main educational setting. These activities demonstrate progression both in the levels and types of involvement activities, and in the relationship between parents and staff, from ‘parent as client’ to ‘parent as partner’.

Dales’ (1996) consumer, empowerment and negotiating models of partnership were also described. According to the consumer model parents were given new rights as consumers and were credited as having expertise that was distinct from the professionals. The empowerment model combined the rights of parents, as consumers, to choose to engage with services at a level that suited them. The negotiating model highlighted that parents and professionals had separate and valuable contributions to make and addressed how different viewpoints could be reconciled.

In practice, the OECD’s (2001) report confirmed that while there were policies regarding parents involvement in all member countries, types of engagement varied. They described engagement as: marginal, formal, informal organised, participatory and managerial.

3.6 Best practice guidelines and curricula in promoting parent involvement

Many philosophies for partnership are evident in the literature. The National Association for the Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC) principles and ideals for partnership states:

'Candidates know about, understand, and value the importance and complex characteristics of children’s families and communities. They use this understanding to create respectful, reciprocal relationships that support and empower families and to involve all families in their children’s development and learning'
The Australian Code of Ethics (1990) suggests EYPs should:

'Strive to develop positive relationships with families which are based on mutual trust and open communication; engage in shared decision-making with families; and encourage families to share their knowledge of their child with me and share my general knowledge of children with them so that there is mutual growth and understanding in ways which benefit the child'.

Another philosophy for partnership is HighScope, an American intervention programme, developed during the 1960's, based on Piaget's theory of child development. This programme encourages partnership both in preschool and at home highlighting that teachers and families are partners in positively influencing young children's development (Schweinhart et al., 2005).

The Italian city of Reggio Emilia, has received international professional recognition for its partnership philosophy, involving parents, practitioners and the community. This system evolved from a parent cooperative movement. Fleer (2003) suggests that new ways of thinking about early childhood centres resulted from perspectives from Reggio Emilia. Active parent participation is an essential component of the Reggio educational approach and is enshrined in The Rights of Parents Charter (Malaguzzi, 1993). The Charter states:

'It is the right of parents to participate actively and with voluntary adherence to the basic principles, in the growth, care and development of their children who are entrusted to the public institution'

(Malaguzzi, 1993:2)

One of the four foundation principles of Te Whariki, Family and Community – Whānau Tangata, published by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (1996) state that the wider world of family and community is a vital part of the early childhood curriculum. This principle states that the well-being of children is interdependent with the well-being and culture of: adults in the early childhood education setting; families; and local communities.

The Harvard Family Research Project (1997) (HFRP) highlights how policymakers, practitioners and researchers can advance the practice of family involvement and strengthen
the linkages among early childhood programmes, schools, community-based organisations and families by investing in projects that increase family involvement processes, supporting early childhood programmes in the community and advancing best practices for family involvement in early childhood education (Weiss et al., 2006).

3.7 Parent involvement: an indicator of quality in early years services

Nationally and internationally, researchers, practitioners and policymakers are increasingly focusing on the issue of quality in early years services. High quality ECCE is crucial to children’s development (Sylva et al., 2003), producing short and long-term social and cognitive benefits (NAEYC, 2000; Schweinhart et al. 2005). The focus on quality may be linked to the fact that children are spending increasingly more time in out-of-home group care (OECD, 2006), to the development of an early years’ profession (Urban, 2004) or to increasing state investment in early years services. Dahlberg et al. (1999:87-89) state: ‘the age of quality is upon us’ with the focus on quality related ‘to the modernist search for order and certainty grounded in objectivity and quantification’. Practices in ECCE have become established traditions, with a Western view of childhood being valued (Fleer, 2003) reflecting Dahlberg et al.’s (1999) assertion that quality is a socially constructed concept with particular meanings, which may be seen as a complex process rather than a set of outcomes.

International organizations highlight the importance of quality. The World Organization for Early Childhood Education – known as OMEP, and the Association for Childhood Education International (1998) recommend partnership with families and communities among their guiding principles. The NAEYC (1997) include professional expertise, ongoing training and adequate compensation, continuity for children and parent/family involvement in their children’s education as part of their principles. The OECD (2001) maintain that in the early childhood field, quality assurance and evaluation increasingly engages the participation and responsibility of a wide range of stakeholders, including parents, staff and (sometimes) children. The philosophy of the EU is that responsibility for childcare should be shared between women and men and between parents, employers and society (DJELR, 2002).
Improving quality is a high priority because poor quality services are likely to have detrimental effects on young children, such as difficulties with language, social development and behaviour (Mitchell, 2004). Hayes confirms that high quality childcare that is ‘affordable, accessible and stable has a beneficial social and psychological impact on young children’ (Hayes, 2002:65). However, strong supports for early childhood programmes, professionals and families are also needed (NAEYC, 1999).

Quality can be measured on a variety of dimensions but it is necessary to look at all levels of the system together, ‘practice; management and leadership; curriculum; legislation and professional development’ (Urban, 2004:41). Definitions of quality vary but most focus on structural aspects, such as, staff-child ratios, staff training, while process or dynamic variables are mainly related to interactions between children and adults, partnership with parents and social opportunities offered (OECD, 2001).

Nationally and internationally, parent involvement is considered an indicator of quality (Henry, 1996; Rennie, 1996; NAEYC, 1997; Powell, 1998; Pugh, 2003; CECDE, 2007) with partnership between staff and parents ‘considered a high priority and an essential element toward rebuilding educational institutions as more open and democratic settings’ (OECD, 2001:119). Partnership is at the core of a quality service because the family is the most significant influence on a child’s development, providing continuity and bringing rewards and benefits (Stonehouse, 1995). In their early childhood environment rating scale (ECERS-R), Harms, Clifford & Cryer (2005) include parent involvement and staff training and development among their ratings of a quality service.

Inherent in the goals of quality services is the development of a shared parent and staff approach to the development and evaluation of the educational curriculum (Elliott, 2004; Taggart, 2007). When staff encourage partnership with parents they essentially relinquish some control over the curriculum (Bridge 2001), but a wider curriculum is offered when the skills of teachers and parents are utilised (McMillan, 2000). In Finland, the curriculum is responsive to the needs of local communities and is considered likely to share the values of the families it supports (Moriarty, 2000). Parental satisfaction is often viewed as a measure of quality in early years services (OECD, 2001) and parents’ satisfaction is likely to feed
back into the community (Foot et al., 2000). In addition, informed parents are likely to become advocates for the centre and for quality care (Stonehouse, 1995; Rodd, 2006). Adopting an holistic approach to meeting the needs of children and families, results in best practice (Pugh, 1998).

A significant indicator of quality is the ECCE workforce particularly, well-qualified practitioners (Sylva et al., 2003; Mitchell, 2004; Oberhumeur, 2004; OECD, 2006) and a positive relationship has been identified between the qualification levels of staff and ratings of centre quality (Saracho & Spodek, 2007). Through education, teachers become more positive towards working with parents (Moriarty, 2000; Wilkins & Walker, 2002; Ginsberg & Hermann-Ginsberg, 2005) while less well-qualified staff exhibit better practices when they have qualified teachers supporting them (Taggart, 2007). However, research has yet to clarify if involvement is a cause of, or a consequence of, high quality (Shpancer et al., 1997).

3.7.1 Quality in early years services – the Irish context

In Ireland, the issue of quality has been the focus of much recent discussion and the government as well as voluntary organisations have implemented a number of initiatives and policies. Many authors highlight parent involvement as a key indicator of quality programmes. Coolahan (1998) asserts that a criterion of good quality programmes is the extent and quality of parent involvement while Siolta (CECDE, 2007) highlights that quality ECCE must value and support the role of parents. French (2003) regards partnership as an integral part of good practice while Murphy (2001) points out that meaningful involvement is an essential part of a high quality service. Greene (2007) asserts that ‘quality’ should be re-analysed from what must or should happen, to what might or could happen.

Quality is regulated through the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations (2006) while Siolta (CECDE, 2007) is considered to have the potential to inform policy and practice relating to quality at a national level. In a study of progress made to implement recommendations in recent reports and policy documents the NESF (2005) point out that the quality of childcare could have long-term implications for society if it impacts on children’s emotional and cognitive development. The Report also established a link between well-trained and supported staff and the quality of service delivered. According to Hayes the best
quality non-parental care is found when it is:

'Child-centred, supported and regulated by government agencies in the context of a cohesive and comprehensive approach to childcare policy which is integrated with family policies’

(Hayes, 2002:71)

3.7.2 Quality in public and private early years services

Children’s experiences in childcare may be affected by the type of service they attend. In the U.S., children in private centres experience more instability in the classroom, including teacher turnover, while children in public centres experience more frequent meaningful interactions from teachers and higher levels of measurable quality variables, such as, teacher-child ratios, teacher qualifications and class sizes (Whitebrook et al., 1990; Clawson, 1997). In New Zealand, 42% of staff in community services had a teaching qualification compared to 35% in private services, with private services also having the highest number of staff with no early childhood qualification (Mitchell et al., 2002:2). In order to cut costs, private centres in Canada, United States and New Zealand were more likely to offer staff poorer working conditions and salaries than public centres, while community services were more likely to look for savings in areas that keep staff and conditions intact (Mitchell, 2002). In Ireland, the National Childcare Census (DJELR, 2002:62) reported that staff employed in community services were paid higher salaries than those employed in private services.

In addition, when comparing public and private services, Mitchell et al. (2002) found that parents tended to be less involved in private services. In Ireland, the National Childcare Census (DJELR, 2002:83) reported that 58.3% of community run, compared to 8.3% of privately run facilities, had parents participate in the running of the group. These findings may indicate that many parents, using private services, did not see the usefulness of partnership with staff (Martin, 2003) but parents using private services are likely to work full-time and may have limited time for active participation. However, while not all parents are free to be physically involved in settings, a partnership relationship is still possible (Logsdon, 1998; Powell, 1998; Bridge 2001) as the frequency or time spent on activities may matter less than the quality of staff-parent relationships (OECD, 2001).
3.8 Benefits of parent involvement

Parents are acknowledged as the first and primary educators of their children and current research supports the belief that in order to do the best for children, their parents need to be involved in their education and care (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Epstein, 1995; Stonehouse, 1995; OECD, 2001; Whalley, 2001; Foot et al., 2002). Good staff-parent relationships in early years services benefit children, staff and parents (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001) and research has demonstrated the very positive effects that result when parents and teachers work together in the interest of children (Whalley, 2001).

When children participate in early years services, parents and educators share responsibility for their education and socialization (Foot et al., 2002) and for creating working relationships that promote children’s learning (Katz, 2000; Epstein, 2001). However, parents and EYPs know children in different contexts, their home or early years service (Katz, 2000) so parent involvement is most beneficial when it links these two contexts, providing continuity for children (Owen, Ware & Barfoot, 2000; Keyes, 2000; Bridge, 2001; Weiss et al., 2006).

3.8.1 Benefits of parent involvement for children

When staff and parents work together, children are motivated and achieve more, they are happier, their experiences and self-esteem are enriched and they have a more positive self-image (Whalley 1997); programmes cater to individual children’s needs, strengths and interests (Ojala & Opper, 1995; Dowling, 2000); programmes are more effective and the quality of care provided is strengthened (OECD, 2001) and there are more positive socialization processes (Owen, Ware & Barfoot, 2000). Children also benefit when the skills and expertise of parents are used to enhance existing skills (Powell, 1998; Wall, 2003).

Children gain educational, intellectual and developmental benefits when educational aims are shared (Shartrand et al., 1997; Katz, 2000; OECD, 2001; Rodd, 2006; Taggart, 2007). The importance of parents engaging in activities with children at home has also been highlighted (Sylva et al., 2003) while a supportive home learning environment, with parents having direct and regular contact with schools results in children having high levels of social skills and greater academic motivation (McWayne & Owsianik, 2004).
Parent involvement also eases children’s transition from their home to the early years service. Positive transitions for children are facilitated in a number of countries including Sweden and in the Pen Green Centre in England, where a two-week period is allocated when parents spend time with their children. In Italy, labour laws as well as regional and local policies mandate parental leave during transition from home to ECCE. This provides security for children when separating from parents (Hyder et al., 1997) and enables the growth of parent/staff relationships (OECD, 2001; Tait, 2001). Many authors, (Stonehouse, 1995; Erwin & Rainforth, 1996; Shartrand et al., 1997; Logsdon, 1998; Foot et al., 2000) believe it is crucial that parents are accepted and valued and that their views are considered. Rennie (1996:201) asserts that as the evidence about how children benefit from parent involvement is irrefutable, ‘it is now possible to claim that teachers and workers who do not involve parents are acting unprofessionally’.

3.8.2 Benefits of parent involvement for parents

The numerous benefits parents gain from their involvement in their children’s education have been highlighted in the literature. Parents who are supported, respected and informed during the early years of their child’s education are likely to be stronger parents (Dowling 2000). Through their involvement parents felt acknowledged and valued (Graham, 1997; Logsdon, 1998). Parents reported that involvement boosted their own skills, brought them support, friendship, enjoyment, a better understanding of their own child and a sense of achievement (Whalley, 1997). Parents gained greater knowledge of school programmes and familiarity with school experiences (Shartrand et al., 1997; Foot et al., 2002). Improved aspirations and relationships with their children, alleviation of maternal stress, improved education or training credentials and employment status have also been reported (Wylie, 1994 cited in OECD, 2001) while teachers with insight into parents’ goals can help parents reach their goals (Pelletier, 2002). In addition, parents anxiety about leaving their children may be relieved: when staff empower and involve parents (Bridge, 2001); by positive, friendly and respectful relationships (Marsh 1997) and by effective communication (Elliott, 2004).

3.8.3 Benefits of parent involvement for staff

Establishing partnerships with parents is a vital part of the job of EYPs, and rewarding when
successful (Stonehouse, 1995). Working in partnership adds a new dimension to staff’s work, widening their views on families and family life (Draper & Duffy, 2001) resulting in more positive expectations (Whalley, 1997). Staff sharing their knowledge of children in general with parents, results in mutual growth and understanding (Hyder et al., 1997) while mothers sharing information acknowledges staff skills and appreciation for their role (Owen, Ware & Barfoot, 2000). In addition, parents and staff sharing responsibility results in increased staff motivation, with staff gaining the support of parents when they explain their goals to them and when parents understand the complex nature of their job (NAEYC, 1999; OECD, 2001; Wall, 2003; Sylva et al., 2003).

3.8.4 Benefits of parent involvement for society

There is evidence to suggest that society also benefits from the involvement of parents in their children’s education. Coolahan (1998) asserts that parent involvement is a matter of vital importance to the well-being of society while Dunst et al. (1994) suggest that a family-centred approach supports families in raising their children, which ultimately benefits society. Hayes (2002) asserts that high quality childcare has a direct positive, economic impact on society while Schweinhart et al. (2005:3) documents a return to the public exchequer of $16.14 per dollar invested in early years education over the participants’ lifetimes. In Ireland, the Department of Health and Children published a Report of the National Task Force on Suicide (1998) highlighting the importance of education, among other factors, in the prevention of suicide. The Report stressed the importance of the availability of preschool educational groups, particularly in urban areas involving both children and parents.

However, the benefits of parent involvement to children, to society and for business have been questioned. Having reviewed the literature, Hughes & MacNaughton (2000) suggest that parents are encouraged to become involved in their children’s early education because their involvement is regarded as beneficial to national development and to business. They cite research which they suggest alleges that parent involvement benefits national development by improving children’s educational outcomes especially literacy, resulting in a more literate and productive workforce, benefiting business. They conclude that the benefits of parent involvement must be redefined and instead of boosting the national economy ‘the
benefit would be a boost to local democracy by informed citizens who create local, collective knowledge about what is in children’s best interests’ (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000:256).

### 3.9 Disadvantages of parent involvement

While the participation of parents in early years services is generally regarded by professionals and parents to be positive for children, disadvantages have also been identified in the literature. Children’s behaviour changing has been identified as a potential disadvantage of parent involvement, particularly when parents are present in the services (Bridge, 2001; Murphy, 2001; Foot et al., 2002). For example, when parents were present, children engaged in less frequent and less complex interactions with other children and they expressed more negative emotions (Smith & Howes, 1994). A further disadvantage of parent involvement in centre-based activities is that parents may be too focused on their own children to the detriment of other children or cliques of parents who are already involved may exclude other parents (Hyder et al., 1997).

In addition, while involving parents on boards of directors or in volunteer or advisory capacities may be aimed to make settings less institutional, Ferguson (2002) stresses that when parent fees are one of the primary sources of the centre’s income, it may not be advantageous for staff to have parents establishing staff wage rates and parent fees. This may indicate that parents would keep staff wages to a minimum in order to reduce parents’ fees.

### 3.10 The role of early years practitioners in parent involvement

The most fundamental role of an early childhood service is to provide care and education for young children while many EYPs were trained to work with young children they are now required to work with their parents also (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989; Arnold, 2001; Karila, 2006). However, it cannot be assumed that training in child development will translate to an ability to collaborate or communicate with parents and this may result in teachers lacking the knowledge necessary to invite or sustain involvement (OECD, 2001). One key shift in their role requires EYPs to become facilitators, sharing their skills with parents, but roles must be clarified so that both practitioners and parents know what to expect of each other. Urban (2004) asserts that because pedagogical situations are less predictable and more complex than
ever, dealing with uncertainty is the most challenging professional task facing practitioners. In addition, many staff believe schools should cater for children rather than families (Shartrand et al., 1997). Consequently, parents may perceive they are intentionally excluded or their efforts are not appreciated (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1997). However, ‘attitudes, for new skills and strategies will bear little fruit unless professionals really want to develop a partnership with parents’ (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989:59).

How staff interact with parents depends on how they view their role, whether it is parent-focused, school-focused and/or partnership-focused (Garcia, 2000). Research confirms that practitioners who consistently encourage parent involvement are ‘inviting a partnership-focused role orientation’ (Reed et al., 2000:10). While parents’ and teachers’ roles are distinctive and complementary to each other (Katz, 2000), there is a need to develop an attitude where these roles are recognized and respected to benefit children (Nutbrown, 1996). Research highlights that when parents’ and teachers’ beliefs regarding education matched, relationships thrived (Crozier, 1997) and this became an important factor of influence in early educational practice (Hayes, 2004). However, different expectations of teachers and parents may affect the parent-teacher partnership as each may place different emphasis on issues that they believe important (Shartrand et al., 1997; Keyes, 2000). Failure to create good relationships tends to blame the practitioners or the parents rather than recognizing their different views and attitudes about their respective roles (Laloumi-Vidali, 1997), and too little emphasis is placed on parents’ and professional’s capacity to enrich one another’s roles by meeting each other’s needs for information and support (Henry, 1996).

The literature highlights the role of EYPs in communicating with parents suggesting that EYPs are mainly responsible for developing and sustaining ongoing collaborative relationships with parents (Shpancer et al., 2002; Billman et al., 2005). Staff are not only responsible for asking parents what they want to know in order to remove barriers to their involvement (Elliott, 2004) they are also responsible for adapting communications to meet the diverse needs of parents (Keyes, 2002). However, while practitioners initiated and led conversations, parents played a supplementary and conforming role, because in some conversations their interpretations and viewpoints were totally ignored (Karila, 2006).
Some research reports that parents are highly satisfied with their relationship with teachers (NAEYC, 2005) and with the amount of information they received regarding their children's activities and development (Foot et al., 2002). However, research also highlights gaps in parents knowledge about developmentally important aspects of their child’s daycare resulting from ‘imperfect information’ which may prevent parents demanding the aspects of high quality childcare they believe important (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997). The literature highlights that 8.1% of parents did not know the name of their child’s primary caregiver suggesting that daycare centres must accept part of the responsibility for their failure to devise and implement parent education and information exchange procedures (Shpancer et al., 2002:639). Improved communication between staff and parents could alleviate these gaps in information (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000).

The National Education Association (2005) highlights the importance of identifying parents’ needs at the start of children’s education and care. This relates to the fact that the younger the child the more parents want to be involved, with involvement more beneficial the earlier it takes place in the child’s education. Furthermore, from the beginning, parents develop an attitude towards the preschool and as a result will transfer their attitude into relationships with practitioners (Laloumi-Vidali, 1997). Establishing parents’ needs facilitates the creation of constructive partnerships while also ensuring staff do not impose their own preconceptions of parents’ needs (Foot et al., 2002; Mitchell, 2003).

Research shows how parents’ needs differed. In an Australian study, parents wanted information evenings to help them understand their children while new parents wanted reassurance and guidance from staff (Elliott, 2003). A parent in Elliott’s study states:

‘A lot of kids live at day care. My daughter is there more often than she is at home. She comes home and has dinner then goes to bed. I need to know what she is learning in her other home, at day care where she is awake and learning’ (Elliott, 2003:7)

In a Scottish study, while parents were satisfied with the information they received about their children’s activities and development they were unhappy with the lack of opportunities offered for their involvement, particularly their participation in daily activities and administration (Foot et al., 2002). In a Greek study, parents had positive attitudes towards the
development of effective communication, contact and involvement in the education process with EYPs (Laloumi-Vidali, 1997) but in an Australian study, parents were dissatisfied, because they felt services informed them rather than communicated with them; did not share the type of information they needed, causing discontinuity between children’s experiences in services and their homes (Elliott, 2004). This confirms that parents are not a homogeneous group, they have different needs and different starting points (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989; Whalley, 1997) so promoting a single notion of the ideal parent or model of parent-staff partnership should be avoided (Stonehouse, 1995).

Many authors highlight the role of EYPs in supporting parents to rear their children (Oberhuemer & Ulich, 1997; Moriarty, 2000; Murphy, 2001; Foot et al., 2002; Karila, 2006; CECDE, 2007). Parents need support for a variety of reasons. They may lack traditional support networks (Yeates et al., 1990) or are full-time working parents (Olson & Hyson, 2005). However, there is little research to demonstrate ways to increase working parents’ involvement (Bridge, 2001) and because mothers now constitute a significant portion of the workforce, involvement activities need to reflect their needs and availability (McWayne & Owsianik, 2004).

Pugh & De’Ath (1989) state that support and supervision for staff are important determinants of how well the work with parents develops, highlighting the role the manager plays in organising staff meetings and individual supervision for staff. More up-to-date research highlights that staff need support, with time, training and supervision (Rodd, 2006) and in the area of family relationships (Olson & Hyson, 2003). In a study (McMillan, 2000), staff expected parents to support them and this included parents active participation in centre-based activities.

3.11 Qualifications, training and experience of staff

Nationally and internationally, formal qualifications, training and experience are considered critical in the delivery of quality early years services. Practitioners and educators believe that parent involvement is important and there is a consensus regarding the need for training to implement parent involvement programmes (Murphy, 2001). Lack of skills, training or
commitment to work with parents, are barriers to parent involvement in their child’s education (McMillan, 2000; Wilks, 2000) but international research highlights that teachers can be taught the knowledge and skills necessary to involve parents (Moriarty, 2000; Buchinal et al., 2002; Wilkins & Walker, 2002; Harris, Jacobson & Hemmer, 2004; Ginsberg & Hermann-Ginsberg, 2005). Lynn (1997) states:

‘At the heart of any successful parent-involvement programme are teachers who are not only committed to building family and school relationships, but who also have the skills and knowledge to do it well’

(Lynn, 1997:1)

Training is important not only because young children have a right to high quality education from adults trained to degree level (Hirst, 1996) but also because holding a Bachelors level degree and specialized early childhood training, affects teachers behaviour and the quality of the programme provided (Burchinal et al., 2002; Saracho & Spokek, 2007). Writing about the British context, Cameron et al., (2002:572) state: ‘at a time of major expansion in childcare services the workforce becomes a major issue’. In the United States there have been calls for new policies regarding the educational requirements for those who teach young children (Ackerman, 2005). The HFRP (1997) propose a number of recommendations to help teacher education programmes develop a stronger emphasis on parent involvement including the coordination of information; establishing how trained teachers are applying what they have learnt about family involvement; professional organisations making family involvement a priority and practitioner training.

To work effectively with parents, practitioners require knowledge, skills and qualities ranging from a basic understanding of the benefits of and barriers to involvement to more specialized skills related to enhancing parent participation in governance roles (Shartrand et al., 1997). They also need skills in relating to, learning about, and appreciating the perspectives of families (McMillan, 2000). However, the OECD (2001) report that few staff training courses focus on strategies to work with parents and family members, despite the fact that these are an important part of programme goals in most countries. Whalley (2002) asserts that because few opportunities exist to develop these skills students may perceive that parent involvement is peripheral to their main task, and they may have difficulty recognising parents’ competences or their commitment to their children’s learning. Time has been cited
as the greatest barrier to conducting training (Brown et al., 2002) but if opportunities are not provided for teachers to become adept at sharing information with parents, competencies will not be developed and benefits from the partnership will not be realised (Karila, 2006).

Crozier & Raey (2005) assert that because there is little or no training in developing home-school links or communicating with parents, pre and in-service training are urgently needed to address this deficiency. Shartrand et al. (1997) suggest that making changes at the pre-service level could provide the collaboration skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to increase parent involvement, while emphasising that in-service training would increase the likelihood that skills learned in working with parents would be employed on a widespread basis. The NAEYC (2001) emphasise the developmental nature of professional growth stressing that opportunities must be ongoing to expand what has been learned at pre-service level. This enables teachers adapt and maintain their skills (Shartrand et al., 1997). Mitchell (2003) reported that teachers highlighted their need for more professional development time or a continuance of professional development related to relationships with parents. However, staff with the lowest levels of initial training, tend to have least opportunities to participate in in-service training and professional development (OECD, 2001).

In relation to schools, Garcia (2004) states that unless teacher education programmes acknowledge that building effective home-school partnerships is integral to preparing educators, teachers will continue to view parent involvement as an elusive goal and not as a viable reality. Referring to primary teachers, Shartrand et al. (1997) believe education programmes should offer field experiences, confirming that less than a quarter of courses give students an opportunity to work directly with parents. However, field experiences are also important for EYPs because they enable students translate knowledge into deep understanding and professional skills (NAEYC, 2001).

Research confirms that while staff qualifications are vital, staff attributes may be more important than formal qualifications (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989). In addition, Wolfendale (1992) points out that while teachers are key facilitators, equal competence among all teachers cannot be taken for granted in the sensitive area of human interaction. Goodfellow (2003) asserts that holding a qualification assumes the capacity to act as a professional but this does
not acknowledge the person, or what they contribute to a situation.

Parents’ concern about educational progression increases as children approach primary school (Foot et al., 2002). Katz (1995) found that older children were educated by more highly qualified experienced teachers which may suggest that teacher qualifications are associated with children’s age. This may indicate that caregivers for younger children are seen as ‘babysitters’ who provide care that ‘anyone can do’ (Cameron et al., 2002:12). Working with older children carries greater financial reward, respect and acknowledgement (Whitebook & Sakai, 2003). However, if parents’ wishes for high quality education for their youngest children are to be achieved, educators need to be trained and qualified, and their qualifications should have the same credibility as those who work with older children (Nutbrown, 1996). More up-to-date research highlights the consequences of inequality of training and qualifications:

‘Frequently public school teachers ignore the information they obtain from the child’s preschool teachers. They may dismiss the preschool or child care teachers’ reports, because their qualifications to teach young children are beneath theirs. They assume that the preschool or child care teachers’ documents are inappropriate and insignificant. They will look down upon the child care and preschool teachers’

(Saracho & Spodek, 2003:177).

Having a unified system of education for preschool and national teachers, as is the case in Sweden, where students are educated together before choosing to specialize, may help overcome the problem, but parity of esteem in qualifications and pay, need to be considered as fewer candidates are choosing the preschool option (OECD, 2006). In Ireland, take up of optional modules in ECCE is low (NESF, 2005) and there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that increasingly early childhood education graduates are leaving the early years sector and undertaking post-graduate training in primary education. The OECD state that:

‘The formalising and mainstreaming of training, the clear articulation of professional roles and career paths as well as increasing demand for high quality childcare services are all contributing to the professionalisation of the childcare sector, in centre-based provision. This will improve the external perception of and self-esteem among childcare staff’

(OECD, 2002:46)
Experience plays a major role in parent involvement and research confirms that practitioners became more positive towards involving parents through experience of working with them. Ginsberg & Hermann-Ginsberg (2005) report that experienced teachers had more positive attitudes about working with parents, were more resolute in their approaches and had more strategies to interact positively with parents. Research also reports that where practitioners had previously excluded parents, once they began to involve them, the experience was liberating and uplifting and their enhanced role was much more rewarding Rennie (1996; Sumssion, 1999).

However, many childcare staff may lack experience. A study in Britain, found that three-quarters of early years staff were under the age of 30 (Cameron et al., 2002:577). Lack of experience causes staff to be anxious about meetings with parents (Katz et al., 1996) and to be less effective in engaging families (Tait, 2001). However, McMillan (2000), in her study of early childhood staff in Northern Ireland, found that recently trained staff mainly adopted an expert approach.

Katz (1995) stresses that the type of relationship developed with parents and the level of parent involvement may relate to the stage of professional development practitioners have reached, as a strong career commitment, a shift in maturity and a broader perspective are necessary to work collaboratively with parents. Vander Ven (1988) asserts that practitioners with a wide array of professional knowledge and skills only emerge over time, as a function of experience and ongoing development as adults, while also stressing the importance of the early childhood sector recognising stages of professionalism among its practitioners.

3.12 Role of communication in parent involvement

International research highlights that communication is the most important component of parent involvement and plays a major role in developing and maintaining effective partnerships with parents (Logsdon, 1998; Elliott, 2004). Good staff-parent communication also contributes significantly to the success of early childhood programmes (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001) enabling links to be established between children’s two main contexts — their home and early years service (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Stonehouse, 1995). Establishing links between these contexts recognises an ecological perspective, which
acknowledges that children’s development is affected by relations both within and between settings, for example, parents and practitioners working together for the benefit of children.

The purpose of communication is to develop relationships with parents, to get to know their parenting style, their habits and behaviours (Cameron et al., 1999). Communication is considered essential to sharing information, negotiating relationships, solving problems and resolving conflicts (Erwin & Rainforth, 1996). Furthermore, communication which promotes interactions and meaningful engagements enables parents to actively engage in their children’s education (Elliott, 2003). Parents are now recognized as a key source of information and an important educational resource, and a significant change has occurred in the relationship between the home and school, and the role of parents in relation to teachers (Caddell, 1996). Adopting a family-centred model results not only in ‘teacher-as-imparter-of-knowledge’, but acknowledges that teachers learn from parents also (Galinsky & Weissbourd, 1992:51), as each point of view enlightens the other (Keyes, 2000).

In a study in Australia, parents believed communication was important to enable them to actively engage with services and their children’s education (Elliott, 2003) and in a number of studies, parents rated communication as the most common area in which relationships might be improved (Foot et al., 2000; Martin, 2003; Elliott, 2004; McMillan, 2005). Parents need opportunities to interact with practitioners because partnerships require ‘mutual, continuous and committed interaction in all matters concerning the child’ (Karila, 2006:10).

It is also important to view parents as allies in collecting information about children’s development and learning (Arnold, 2001) rather than adversaries (Rodd, 2006). Research confirms that parents’ feeling of satisfaction with pre-school services revolves around their contact and communication with staff (Foot et al., 2000; OECD, 2001). Parents prefer cooperative, respectful communication resulting in them talking openly to teachers and approaching them positively (NAEYC, 2005) with open communication resulting in understanding which breeds trust (Stonehouse, 1995).

Communication occurs through formal and/or informal methods: verbal, written or electronic. Many authors highlight the importance of informal, verbal communication, particularly face-to-face conversations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Logsdon, 1998; McMillan,
and also the value parents attach to face-to-face communication with staff (Foot et al., 2000; OECD, 2001). Face-to-face conversations allow staff to negotiate shared meanings and understandings with parents about their child (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001); may help engage and empower parents who are relatively inarticulate and unaccustomed to the protocol of meetings (OECD, 2001); keep parents up to date through the exchange of information and help parents and practitioners feel comfortable in their interaction with each other (Caddell, 1996) or facilitate the creation of partnership relationships (Hiura, 1996). However, conversations did not always enhance partnerships because in one study, while parents and practitioners exchanged information no attempt was made to compare or discuss differences between children's two contexts, to promote their development or build a new image of the child (Karila, 2006).

The benefits of formal methods of communication have been highlighted in the literature. According to Schonfeld (2004), documentation facilitates the process of parent engagement in ECCE settings, building linkages between the home and the service and between parents and practitioners. In a Japanese study, the notebook was found to be the most frequent written method of communication and was of significant value in individual communication between parents and practitioners (Hiura, 1996). In Reggio Emilia, in Italy, pedagogical documentation is utilised as a tool for quality improvement.

Implementing partnership requires information and formal meetings (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2002) and while the frequency of contact through formal meetings appeared to have a small effect on parents' general level of satisfaction (OECD, 2001), separate meetings and conversations between parents and staff ensure attention is given to each child's development and education (Karila, 2006). Furthermore, Hughes & MacNaughton (2000) cite research by Endsley et al. (1993) highlighting that managers, who encourage formal involvement activities tend to have preschool staff who engage in higher quality informal conversations with parents at transition times.

However, it is also believed that written communication results in one-way transfer of information (Murphy, 2001). In an Australian study, parents criticized the written information they received suggesting it failed to provide them with important detailed
information about children’s experiences and the educational rationale behind them (Elliott, 2004). For example, parents may not be clear about how children develop pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills through play (Hyder et al., 1997). Moreover, several practitioners suggested the Australian government’s Quality Improvement and Accreditation Scheme’s (QIAS) emphasis on formal and written channels of communication were irrelevant to the practicalities of building meaningful communication with parents (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2002). However, while one-way communication may not represent a partnership relationship it may lead to greater parent-practitioner interaction.

3.12.1 Barriers to interpersonal communication between parents and practitioners

Barriers to interpersonal communication between parents and staff have been highlighted in the literature. For example, staff stressed their need for guidance to resolve problems in their interpersonal communication with parents (Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999). Communication was found to be stressful, complex and caused problems for many staff and parents (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2002; Elliott, 2003). However, research suggests that the attitudes of both staff and parents may prevent the creation of a climate for dialogue (Edwards & Knight, 1994). For example, a top-down, advice-giving approach by practitioners was found to be intrusive and to impede effective parent/staff relationships (NAEYC, 2005). Elliott states:

‘While some interactions result in spontaneous relationships, others take longer and require effort and commitment. This is likely to be the situation in early childhood settings where the service provider/client, professional/lay teacher/parent role presents an automatic dichotomy and a natural barrier to communication. Overcoming that barrier is essential to ensure excellence in quality and excellence in care and education for children in early childhood settings’

Elliott (2004:14-15)

However, staff may be unaware of parents’ dissatisfaction with their communication strategies. In one study, staff rated their communication with parents as good, but parents rated their communication with staff as weak (McMillan, 2000).

Most parent-staff communication occurs at transitions, but this may not always be conducive

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1 The QIAS is a national government supported accreditation system for centre-based care in Australia, tied to the provision of funding (OECD, 2004).
to meaningful exchanges (Mendoza et al., 2003). Parents may be rushing and staff may need to divide their attention between children and parents (Karila, 2006). Two-thirds of transition time opportunities resulted in parent-staff communication, but the median length of conversations was 12 seconds, and in 43% of cases ‘absolutely no communication, not even a greeting occurred between parents and staff’ (Endsley & Minish, 1991:130). However, a sizable minority of parents do not enter the premises when leaving children (Powell, 1989). In addition, parents may not express their opinions for a number of reasons. For example, because of concern that they may upset teachers (Mendoza et al., 2003); because of cultural beliefs related to the authoritative position of the teacher; they may have difficulty talking with teachers as a result of memories of their own schooling; they may be unsure how to express their concerns, while a few parents may fear that questions or criticism will put their child at a disadvantage in school (Katz et al., 1996).

Barriers to communication may also result from government policies. The Australian government’s QIAS, requires staff to seek parents’ knowledge of their child. However, this may result in both staff and parents being unwilling to create parent involvement, as it undermines practitioners’ status as professionals and threatens parents with state intrusion if EYPs deem their child-raising practices to be inadequate, improper or deviant (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000).

3.12.2 Strategies to improve communication between staff and parents

Frequent and open, both-ways communication is considered the foundation for good parent-teacher relationships with teachers and parents sharing responsibility for its creation (Stonehouse, 1995; Katz et al., 1996). A relaxed atmosphere of mutual respect, may lead to the most meaningful conversations (Edwards & Knight, 1994) while ongoing verbal information on the parent’s own child is believed to have a strong positive impact, particularly for working parents (Murphy, 2001; OECD, 2001). Families who receive frequent and positive messages from teachers tend to become more involved in their children’s education than parents who do not receive these messages (NAEYC, 1999). Similarly, Foot et al. (2000) suggest that the more contact parents have with the preschool, the more interest they take in their child’s activities inside and outside preschool. This is particularly true when information is provided about individual children and classroom
content (Caplan et al., 1997). Improvement in communications result when staff are aware of how some of their communication practices affect parents’ ability and willingness to become involved in services their children attend (Mendoza, 2003). In addition, if parent involvement is to be encouraged the messages they received from all adults in the educational setting must be consistent (Edwards & Knight, 1994).

Elliott (2004) has devised a model demonstrating how communications can be improved over time. This communication accretion is based on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and demonstrates how knowledge is expanded ‘through a cyclical process where knowledge accrued is developed and new knowledge is gained, extending the cycle into a spiral that is built up over time’ (Elliott, 2004:6).

Figure 3:2 Model of communication accretion spiral based on Elliott (2004)

This model shows how communication develops from conversations about physiological and safety needs at the most basic level; to conversations about belonging needs at stage 2; communication about esteem needs at stage 3; about the need to know and understand at stage 4, and at stage 5, communication is based on self-actualisation and reciprocal engagement. Elliott suggests that when this model is used, knowledge held by all parties will
be shared and problems associated with much tension in settings can be aired and reduced.

Most communication occurs at the most basic level of this model as parents report communication from staff is more direct when related to health rather than what children are learning. However, the exchange of the most basic information is where relationship between parents and staff begin as this information is then built upon ‘to the point where effective, honest communication results in trusting interactions at a broader and more abstract level between individuals’ (Elliott 2004:6). In addition, conversations about children’s behaviour, their health or their day at the centre, are a means of linking children’s experiences (Karila, 2006), while sensitive, supportive, and stimulating care is based, in part, on knowledge of children’s experiences and needs (Owen, Ware & Barfoot, 2000).

3.13 Factors that affect parent involvement

Working with parents is inevitable when working in early years services but there are a number of factors that may help or hinder this work. These factors demonstrate how aspects of the service and issues related to staff and parents influence parent involvement.

3.13.1 Service Philosophy

The aim of the service, whether it is to complement, supplement or substitute for the care of parents, affects the extent to which partnership is possible (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989). French (2003) suggests that the system operating in the service may not permit liaison with parents. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (1997) maintain that providers may not wish to have their service open to scrutiny; they may lack resources; or there may be inadequate school support for involvement efforts. However, schools that have significant levels of parent involvement are usually those where the entire staff share a commitment to the process (Garcia, 2004).

Centres having a policy on parent involvement are more likely to be working towards partnership with parents (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989). Siolta highlights the importance of ‘clearly stated, accessible and implemented processes, policies and procedures’ (CECDE, 2007:2). Byrne (2002) includes the importance of having written policies and procedures in place that are communicated to all staff and parents. However, there is some research evidence to show that while some services had written policies, it did little to create a spirit of working together
While involvement in management promotes parent leadership and empowerment (OECD, 2001), Pugh & De’Ath (1989) consider management a time consuming and complex responsibility for parents. In addition, Foot et al. (2000) suggest that difficulties could arise for parents who manage a service while their children attend the same service.

Pugh & De’Ath (1989) identified the necessity for funding to promote and support parent involvement while also highlighting that adequate staff, equipment, premises, resources and space were needed - space was needed for parents to socialise with other parents. However, while having space for parents did not affect partnership (Martin, 2003), lack of ‘space’ was identified as a barrier to parent involvement, because parents voiced concern about having to discuss their child in public spaces (Hiura, 1996; McMillan, 2000; MacNaughton, 2004).

3.13.2 Time Constraints

Partnership requires commitment by parents and professionals and the allocation of time and resources to implement it (Murphy, 2001). Pugh & De’Ath (1989:50) highlight the importance of time ‘to change the attitudes and expectations of parents and professionals, and begin to work towards more open relationships’. Lack of time is considered an obstacle to building relationships (Rodd 2006); and to parent involvement (Hiura, 1996). However, while parents considered staff’s lack of time hindered partnership, staff did not consider time constraints an issue in partnership (Martin, 2003). MacNaughton (2004:7) states:

‘There must be increased staff time for work with parents, a redesign of physical spaces to enable this work to grow, and active professional support ... Without these changes staff will remain living with guilt, stress and work intensification’

Modern family pressures may prevent most parents from being physically present in their children’s early years services and from involvement in their learning (Bridge, 2001) but many programmes assume parents are free, willing and able to take on various roles (Pugh & De’Ath 1989; Dale, 1996). Parent’s employment is considered a major barrier to their involvement (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000; OECD, 2001), however, low levels of direct school contact and parents who experienced barriers to involvement, such as family stresses and work responsibilities, are related to children’s ‘externalizing and internalizing problem
behaviours in school’ (McWayne & Owsianik, 2004:2). Staff may assume that lack of involvement indicates disinterest (Keyes, 2000) but research confirms parents’ interest in their children (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989; Wolfendale, 1992; Tait, 2001; Foot et al., 2002; Vincent & Martin, 2005). In addition, despite limited availability, full-time working parents welcome opportunities to get involved (NAEYC, 2005).

3.13.3 Strategies to involve parents:
Families are important for children’s learning, development and success (Garcia, 2004) but staff need to consider how they encourage parents (Elliott, 2003) as parents may not know how to become involved (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Martin, 2003). In addition, what deterred some parents from being involved was the perceived level of staff encouragement (Foot et al., 2002). However, staff and parents had different perceptions of encouragement as staff in private nurseries reported high levels of enthusiasm for parents participation but parents believed staff offered them no encouragement (ibid.).

A variety of strategies are needed to help parents feel connected to the programme (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989; Stonehouse, 1995; Murphy, 2001). ‘Staff need to continuously strive to engage parents in ways appropriate to their needs, strengths, interests and availability’ (OECD, 2001:124) allowing parents decide on the type and level of involvement that suits them (Rodd, 2006). Inviting parents to visit services before children start is important as initial contact sets the stage for future involvement and subsequent relationships (Laloumi-Vidali, 1997; Keyes, 2000) while teacher invitations influence parents’ decisions to become involved (Katz et al., 1996; NAEYC, 1999; Reed et al., 2000; Arnold, 2001; Keyes, 2002). Staff also need to continuously review involvement activities with parents (Billman et al., 2005) whilst ensuring that parents have sufficient information to make a meaningful contribution (Wilks, 2000). There is evidence to show that parents would like teachers to ask about their experiences with their child and what is important to them as parents (NAEYC, 2005), and when staff use this information to develop activities, parent involvement is encouraged (Shartrand et al., 1997). ‘Disestablishing the boundaries and rules that keep parents in a prescribed place’ also encourages involvement (Mitchell, 2003:6).

Depending on children’s age, EYPs can play a major role in encouraging parents to support
learning at home (Caplan et. al., 1997); by providing materials and ideas for activities (Weiss et al., 2006) or sharing their learning goals for children (Pelletier, 2002). In addition, as children approach school-going age responsibility for learning, such as, reading in the home, may be the family involvement process that is most important for children’s outcomes (Weiss et al., 2006). Research highlights that practitioners who wish to promote parent involvement should act as facilitators rather than experts, recommending activities to help parents promote their children’s learning (Erwin & Rainforth, 1996; Shartrand et al., 1997). This results in parents having positive reactions to the school and to the teacher (Powell, 1998) but while parents may be involved in a range of activities, if they are not directly connected to learning, they have little impact on pupil achievement (Mapp, 2004; Harris & Goodall, 2007).

While teachers may not always encourage parent involvement, parents do not always participate even when they are encouraged (Shartrand et al., 1997). However, Foot et al. (2002) found that parents’ willingness to participate was not matched by the opportunities available to them. They suggest that if parents are not participating as much as they would wish, the partnership relationship needs to be redefined to redress this imbalance (ibid.). Bridge (2001) demonstrated how the concept of parent involvement in preschool became merged with the concept of preschool involvement in the home, as activities initiated in the home were implemented in the service. However, Foot et al., (2002) reported that few parents introduced new activities from home to the preschool unless it was a specific resource or skill, such as a parent’s musical talent.

3.13.4 Staff and parents’ attitudes

Staff’s positive attitudes towards parent involvement are important to encourage parents (Shartrand et al., 1997; Murphy 2001) as individual attitudes and values influence the quality of relationships more than anything else (Goodfellow, 2003). According to Wolfendale (1992) there is a continuum of teachers’ attitudes, from hostility towards parents working in schools, to a commitment to initiating and sustaining joint work, where parents are perceived as partners. Research highlights this continuum. For some practitioners, partnership with parents is an essential part of their job (Stonehouse, 1995) but for others it may be threatening, so individuals need to examine their beliefs, views and feelings about the
involvement of parents (Dale, 1996; Nutbrown, 1996). In a Greek study, Laloumi-Vidali (1997) concluded that practitioners’ views about the concept of partnership were related to their own views, beliefs and experience rather than available information. However, ‘the ways professionals view parents most likely are reflected in the way professionals treat parents’ (Erwin & Rainforth, 1996:231).

While it is widely accepted that home/school partnerships are valuable many EYPs have mixed feelings about their work with parents or feel unprepared for this work (Sumsion, 1999). There may be good feelings of shared efforts; or a sense of frustration, anger or helplessness over conflicting views (Keyes, 2002). Murphy (2001) reported that while EYPs generally expressed positive attitudes towards parent involvement, they were ambivalent with regard to its implementation. However, while parents may contribute in different ways (Stonehouse, 1995), their contributions can only be implemented when professionals have positive attitudes about parents and their ability to make decisions and when practices in services foster this decision-making process (Erwin & Rainforth, 1996). Shared decision-making means that ‘parents’ requests are welcomed, respected and taken seriously’ (Stonehouse, 1995:186).

However, research suggests that partnerships with parents are not always easy to promote or maintain (Keyes, 2000; Garcia, 2004); that staff may be anxious about their relationships with parents (Katz et al., 1996; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000); that tensions can exist when parents participate and that developing shared understandings with parents about their child’s best interest is neither easy nor guaranteed (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001). Conflict and tensions arise for a variety of reasons - the wishes and needs of parents and staff may not always coincide (Strahan 1994); parents and staff may have different views about child rearing (Dowling, 2000); about the concept, implementation or development of partnerships (Lindon, 1997); they may not trust each other (Crozier & Raey, 2005); while Keyes (2002) points to the low status felt by EYPs, lack of appropriate preparation and support for the work, or ambiguity about the appropriate roles of parents and staff. While tensions and conflicts are inevitable, they can lead to growth and strong relationships when resolved positively (Stonehouse, 1995). However, Keyes (2002) suggests the absence of conflict, reflecting mutual respect and trust, is what good relationships have in common.
Negative attitudes of parents and teachers were identified as barriers to parent involvement in children's education (Ginsberg et al., 2005) and also as barriers in preparing teachers for parent involvement (Shartrand et al., 1997). Negative attitudes may reflect a belief that parent involvement is an intrusion or that parents’ views are not always well-informed (Wolfendale, 1992). A number of studies highlight the negative attitudes of staff. For example, a Japanese study found that staff were reluctant to talk with parents (Hiura, 1996). In a Greek study, staff did not want parents in the classroom, even for the first few days despite positive parental attitudes towards the development of more effective communication, contact and involvement in the education process (Laloumi-Vidali, 1997). This may reflect the fact that even the most open-minded staff had a cut-off point beyond which they would not collaborate with parents (Edwards & Knight, 1994). However, as staff became more open and shared their skills with parents this ‘enhanced rather than reduced their own and parents’ perceptions of their professional role’ (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989:58). Whalley (1997) suggests that while practitioners may not be able to change the circumstances of their setting, they can change their attitude and methods of working and by example, influence their colleagues.

A negative attitude towards working mothers was highlighted in research conducted in the early 1990’s and if this attitude is still prevalent, it may affect staff’s attitudes towards parent involvement. Dahlberg et al. (1999:46) cite research (Malpas & Lambert, 1993) which reported that 75% of respondents believed mothers should stay at home when they had young children. Galinsky & Weissbourd (1992) report that 24% of teachers were staunchly against mothers working and they also cite research by Galinsky, Shinn, Phillips, Howes, & Whitebrook (1990) which found that teachers’ disapproval of working mothers was linked to a more judgmental stance and to poorer relationships with mothers. In addition, Cameron et al (2002) cite research conducted in 1999 and 2000 from the Thomas Coram Research Unit, which reported that 91% of childcare students and nursery workers would not work full-time if they were mothers of preschool children. A quote from a number of students demonstrates their beliefs: ‘We’re all saying that we fit in with our families. We put our families first. Some people put their job first, and they employ people to look after their families’ These students also considered home-based, individualized care preferable to centre-based, group
Parents are not a homogenous group. They have different needs. Factors that may hinder their involvement include whether or not they work; they feel their help is needed; they feel confident about their skills; or if they feel staff would be making observations about their parenting abilities (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989). In addition, how parents view their role affects the parent/staff partnership (Keyes, 2000), whether they believe their role is parent-focused, school-focused, and/or partnership-focused (Reed et al., 2000). In an Irish study, while parents were confused about their role and the opportunities available for them to work in partnership with staff many parents, using private services, did not see the usefulness of partnership, suggesting it was more appropriate in playschools or primary schools (Martin, 2003). This may indicate that parents see themselves as consumers whose role is limited to purchasing childcare (Dahlberg et al., 1999). However, cooperative partnership with parents is unlikely if ‘a purchaser-provider, parent-as-consumer model of education holds sway’ (Edwards & Knight, 1994:116).

3.13.5 Confidence and efficacy of early years practitioners and parents

Staff confidence is vital when involving parents (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989; Rennie, 1996) and lack of confidence among practitioners and parents was identified as one of the main obstacles to involvement (Crossley-Holland, 1997). Urban (2004:40) highlights the importance of having confidence as part of the professional equipment particularly if education is regarded ‘as co-construction or as interaction between partners with equal rights’. This results in parents and staff seeing themselves as co-educators, co-constructing an appropriate curriculum to meet the cognitive and effective needs of each child (Whalley & Dennison, 2001). Teachers often lack confidence if they have not had previous experience working with families (Shartrand et al., 1997), but confidence can be developed through training and experience of working with parents (Sumison, 1999). Confidence can also be enhanced by feelings of mutual trust and respect (Wall, 2003) while possession of relevant knowledge increases teacher’s confidence in their behaviour and in their role (Katz, 2000).
Many authors highlight a correlation between teacher efficacy and parent involvement in the education process (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1997; Reed et al., 2000; Garcia, 2004), and while much of this research relates to schools, the findings may also be applicable to practitioners in early years services. Difficulties may arise because practitioners may not understand the value of parent involvement (Yeates et al., 1990). Many EYPs find involvement problematic causing stress for those who do not understand the process (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000) or because of difficult experiences with parents many may give up after a few attempts of not achieving the desired result (Garcia, 2004). However, practitioners who were secure in their perceived capabilities were more likely to welcome input from parents (Foot et al., 2002). They were also more likely to support new or to renew invitations to parents; to initiate parent-teacher relationships and to persist in efforts to involve parents (Garcia, 2004). Those with a high sense of efficacy and a commitment to parent involvement were likely to view obstacles as problems to be solved rather than limitations (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1997). However, in an Australian study, (Ashton et al., 2004) students encountered resistance from experienced professionals who were unwilling to adopt new ideas.

Research highlights different approaches to enhance staff's self-efficacy beliefs related to effective parent involvement. Opportunities must be provided for teachers to experience success in working with families and to observe or hear about other's successes (Garcia, 2004). Hoover-Dempsey et al. (1997) point to the importance of setting goals for increased involvement and the identification and analysis of obstacles to involvement. Sumsion (1999) demonstrated how a trainee teacher developed the skills necessary to work with parents through experience. However, in the background to their study on pre-service teachers' beliefs about parent involvement in all areas of education, Wilkins & Walker (2002) assert that students with a high sense of efficacy may underestimate the complexities of working with parents, and when difficulties arise, they may not persist or ask for help.

Parents must also feel comfortable with staff before they become involved (Caplan et al., 1997). They must know what to expect and what is expected of them (Hyder et al., 1997). Caddell (1996) reported that a lack of confidence influenced the extent to which parents felt comfortable talking to EYPs. Referring to schools, Shartrand et al. (1997) point out that when staff work in partnership with parents, parents feel valued, they gain confidence in their
ability to contribute to their children’s education, and as a result are more likely to become involved. Similarly, Elliott (2004) asserts that involving others instills a sense of belonging which contributes to a healthy sense of self and positive self-esteem, which has significance for the way people communicate with each other. Parents’ sense of efficacy also influences the interactions they may have with their children’s educators (Reed et al., 2000; Keyes, 2002). From a parent’s perspective barriers may result from self-perceptions of inadequate skills and knowledge, lack of invitations from the school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1997) or prior negative experiences in education (Katz et al., 1996; OECD, 2001; Whalley, 2002).

3.13.6. Staff/parents: educational differences

A teacher’s success in developing partnership with parents depends: on the ‘fit’ between parents’ cares and concerns and those of the teacher; the degree of match between their culture and values, which may include socio-economic class and educational level; the stress they are both under; their sense of efficacy, their expectations, personal attributes, their communication styles and how they each view their role (Keyes, 2002). Comparisons between parents and EYPs reveal widening economic, linguistic, cultural or socio-economic gaps that may limit two-way communication (Shartrand et al., 1997). However, if there are differences in their backgrounds they must be open-minded and flexible (Rous et al., 2003). Early childhood services are ‘disproportionately used by parents with high levels of education, working in full-time, higher status jobs’ while nursery workers generally have ‘low levels of education and work in low status jobs’ (Cameron et al., 2002:577). In addition, highly educated women usually have at least twice the level of labour market participation as those with lower qualifications, and are likely to work full-time (OECD, 2001; National Women’s Council of Ireland, 2005). Additional differences that may affect parent involvement include parent and practitioner characteristics (Castro et al., 2004).

In Canada, more middle and upper class mothers work full-time and the educational benefits of early years services are widely understood and EYPs are respected for their professional training (Ferguson, 2002). In Finland, EYPs have achieved a higher status and have been actively involved in curriculum formation and Moriarty (2000:240) believes EYPs should consider their professional role in the wider sense, by ‘critiquing dominant discourses and being advocates for the children and the families who use their setting’.

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3.13.7 Power inequalities

The equal distribution of power is a characteristic of partnership relationships (Stonehouse 1995; Whalley, 1997) but while partnership relationships sound equitable, in practice they tend to be determined by preschool staff (Bridge, 2001). In addition, ‘the pattern of rights, responsibilities and expertise that make up power are unlikely to be the same between parents and workers; they are in different positions and roles’ (Lindon, 1997:173). However, Foot et al. (2002:7) assert that ‘power is invested ultimately in those who hold responsibility, and what determines the nature of the partnership are the aims and objectives of the preschool establishment’, highlighting that the greatest obstacle to partnership is getting parents to recognise that they have power, and motivating them to use it.

The power of practitioners may be evident in a number of ways. For example, the type of tasks undertaken by parents may reflect practitioners’ views on control, balance of power and parents’ capabilities (Wall, 2003). Power may also be evident by a failure to share the type of information parents need (Elliott, 2003) and this may reflect ‘inequalities in what people think it is important for them to know as opposed to what other people think it is important to tell them’ (Curtis & O’Hagan, 2003:105).

However, parent involvement is not without risks. Edwards & Knight (1994) assert that the aims of the nursery may shift if staff lose control of the agenda determining the range and style of involvement practices. Lindon (2003) points out that it is vital that each member of staff has a shared view of the aims, which may develop and change over time, because opinions about the development of relationships, what is appropriate and what is not considered reflect differences in power. It is particularly important how staff reached the decision about what partnership means in their setting and how their behaviour towards parents reflects this policy (Lindon, 2003). If families do not contribute to service goals, philosophy or programme objectives, accepted practices, even if unsuitable, will not be changed or improved (Elliott, 2003). However, staff who are well-supervised and confident in their own abilities, training, experience and skills are likely to be open to the idea of power-sharing (Hyder et al., 1997).

Pugh & De’Ath (1989) argue that parents may not have the information, resources or the
power to participate in partnership. Dale (1996:5) states: ‘whoever has greater sources of powers is in the driving-seat of control in the relationship’, suggesting that parents, in their parental role, occupy a lower social status than professionals, and where they stand in relation to each other, in terms of authority and power, affects the kind of relationship they can sustain and the potential for partnership. However, parents are now seen as consumers who are empowered to have a greater say in their children’s education, evident when they interfere in their children’s education and/or call teachers to account (Crozier, 1997).

Expertise may also confer power. Parents and professionals have different but equivalent expertise (Rodd, 2006). However, concerns about who has professional expertise can create barriers to parent involvement (French, 2003). Greater parent involvement can potentially represent a threat to early years staff’s professionalism (Crozier, 1997). Staff may claim professional status by ‘othering and subordinating parental knowledge’ (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000:247). This point may be evident by the claim that many parents need ‘professional help, guidance and encouragement to support their children’s learning which can best be provided by teachers’ (INTO, 1997:11) or the assertion that ‘at times, schools had ‘blaming’ attitudes towards families or a ‘we’re the experts’ approach to family involvement’ (Shartrand et al., 1997:13). An attitude where professionals view themselves as the only ones with expertise may result in alienation and disempowerment of parents and a diluted parent-child relationship (Stonehouse, 1995). However, in a study conducted in England and Finland, practitioners were concerned that parents were too deferential to the expertise of early years professionals (Moriarty, 2000).

3.13.8 Leadership

There is evidence to suggest that centres having strong leadership and long-serving staff have good outcomes for children (Taggart, 2007). Managers\(^2\) play a vital role in the running of services and in establishing positive relationships among staff (Marsh, 1994); in initiating, developing and managing parent involvement (McMillan, 2000); in encouraging and developing attitudes conducive to partnership (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989) and in implementing

\(^2\) People in authority in early childhood services are referred to in different ways. ‘Directors’ (Endsley et al. 1993); ‘Managers’ (McMillan, 2000); ‘Heads’ (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989); ‘Supervisors’ (Yeates et al. 1990) and ‘Leaders’ (Rodd, 1998). In this study individuals in authority will be referred to as ‘managers’.
change, a major challenges in ECCE (Rodd, 2006).

With an increased interest in collaboration and consulting parents, new skills and a change of attitude are required from managers and practitioners (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989). Particularly important is the ability to collaborate with parents (Shartrand et al., 1997). Managers of early years services not only require communication, team building and conflict resolution skills they also need confidence to explain their philosophy regarding the care and education of children to parents, while at the same time ‘acknowledging parental rights, information, theories, expectations, problems and pressures’ and in this way the complementary expertise of both parent and professional can be utilised (Rodd, 1998:169).

Teamwork, between staff, and between parents and staff, is a vital component of quality (CECDE, 2007) and it is unlikely that programmes can be of high quality unless staff relationships within it are also of good quality (Katz, 1993). Centres having the best relations with parents, had regular team meetings, developed a joint approach to working with parents and with each other, enabling staff share their skills and expertise, learning from each other and from parents (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989). In Reggio Emelia, staff are seen as ‘reflecting practitioners’ and time is set aside on a weekly basis for professional dialogue and development (Abbott & Nutbrown, 2001; OECD, 2001). Reflective practitioners are also encouraged at the Pen Green Centre of Excellence in the UK and staff training involves sharing personal experiences which informs and enhances their professional practice, as it is believed that practitioners become more actively involved in direct work with parents when they discuss among themselves their fears about this work (Whalley, 2001).

3.13.9 Status of early years practitioners

Nationally and internationally, the low status accorded to EYPs has been documented (Katz, 1995; Clawson, 1997; Murphy, 2001; OECD, 2001; Ferguson, 2002; Martin, 2003). Low status may indicate that early childhood education is not recognised as a distinct field of education (Taggart, 2007) and while the vital importance of quality childcare for children and society has been acknowledged, many do not appreciate the importance of childcare work (Fine-Davis et al., 2005). EYPs believe their work has a high intrinsic value, but they are struggling to gain respect for the value and importance of their work and recognition of their
knowledge, expertise and skills (Wall, 2003). EYPs are aware that society has a different view, with ‘low pay offering the clearest signal of low social status’ (Cameron et al., 2002:581). However, Maslow (1968) points out that low status may affect staff’s self-esteem as self-esteem is developed mainly in response to the way individuals perceive they are valued by others (cited in Elliott, 2004). What is needed is ‘public understanding and recognition of the potential benefits of high quality education in the early years and deeper public commitment to the welfare of young children’ (Katz, 1995: 229).

Bronfenbrenner (1979:6) argues that the expectations of particular behaviour associated with particular roles in society may affect how a person is treated, how they act, what they do and even how they think and feel. Katz maintained:

'The younger the child with whom the practitioner works, the less training is required, the less ability is expected, the lower the pay, the fewer employment benefits and the poorer the working conditions'... 'Too often, young women are advised to enter early childhood education because their shyness makes them unsuitable for work with older pupils or because they are not academically strong enough to take up a more challenging or profitable occupation... preschool teachers have been urged to transfer into secondary teaching because they were judged 'too good for infants'...

Six years later, the OECD (2001) report that the situation for children under 3 years is less favourable in terms of quality, with countries with large private and voluntary sectors having a significant group of low-trained and untrained staff working in ECCE, mainly with infants and toddlers. However, this is the age group that parents might want most contact with staff. In addition, students had negative views about working with children in the 0-3 group but were positive about the 4-8 year group (Maloney, 2002). The OECD (2001) stress that signs of professionalisation are particularly important as parents can easily perceive staff to be unskilled, but having a curriculum for early childhood staff may demonstrate that they belong to a professional group. Research highlights a link between training and professional identity:

'Training was seen as a way to improve care giving skills, but also as a means towards improved confidence, increased control over professional development and the creation of networks. These networks would affirm and enhance the individual caregiver's feeling that she was a member of a valued and skilled professional group - a group that shared her commitment to the caregiver's unique blend of public and private worlds'

(Taylor, Dunster & Pollard, 1999:304)
The OECD (2006:126) identified appropriate training and working conditions as one of eight key elements of successful early childhood policy, stressing 'a critical need to develop strategies to recruit and retain a qualified and diverse, mixed gender workforce and to ensure that a career in ECCE is satisfying, respected and financially viable'. This is particularly important as Katz (1995) suggests that the best possible environments will not be the norm for children unless there are optimum environments for the adults who work with them. In addition, family involvement is more likely to occur when teachers are supported and rewarded for their efforts (Shartrand et al., 1997). Weiss et al. (2006:6) highlight the necessity of putting standards in place to guarantee that early childhood teachers are well paid and trained so that they have the ability and time to invite parents’ participation and the knowledge to provide parents with clear strategies for rich relationships with their children. However, practitioners’ belief in the need to defend their professional status may result in partnership being unlikely (Edwards & Knight, 1994).

3.13.10 Staff Turnover

Low staff turnover (Marsh, 1997), staff wages and benefits, training and qualifications are major factors enhancing the quality of children’s experience (Daniel, 1996; Mitchell, 2002; Whitebook & Sakai, 2003). Cameron et al. (2002: 582) report that workers have difficulty viewing childcare as a career, because their work is seen as akin to mother care and the level of pay does not enable most childcare staff to be financially independent. In addition, she considers financial rewards from gaining a qualification are few when compared to workers in related fields (ibid.). However, the continuity and responsiveness of staff, and their consistent relationship with the same group of children is more easily achieved when staff are paid above the minimum wage (European Commission Network on Childcare, 1996). Improving wages was considered by a vast majority of staff as essential to stemming turnover (Whitebook & Sakai, 2003). O’Kane (2005) believes well-trained staff should be paid salaries relative to their qualifications while the NAEYC (1997) maintain that compensation should be sufficient to attract and retain qualified staff to reduce high rates of turnover and its detrimental effect on children. In addition, higher salaries and status may help facilitate more equal partnerships between staff and parents (OECD, 2000).
High turnover is unsettling for parents and has been identified as a barrier to their involvement (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989). High turnover interferes with the continuity and consistent relationships that are so important to young children’s development and learning (OECD, 2001). Turnover was an issue in one study, as ‘48% of the teachers in private centres resigned or were dismissed’ within the five-month period of data collection compared to 16% in public centres (Clawson, 1997:16). In the US, Whitebrook and Sakai (2003) found that centres that paid higher wages to staff were better able to retain staff, while membership of a professional organisation was also a discriminating factor. In Ireland, low status, low rates of pay and high staff turnover are features affecting the quality of provision in early years services (OECD, 2006). Inadequate compensation was found to be the single most important factor contributing to high staff turnover and difficulties in recruitment or retention of staff (Cameron et al., 2002). In Australia, lack of professional and public recognition of the expert knowledge held by practitioners was considered a contributing factor in low staff retention and low morale (Goodfellow, 2003). In the US, Whitebrook and Sakai (2003) provide evidence that high turnover is linked to poorer quality education and care that may affect children’s social-emotional and language development.

In England, childcare work has provided an important source of employment for women with low levels of educational qualifications (Cameron et al., 2002). In Ireland, 17% of staff employed in childcare were Community Employment or Jobs Initiative participants (DJELR, 2002:61) but this may have inadvertently contributed to maintaining low salaries in the sector as participants are paid an allowance by FÁS that corresponds to their previous welfare payments but are not in line with salaries. Professionalisation of the work threatens to exclude many women, but ‘if the work is understood as complex, demanding and not substitute mothering, it requires levels of training and qualification to match: gender or experience of mothering are not therefore adequate credentials’ (Cameron et al., 2002:590).

Social attitudes influencing the undervaluing of childcare labour may include the belief that the care of children is the private responsibility of parents; the perception of childcare as a commodity to be purchased and those who work in childcare are viewed as ‘workers’ or ‘babysitters’ not early childhood educators (Ferguson, 2002). They provide substitute mothering (Cameron et al., 2002). This reflects the view that the work involved in caring for
children is no more than minding babies for mothers who are otherwise engaged (Katz, 1995). While childcare has traditionally been viewed as women's work (Fine Davis, 2005) the idea of care work being 'natural' to women has an association with a highly gendered workforce, with low pay and low social value (Cameron et al., 2002). Despite low salaries and poor working conditions, workers gain high levels of satisfaction from their work and believe there are opportunities for career development (Fine-Davis et al., 2005).

Ferguson (2002) points out that unions have helped other workers in the caring or educational professions to gain respect, enhanced wages and improved working conditions. In Denmark, almost all child and youth educators are members of the National Union of Child and Youth Educators (BUPL) which traditionally works for better pay and working conditions as well as for higher quality in daycare facilities. Moreover, the recommendation that a national pay scale for EYPs be developed to reflect the social and economic value of their work has not been implemented (NESF, 2005).

3.13.11 Social class

Social class plays an important role in parent involvement (Keyes, 2002). Economically disadvantaged and minority parents face many obstacles to their involvement and there is some evidence to show they are unlikely to develop partnerships with staff (Olmsted & Weikart, 1995; Martin & Vincent, 1999; Weiss et al., 2006). In a study of parents and schools, social class had a bearing on parents' material conditions which affected whether they became involved or not, and this in turn affected the attitudes of teachers towards parents and the confidence and knowledge that parents had or did not have in intervening on their child’s behalf or becoming involved in other ways (Crozier, 2000). Factors that may prevent the development of strong relationships include: language and literacy barriers, lack of access to transportation to and from schools or lack of experience asking questions (Shartrand et al., 1997).

Having reviewed the literature on family-school relations, De Carvalho (2001:3) identified that in schools, upper/middle-class articulate, educated parents tended to do best in partnership relationships, stressing that parent involvement may reinforce patterns of discrimination based on social class, ethnicity and gender by creating 'new stratified
structures of participation’ which may result in ‘lower class’ mothers helping in the school cafeteria, while middle-class parents act as classroom volunteers or committee members. In addition, research reported that middle-class parents tended to dominate in formal bodies, with families of more modest income under represented (OECD, 2001; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). However, while Weiss et al. (2006:4-9) argue that participation in preschool-based activities and regular communication between families and teachers buffer the negative impacts of poverty on the academic and behavioural outcomes of poor children they also state: ‘It is unclear how well many of the recommended strategies for parent involvement fit with the life rhythms and demands of non-White and poor families’.

In this section a number of factors were highlighted that affect parent involvement. These include aspects of the service such as having a written policy on parent involvement, providing space for parents and funding to promote and support parent involvement. Time constraints were also highlighted which is considered a particular problem for working parents. Methods and strategies to encourage parent involvement were also examined. Attitudes of staff and parents were also considered as was their confidence and efficacy. Differences between parents and staff particularly educational differences were highlighted as these may affect parent involvement. Power inequalities were also considered. Leadership was also examined as were the skills managers of early years services require not alone to involve parents but also to promote teamwork between staff and between parents and staff. Status of EYPs was considered as was the importance of low staff turnover. Finally, the effects of social class on parent involvement was highlighted.

3.14 International perspectives on parent involvement

Internationally, parent involvement is encouraged or mandatory in some countries. Sweden, for example has a long tradition of parents working full-time outside the home and in 2004 76.6% of parents with children under 6 were in employment (OECD, 2006:413). However, while many parent co-operatives require mothers and fathers to share the work in centres and parents are actively encouraged to take part in quality monitoring and in reviewing nursery school activity, the role of the parents is still relatively weak (OECD, 2006).

In Denmark, parents are highly involved in their children’s services. Parents’ Boards have
been obligatory in daycare facilities since 1993. These boards set the principles governing the work of the daycare facilities, the use of budgets and the employment of staff (OECD, 2001:23). In Finland, an emphasis on the professional autonomy of staff has changed to closer co-operation with families. Parents are now considered important partners and parents' councils play a role in the planning and management of the centre's activities (OECD, 2001). In the Netherlands, there is growing awareness of the importance of parents' engagement and support. The formal participation and influence of parents in ECCE provision was incorporated into legislation in 1996 with the introduction of the Act on Participation of Clients of Care Services. Under this Act, organisations are obliged to establish a parent’s council to represent their interests while parents are represented by the national organisation, BOINK (OECD, 2000). In Australia, the QIAS requires that centre-based childcare centres be accredited to enable parents receive childcare benefits. Centres complete a self study against 52 principles which is undertaken in collaboration with management, staff and parents. One of these principles relates to practitioner-parent interaction and requires practitioners to seek parent’s knowledge of their child.

3.15 Issues in parent involvement research

While there is a lot of rhetoric about the importance of parent involvement research has not shown which particular strategies are more successful at involving parents than others, or which form of involvement is more likely to be linked to increased student achievement or other indicators of school success (Caplan et al., 1997).

Baker & Soden (1998) highlight a number of issues in parent involvement research that require clarification including the type and level of involvement necessary for benefits to result; the location of involvement, the home or the school; comprehensiveness - do parents need to be involved in all aspects of a programme, for involvement to be beneficial?; is there a relationship between parent involvement and its outcomes with different types of involvement?; the relative importance of different aspects of parent involvement at different points in the life of the student; do different types of involvement affect each other?; and does parent involvement have different outcomes related to gender?

Baker & Soden (1998) highlighted a number of methodological limitations in the majority of
studies conducted. For example, they questioned the use of non-objective measures, as researchers assessed parent involvement using a person’s report of their involvement. They also highlighted that closed-ended surveys were used that do not fully capture the dynamic nature of parents’ involvement, suggesting open-ended and observational techniques would be more enlightening. Further limitations highlighted include the use of non-experimental design, as research did not contain the controls necessary for researchers to conclude that parent involvement is the cause of enhanced student performance, so alternative explanations cannot be ruled out; lack of isolation of parent involvement from the effects of other aspects of a programme; or inconsistent definitions of parent involvement. Some researchers focused on attitudinal components, defining parental aspirations for the child’s educational success; behavioural aspects, such as assistance with homework while others focused on parenting style or family interaction patterns (Baker & Soden, 1998).

Bridge (2001) suggests that until clear definitions of parent involvement are put in place through case study research, staff work more from assumptions than from research evidence. Baker & Soden (1998) assert that researchers must make explicit which aspect of involvement is being measured in order to create a coherent understanding of the importance of its different aspects. They also suggest that common instruments for measuring parent involvement across a variety of settings must be developed and validated and because self-report data can be unreliable, techniques such as direct observation of parent behaviour with standardised data collection tools must be used (ibid.).

However, Edwards & Knight (1994:111) suggest that large-scale evaluation of parent involvement is difficult ‘because control and experimental groups are impossible to establish for sound comparisons between different types of involvement and non-involvement’ which, for important ethical reasons, results in practitioners having to rely on their own observations and compile case studies of small-scale successes. They also suggest that because evaluation of the subtle long-term processes and aims of work with parents has to be complex, and the cost prohibitive, it is difficult to prove that parent involvement programmes are beneficial.

Shartrand et al. (1997:5) maintained that ‘no system existed to support research and model development for family involvement training at the pre-service level, to act as a
clearinghouse of information, or to provide technical assistance’. They also state that teacher educators point to a lack of successful models to follow and learn from, suggesting that teacher education programmes often had to ‘reinvent the wheel’ when designing their curriculum.

**3.16 Summary**

This chapter presents an overview of the literature on parent involvement. Initially, the concepts of parent involvement and partnership were discussed. This was considered necessary because of confusion surrounding these terms and lack of clarity as to what ‘parent involvement’ and ‘partnership’ entailed. A variety of definitions was presented ranging from a belief that any connection between parents and EYPs constitutes ‘involvement’ (Yeates et al. 1990) to a belief that parents ‘as partners’ were: active and central in decision-making and its implementation; had equal strengths and equivalent expertise; contribute to as well as receive services and share responsibility, so that they with professionals are mutually accountable (Wolfendale, 1992).

A short history of the development of parent involvement from the initial reporting of the benefits in the Head Start programmes in the United States to the position today where parents have a right to involvement in their children’s education were then presented.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological systems theory was used to explain how children’s development could be best understood not in isolation, but within and between the contexts in which it occurs - their family, educational setting, community and society. Incorporating a number of theories, Keyes (2002) model of parent/teacher partnerships, considered the institution with its roles and expectations, individuals with their personalities and dispositions and their impact on each other. This model also highlights how the teacher’s role is detached and rational and focuses on the whole group of children while the parent focuses on their individual children. As part of this model, Keyes (2002) highlighted the importance of ‘communication’, particularly first meetings with parents and teachers’ invitations and the role they play in influencing how parent-teacher partnerships develop.

Different models of parent involvement were described including Pugh & De’Ath’s (1987)
conceptual framework which illustrated different levels of involvement from non-participation to parents in control of services. Epstein’s (2002) classifications were used to illustrate a wide span of involvement activities to create successful partnerships, both school and home-based, that covered children’s early childhood education to their completion of secondary school. Dales’ (1996) consumer, empowerment and negotiating models of partnership were also described as were the OECD’s (2001) report of parent engagement which ranged from marginal to managerial. Best practice guidelines were also highlighted.

The issue of quality was included in the review to reflect the current emphasis on the quality of children’s experiences in early years services and also because parent involvement has been identified as an indicator of quality. Differences in quality between public and private services were also highlighted.

The benefits of parent involvement for children, parents, staff and society were described but disadvantages were also highlighted. Children are believed to be more motivated and achieve more academically, they are happier, have better social skills, their self-esteem is enriched and they have a more positive self-image. Resulting from involvement in their children’s education parents are believed to develop new skills and confidence, they feel acknowledged and valued, they have a greater knowledge of school programmes and school experiences while improved aspirations and relationships with their children were also reported. Working in partnership with parents adds a new dimension to staff’s work, resulting in mutual growth and understanding. A family-centred approach is also believed to benefit society with parent involvement particularly beneficial for disadvantaged children resulting in positive economic benefits. Disadvantages to parent involvement were also identified in the literature. When parents are present in settings, children’s social behaviour changes or parents may focus on their own children to the detriment of other children. Staff may also be disadvantaged when parents are involved in management of services, for example, establishing wage rates.

Communication is considered vital in the development of parent/staff relationships and Elliott’s (2002) communication spiral was used to demonstrate how communication develops from conversations about children’s physiological needs at the most basic level to communication based on self-actualisation and reciprocal engagement at the highest level.
Barriers to communication and strategies to improve communication were also investigated.

A number of factors that affect partnership were investigated. Factors include the philosophy of the service as policies within services may not encourage parent involvement. Staff's expanded role and their attitudes towards parent involvement were also considered as was the fact that practitioners may not have the knowledge, skills or training to involve parents. Staff's confidence, their experience, their sense of efficacy and their status were also highlighted. Parent involvement may also be negatively affected by differences in educational levels between parents and staff. Leadership can play a major role in parent involvement and this skill was investigated. Parents' expectations may be a factor in parent involvement while barriers from a parent's perspective were found to include previous educational experiences, self-perceptions of inadequate skills or knowledge, parent's employment, their social class or lack of invitations from staff. An international perspective on parent involvement was also included. To conclude this review, limitations in previous parent involvement research were highlighted.

Chapter four describes the methodology used in the study.
CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY
4.0 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research methods employed in the study. The methodology was designed to ascertain EYPs' understandings and practices of parent involvement. Issues that emerged from the literature review and also from observations resulted in focus being placed on EYPs' beliefs about, and attitudes towards the involvement of parents in their children's early years services. Emphasis was placed on the reasons for parent involvement, how EYPs would like parents involved, the benefits, barriers, disadvantages and problems associated with involvement. EYPs' perceptions of the skills and training they required to implement involvement were also investigated.

Initially, ethical considerations and the research design are outlined. This is followed by an analysis of the sampling framework. The sample was chosen from the official list of childcare services in the Dublin Health Board Areas provided by the Eastern Region Health Authority. Data was generated in a two-stage process: non-participant observation and a self-administered postal questionnaire. Analysis of the data is discussed and methodological limitations are highlighted.

4.1 Ethical Considerations

This study complies with the British Educational Research Association Guidelines (2004). The guidelines state that research should operate with an ethic of respect for any person involved, highlighting the responsibility of the researcher to gain voluntary informed consent. It should ensure the participants understand the process involved and it should acknowledge their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participant's data should be considered the norm. These ethical considerations were taken into account before the study was undertaken. Prospective participants were contacted by telephone, the purpose of the study was explained, and they were invited to participate, without any pressure. A number of respondents declined to participate at this stage. Those who agreed were assured of confidentiality and that any information they provided would be kept securely, and only seen by the researcher or the study supervisor. Anonymity in the final report was guaranteed by the removal of all codes used by the researcher when quoting participants. In addition, to ensure confidentiality within a service, a stamped addressed envelope was included with each questionnaire, to enable participants post them.

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1 Name has changed and is now referred to as the Health Service Executive
2 Kept in a secured locker in the researcher's office
directly to the researcher. All participants were offered a copy of the main findings from the research.

4.2 Research Design

This study contained a two-stage research process, non-participant observation and a self-administered, postal questionnaire. A Pilot study was also conducted before the final completion of the survey. Both qualitative and quantitative measures were employed in the survey. The sample was chosen from the official list of childcare services in the Dublin Health Board Areas, provided by the Eastern Region Health Authority. Focus was placed on early years facilities providing care and education for children of working parents. This criterion resulted in only childcare facilities providing a full-day service being included in the study. Generally, only private facilities provide a full-day service so community services or playschools were not included. Managers of services were contacted by phone and the purpose of the research was explained to them. Surveys and letters explaining the purpose of the study were sent to those agreeing to partake. The survey was considered the most efficient way of gaining information from the greatest number of individuals, in the least amount of time and at a fraction of the cost of individual interviews which had been considered. Drawbacks to the survey, such as the necessity to keep surveys as short as possible; the fact that questions could be misinterpreted and the relatively low response rate were considered. However, the survey was deemed the least intrusive in the work-lives of the participants. One hundred and ninety-three respondents participated in the study, a response rate of 45%.

4.2.1 Stages of the research process

Non-participation observations were used by the researcher to listen and observe at first-hand what actually happens during children's transition from home to early years services and to monitor how parents and staff interact during these transitions. Wisker (2001) considers non-participation observation a valuable tool because it allows the observer to capture what people actually do rather than what they say they do and then relate what is seen in context to research questions.
4.2.2. Description of the questionnaire

A six-page, semi-structured, self-administered postal questionnaire, consisting of 32 items was used to collect data (see Appendix B). To ensure clarity, instructions were given throughout the questionnaire. Quantitative and qualitative measures were employed. A variety of formats were used to offset response biases and to provide interest: multiple choice, Likert scales, and boxes to tick. Open-ended questions were dispersed throughout the questionnaire to allow respondents provide additional information. The questionnaire was structured into 4 main sections and was informed by the literature review, empirical data collected from the observations and feedback from the pilot study.

Section one was used to established the personal profile of respondents: gender, age group, qualifications, position in the service, childcare experience and training to involve parents. The second section focused on staff beliefs about parent involvement; why they considered involvement important; the reasons parents might want/not want to be involved; involvement practices favoured by staff; and their perceptions of the benefits and disadvantages of parent involvement for children, parents and staff.

Parent involvement practices were investigated in section three and this included induction procedures; day-to-day practices; levels of involvement; and communication practices. In the fourth section, staff’s level of agreement with statements that focused on their beliefs, expectations, perceptions, needs, skills, attitudes and responsibilities in the area of parent involvement were elicited. Staff’s views about how parents valued their role was also investigated, together with the level of difficulty they experienced when involving parents and changes they would like to make in parent involvement.

4.2.3 Pilot study

The literature review and non-participant observation provided the basis for the development of the questionnaire. The purpose of the pilot was to determine how the questionnaire was received in terms of length, clarity, interest or overlap in questions. Practitioners who undertook the pilot study were employed in private services chosen from the eight Health Board Areas in the Dublin region, providing full-day care. Services were chosen by taking the tenth service on the list in each area with two additional services included to represent larger areas. The services used in the pilot study were not included in the final list of services in the survey. Initially, the manager or owner of the selected
services was contacted by phone, the purpose of the study was explained and they were invited to participate in the piloting of the questionnaire. Questionnaires and letters explaining the study in more detail together with stamped addressed envelopes were posted to the ten individuals who agreed to participate. The response rate was 90% and as a result of feedback, a number of changes were made including: shortening of the questionnaire, additional space was provided for qualitative data, box sizes were increased for numerical answers, while wording and clarity of instructions regarding ranking was improved.

4.3 Population Sample

4.3.1 The Sampling Framework

The sampling framework consisted of private services in the eight Health Board Areas in the Dublin region, providing full-day care, mainly for working parents. The Preschool Officer in each Dublin Health Board Area of the Eastern Region Health Authority was contacted and requested to provide the official list of childcare services operating in their area. The list provided: names; addresses; telephone numbers; the manager’s name; and details of the type of service provided (full-day/sessional).

In a chain of services or if a number of services were owned/managed by the same individual, only one service was included in the sample, as it was considered that policies and practices would be similar in each service.

4.3.2 Sampling Procedures

Services were selected in proportion to the number of services within each Health Board area with two additional services included to represent larger areas. Systematic sampling was used. A random number was chosen - the tenth service in each Health Board Area, and continued with every third service from this point. If a second round was necessary this commenced at the eleventh service and every third service was then chosen as before. This process was continued until the required number of services were identified.
Table 4.1 Structure of study sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health Board Area</th>
<th>2. Number of Services</th>
<th>3. % of Total Services</th>
<th>4. Sample Services</th>
<th>5. Number of questionnaires posted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3.3 Data collection procedures

Initially, one hundred and fifty two managers/owners of services were contacted by telephone and given a brief overview of the study. Managers who confirmed they ran a private service, providing full-day care, mainly for children of working parents were included. Managers were asked if they, and two other members of staff, who mainly worked with children, would be willing to participate in the study. Ninety-six percent of managers contacted agreed to participate and 4% (6) refused. Reasons for their non-participation varied: ‘too busy’, ‘on my own’ or ‘do not have any parent involvement’. Those who declined to take part were offered, and accepted, a copy of the questionnaire.

A letter was posted to the manager/owners of the services selected, thanking them for agreeing to participate and explaining the study in greater detail. Three surveys, with prepaid envelopes together with three individual letters explaining the study, were included for the manager and the other two members of staff who would be completing the survey. Confidentiality was guaranteed in the letters (see Appendix A) and assured by the provision of an individual prepaid envelope addressed to the researcher. To track responses, each questionnaire was coded with an identification letter and number.

Respondents were given two weeks to complete the questionnaire and after this time a telephone call was made to remind those who had not returned them. This was found to be a worthwhile exercise as 19 managers/owners reported they had not received the original
questionnaires, resulting in an additional 57 questionnaires being posted. Other individuals indicated that they had forgotten or were too busy to complete the survey.

4.3.4 Response Rate

One hundred and ninety three respondents completed questionnaires, a response rate of 45%. MacNaughton (2001) suggests that the average rate of response for a self-completing survey is usually about 30 percent and rarely higher than 40 percent. A complete set of questionnaires (3) were returned from 30 services, while two completed questionnaires were returned from 33 services and 37 services returned one completed questionnaire. It may need to be considered that sending three surveys to each service was or may have been a deterrent to those who did not return any questionnaires.

A letter of thanks was sent to those who participated in the study and a reminder was sent to those who had not returned their completed questionnaires. All participants were offered a summary of the main findings, a contact telephone number and an email address if they wished to discuss any issues related to the questionnaire. One respondent requested a summary of the main findings.

4.4 Data Analysis

Completed questionnaires were coded and recorded in an Excel database. Quantitative data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 11) while themes were generated from the qualitative data.

4.4.1 Analysis of quantitative data

Quantitative data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 11). This package allows large quantities of information to be analysed, categorised and summarised whilst also facilitating quick comparisons between different variables. Graphical data and tests of significance can also be carried out using this package which provides validity to research conclusions.

4.4.2 Analysis of qualitative data

Themes were generated from the qualitative data. Quotations deemed important were used to support results from the quantitative analysis, and also to pinpoint inconsistencies between both. Combining both quantitative and qualitative data provides a deeper understanding of findings (Haralambos & Holborn, 1991), or raises new questions.
4.4.3 Difficulties encountered during data collection

A number of difficulties were encountered by the researcher during the initial introduction to the services. For example, numerous telephone calls were required as managers/supervisors were not always present (nor were deputies available); some were too busy to take calls, and despite leaving messages the majority of calls were not returned. Others confirmed they did not have any parent involvement.

One Pre-school Inspector refused to provide a list of childcare facilities in her area stating that lists were only for parents seeking childcare. She also stated that services were very busy and were ‘fed up’ receiving questionnaires. This point was made by a number of respondents who detailed the questionnaires they received: ‘one of 15 pages’; ‘one on special needs’; ‘received another one today’; ‘one about children who have special needs/or were members of the Travelling Community’.

Postal issues also caused difficulties. Many staff confirmed questionnaires had not been received and while a number of respondents reported their completed questionnaires had been returned, they were never received. One manager asked if the questionnaires could be posted again as there had been a fire in their local post box.

Twelve services were removed from the sample as they were deemed unsuitable, on the grounds that, contact was never established or calls were not returned. One service was closed and a number of services, despite being classified ‘full-time’, provided just over 3 1/2 hours service per day.

4.5 Methodological Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations resulting from the methods used in this study. Sample limitations are related to the fact that individual managers decided which two additional participants would complete the survey and it may need to be considered if these participants had a choice in the matter, highlighting the issue of informed consent and also highlights a bias potential. Another limitation is the fact that the researcher had no direct contact with respondents and so was unable to clarify issues that may have arisen for respondents while they completed the questionnaire. However, while the researcher’s contact details were supplied to answer any queries that may have arisen, contact was not
made which may indicate that respondents preferred to preserve their anonymity.

In addition, closed-ended surveys may not fully capture the dynamic nature of parents’ involvement (Baker & Soden, 1998) or participants’ attitudes and beliefs about parent involvement. However, using both qualitative and quantitative measures may help overcome some of these limitations. A further limitation relates to the finding that respondents who were employed in the same service provided different responses to factual questions, for example, if photographs of staff were displayed. This demonstrates a further disadvantage of questionnaires as the ‘validity of the data may be reduced by the unwillingness or inability of respondents to give full and accurate replies to questions’ (Haralambos & Holborn, 1991:733).

4.6 Summary

The aim of the study was to establish staff understandings and practices of parent involvement in private early years services, providing full-day childcare mainly for working parents.

The Ethical Guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (2004) were adhered to, throughout this study. This involved respecting the participants, assuring them of confidentiality and anonymity and where possible, gaining voluntary informed consent.

This study contained a two-stage research process, non-participant observation and a self-administered postal questionnaire. Non-participant observations were carried out in two early years services – a community and a private service. A six-page, semi-structured, self-administered postal questionnaire, consisting of 32 items was used to collect data. Quantitative and qualitative measures were employed and a variety of formats were used to offset response biases and to provide interest. The questionnaire was structured into 4 main sections and was informed by the literature review, empirical data from observations and feedback from the pilot study.

The sample was chosen from the official list of childcare services in the Dublin Health Board Areas. As there is little research on the issue of working parent’s involvement in their children’s early years services only private services providing full-day care for children of working parents were included in the sample. Managers of services were contacted by phone and surveys and letters explaining the purpose of the study were sent
to those agreeing to take part. One hundred and ninety three participants returned completed surveys, a response rate of 45%. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS while themes were generated from the qualitative data.

A number of methodological limitations of the study were identified. For example, ranking of some questions proved problematic for many respondents. In addition, while managers themselves agreed to participate, they chose the two other participants, so the issue of informed consent arises. Another limitation is the fact that respondents employed in the same service provided contradictory responses to factual questions and the researcher was unable to establish which response was correct. Moreover, closed-ended surveys may not capture the dynamic nature of parents’ involvement. Finally, a number of respondents did not complete all the questions, or questions may also have been misunderstood. However, the researcher was unable to establish why questions were not completed and was unable to clarify issues that arose as respondents did not use the contact details supplied.

In chapter 5 the results of the survey are presented.
CHAPTER 5

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS
5.0. Introduction

The key aims of the study were to establish how EYPs understood parent involvement, to investigate the type and level of involvement practised and to identify EYPs’ beliefs about what is needed to encourage and sustain parent involvement. Results from the survey are presented in this chapter. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 11) was used to analyse quantitative data. Themes were generated from qualitative data.

The first section of this chapter presents a demographic profile of respondents. The second section details staff’s beliefs about why involvement was considered important, how staff would like parents involved and the reasons parents might or might not be involved. Benefits and disadvantages of parent involvement are then identified. The next section describes levels and types of involvement practices and includes problems associated with parent involvement. Beliefs and attitudes needed for parent involvement to happen are then presented. Changes staff would like in parent involvement are then outlined and this is followed by responses to the question regarding whether parents valued their role. Difficulties staff encountered when completing the survey follow. To conclude, a summary of the results is presented.

The benefits of using both qualitative and quantitative measures were evident in this study. Generally, positive views were expressed when quantitative measures were employed, however, some qualitative data presented a different picture. In addition, when responses from staff employed in the same service were compared, in a number of instances, major differences emerged (These issues will be discussed in chapter 6).

Note: In this chapter percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number and are based on the numbers of respondents who completed each question as a number of respondents failed to answer all or part of a number of questions. Responses not/incorrectly ranked were excluded, and may result in ‘n’ being different for a number of questions.

Workplace services were not categorized separately as no specific differences were evident when results were compared.

In analyzing question 26, which requested respondents to demonstrate their levels of agreement/disagreement with statements, using a Likert scale, ‘1’ and ‘2’ were merged to
indicate 'agreement', '4' and '5' were combined to indicate 'disagreement' while '3' was taken to indicate respondents were 'unsure'.

5.1 Profile of respondents

One hundred and ninety three respondents employed in 99 private early years services completed the survey. Services were run by twenty five owner-managers and fifty one managers employed to run individual services, chain/franchised\(^1\) services and workplace crèches\(^2\). One hundred and ninety one respondents (99%) were female and two were male. Sixty-seven respondents (35%) were parents themselves.

5.1.1 Age range of respondents

Of the 186 staff who responded to this question 99 (53%) were aged between 26-40 years and 72 (39%) were aged between 18-25 years. Thirty seven managers (49%) were aged between 26-40 years and 11 (14%) were aged between 18–25 years.

5.1.2 Respondents' positions in early years services

Seventy-eight respondents (43%) are classified as childcare workers. Included in this category are: nursery nurses, supervisors, preschool teachers and childcare assistants. Seventy-six respondents (42%) acted in a management capacity.

Fig 5.1 Respondents' position in the service

\(^1\) Chain/franchised services refers to a number of services owned by the same individual/s who would have bought the right to use a particular name, for example, Bright Horizons.

\(^2\) A workplace crèche is a facility provided by an employer for the exclusive use of employees' children.
5.1.3 Qualifications of respondents

There was a wide variety in the type and level of qualifications held by respondents. Qualifications and training ranged from Montessori training (32%), FETAC levels 1-3 and a wide range of certificates and diplomas. A majority of respondents did not provide details about the level of Montessori training they had received.

Fig 5.2 Qualifications of respondents

One hundred and seventy four respondents (94%) stated they held qualifications in childcare and twelve had no qualifications. Respondents confirmed they held qualifications in First Aid, Crèche Management, Special Needs, Sign language, Food Management, Fire Training, Child Protection, Art & Craft; Behaviour Management and Health & Safety. Generally, these were the only formal qualifications held by a large number of respondents.

Seven respondents held degrees, one in childcare; one in psychology; two held Montessori degrees; two were primary school teachers; one held a Masters degree in speech and language therapy. Qualifications may be classified between levels 1-4 in the NQAI Framework of Qualifications. Two managers held degrees, twelve held Montessori qualifications and ten held FETAC qualifications at levels 1, 2 and 3, but
two others stated they had no qualifications. Overall, there was a wide diversity in the types and levels of qualifications held by respondents with many reporting they lacked training to involve parents.

5.1.4 Childcare experience of respondents

Of the one hundred and twenty five respondents who gave details of their experience in childcare 48% had over 6 years experience. This indicates that these respondents were highly experienced. However, sixty-eight respondents (35%) failed to give details of their childcare experience but almost all respondents detailed their experience in their current service.

Table 5.1 Length employed in current service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of Employment</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to 2 years</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 to 4 years</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 to 6 years</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10 years</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 years +</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n 182

Only 22% of respondents had over 6 years experience in their current service. This may indicate that turnover was an issue. Seven managers had one years experience, eleven had two to three years and thirty one had four years plus experience. Eleven owners of early years services had over eight years experience in childcare.

When comparison was made between respondents who could be considered to be relatively inexperienced, for example, those having up to three years experience (94 respondents) and those with four years plus experience (88 respondents), small difference emerged. One difference identified was that thirty inexperienced, in comparison to fourteen experienced staff, stated their conversations with parents lasted between 6 -9 minutes and eight inexperienced in comparison to fifteen experienced staff stated their conversations lasted for 10 minutes plus. No experienced staff rated their conversations with parents as fair or weak but five inexperienced staff did. Twelve more experienced than inexperienced staff identified
that parent involvement puts an extra burden on stressed parents while fifteen more inexperienced staff compared to experienced staff were unsure if their service had a written policy on parent involvement.

5.1.5 Training in parent involvement

Seventy-one respondents, (40%) including twenty four managers, had specific pre-service training and thirty-six (20%) had additional training to involve parents. Sixteen managers had further training.

A majority of respondents reported their pre-service training to involve parents, included communication skills, and three reported a separate communication module was part of their course. A small number suggested their communication training involved learning how to give advice while fifteen confirmed they were trained to get parents more involved but information on the type of training was not given. Six stated role-play was used in their training and five said they were trained to involve parents during work experience. Three respondents reported their training involved dealing with parents when there was a problem with a child. While these respondents had training to communicate with parents the majority did not receive training in these important areas. One respondent stated she would like: ‘More courses in relating with parents/staff in the childcare environment’.

Table 5.2 Profile of managers/ owner-managers of services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Managers/ Owner-managers</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender - male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender - female</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 26 – 40 years</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 18 - 25 years</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 years + experience in current service</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Held a degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montessori qualifications</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No qualifications</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service training to involve parents</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional training to involve parents</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two owner-managers were male and a majority were aged between 26-40 years. Approximately half had over 6 years experience in their current service and a
minority had pre-service or additional training to involve parents. The most common qualification was described as Montessori but the majority did not stipulate the level of this qualification.

5.2. How staff understood parent involvement

5.2.1 Reasons to involve parents

In order to establish why respondents considered involvement important six statements were presented that were based on the literature review and respondents were asked to rank these in order of importance (Question 10 in Appendix B).

Fig 5.3 Why involve parents?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents are their children’s first educators</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff are more informed when parents share their knowledge about their child</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents are interested and have a right to be involved</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement is crucial to effective work with children</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff like to support parents in their childrearing function</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement is considered an indicator of a quality service</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n 155 Note: Responses not/incorrectly ranked were excluded (17%)

There was almost unanimous agreement (97%) that it was important to involve parents. Parents are their children’s first educators was considered the most important reason to involve parents, chosen by forty-four respondents, including twelve managers. As only 17 responses separated the most important reason from the reason ranked fourth, this suggests the top four reasons are considered equally important. However, ranking of statements caused difficulty for some respondents who considered all options were equally important, and contrary to the instructions given, ranked each statement a ‘1’. This resulted in 17% of responses not/incorrectly ranked being excluded. This was explained by one respondent who highlighted the difficulty of choosing between the options offered suggesting that all aspects were equally important.
Staff like to support parents in their child-rearing function was chosen by seven respondents (4%) as the most important reason to involve parents. However, in response to an open-ended question, additional reasons given to involve parents included the need to support parents, to develop strong relationships with them and to keep them informed. Respondents stated:

'Staff need to have a good attitude/relationship with parents, they need to listen and be supportive to parents when parents are seeking advice or informing staff about their children'

'Working in partnership, co-operating and supporting each other'

Respondents also suggested:

'Parent involvement ... a very important aspect of childcare which does not receive enough attention'

'Looking at parent involvement as a help more than a hindrance'

'If parents are not aware of what goes on in their children's daily life, all work during school hours may be contradicted at home, making progress impossible and work pointless'

'So parents feel there is an open-door policy for them that they can participate, watch a class at any time. To ensure their child is in a safe learning environment with caring staff'

Strong positive views were expressed about the importance of involving parents by a number of respondents who stated: 'parent involvement is great', 'is important to staff and children and the parents themselves', that it was 'good in theory' or that it was 'ideal to have parents involved in most areas'. However, negative views were also expressed with regard to its implementation as respondents suggested: having to acknowledge that parents were 'always right' or that parent involvement 'was not always popular'.

5.2.2 Preferred parent involvement practices

Respondents were invited to rank statements to indicate how they would like parents to be involved in early years services (Question 11 in Appendix B).

Parents, as partners, was ranked the most favoured way staff liked parents involved, with seventy-five respondents (41%), including twenty-two managers and ten owners
of services, choosing this option. Many respondents provided additional information to explain their choice:

'Staff and parents get to know each other better, building trust and exchanging ideas'

'It is absolutely necessary to build a rapport with them [parents] as they need to know, to both back up the teacher and to be able to continue with care discipline etc. (as staff do in accordance with parents)'

### Table 5.3 Staff's preferences for parent involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role of Parents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents as partners with staff in the care and education of children</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents as educators of their own children (e.g. supporting service ideas at home)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents as learners (e.g. parents learning about child development etc. from staff/guest speakers)</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents as supporters (e.g. fundraising, contributing materials)</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents as volunteers (e.g. helping with day to day activities, outings)</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents involved in managing and developing the policies of the service</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Responses not/incorrectly ranked were excluded (12%).

Parents, as educators of their own children, for example, supporting service ideas at home was ranked second and chosen by forty-six respondents (25%). This may suggest that these respondents favoured the promotion of continuity between children’s two contexts, their home and the service, but respondents who chose parents as partners may have assumed that this type of involvement was the norm.

Only ten respondents (5%) had a strong preference to involve parents as supporters or as volunteers. However, staff may have considered it inappropriate to ask parents who were paying for the service to fundraise or contribute materials and in regard to parents volunteering, six respondents highlighted ‘demanding parents’ or ‘parents trying to take over’ as issues of concern.

Fifty-seven percent of respondents, including thirty managers disagreed that parents should serve on the management committee and this was the least favoured way
respondents liked parents involved, chosen by four respondents (2%), one a manager.

5.2.3. Beliefs about parents motives for involvement

Respondents were asked to rank six statements to reflect why parents might want to be involved in their child’s early years service (Question 12 in Appendix B). Parents wanting to have a say in the care and education of their children was considered the most important reason by eighty-one respondents (48%). However, a majority of managers believed that parents got involved to relieve anxiety.

Table 5.4: Why parents might want to be involved

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To have a say in care and education of their child</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To alleviate any anxiety about leaving their child</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To know more about the service (what their child is doing/learning)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To support staff</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To satisfy their own needs e.g. for social contact</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To monitor staff</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost equal weight was given to the belief that parents wanted to relieve anxiety about leaving their children as wanting to know more about the service. One experienced respondent who lacked qualifications suggested what was needed:

‘Patience and understanding as this can be an emotional time for parents when first leaving their child’

Another respondent stated:

‘They [staff] must appear non-judgmental as a lot of parents carry guilt about leaving their children in a crèche’

While a minority of respondents believed parents got involved to monitor staff, some qualitative data found the opposite. One respondent stated:

‘[Staff] feel they are being monitored/can’t get on with daily tasks, feel inadequate’
5.2.4 Beliefs about why parents might not be involved

Eight statements to indicate the most likely reasons why parents might not be involved were presented and respondents were invited to rank these in order of importance (Question 13 in Appendix B). Eighty eight respondents (47%), including twenty two managers and fourteen owners of services, believed that work or family commitments were the most likely reasons for the non-involvement of parents. Many respondents acknowledged that parents were very busy, and 29% believed that involvement would put an extra burden on stressed parents.

Fig 5.4 Why parents might not be involved

![Bar chart showing reasons for non-involvement of parents](chart.png)

Note: responses not /incorrectly ranked were excluded (12%).

Many respondents were aware of the pressures working parents were under:

'I would like to see more parents showing interest but can understand the difficulty due to stress of work etc,'

'Parents have very little time with their children when in full-time care, so any involvement is a bonus'

'Parents are involved with our service but we don’t have social events and never ask parents for extra help as they are all working parents. I’m sure if asked they would have no problems in helping us with the children'

'Parents, I find, seem happy not to be involved in the crèche as the reason they use the crèche is because they work'

However, some staff may have believed that parents lacked interest as only thirty three respondents (18%) chose parents are interested and have a right to be involved as the most important reason to involve parents. One respondent explained:
Most of our children are in full time care, therefore their parents are working full time. So a lot of them are not interested in getting involved in the daily running of the nursery.

Many negative views about parents were expressed:

'Some parents could not be bothered',

'I would like parents to be involved but some parents have no interest in their children at all, most parents don't want to be involved, they had no time for their children let alone time for staff'... 'some parents are just not interested in the development of [their] child'

'Most parents have no time for their children/staff'

'Too busy working, modern parents don't seem to be able to cope'

5.2.5. Decision-making regarding the involvement of parents

In order to establish who made decisions regarding the involvement of parents, staff were given the options of: parents, staff in room, manager, or other and asked to indicate all that applied (question 15 in Appendix B). Almost 30% indicated that the manager alone made the decision and twenty-five respondents (13%) indicated that parents alone decided. Other respondents indicated that the manager, in consultation with parents or staff made the decision. While sixteen respondents (9%) indicated that the staff made the decision, two other respondents highlighted that they did not have an input, reporting that parent involvement was 'not allowed'. Of the respondents who chose the option, 'other', many reported the owner decided.

5.3. Benefits of parent involvement

In response to a quantitative measure 163 (90%) respondents agreed there were benefits to be gained from parent involvement (Question 16 in Appendix B). One hundred and fifty two respondents (79%) identified benefits for parents, one hundred and forty six (76%) identified benefits for staff and one hundred and forty (73%) identified benefits for children. The three most frequent benefits identified in qualitative data for children, parents and staff are presented in Table 5.5.
5.3.1 How children benefit from parent involvement

Continuity, was acknowledged as the main benefit for children from parent involvement, and mentioned by thirty respondents. Children were also believed to benefit by spending more time with and sharing their experiences with their parents and they were also believed to develop more confidence.

5.3.2 How parents benefit from their involvement

Almost equal weight was given to the belief that the main benefit from parent involvement for parents was that they get to know their own child better and their child’s routine. A small number believed that involvement relieved parents’ anxiety.

5.3.3 How staff benefit from parent involvement

The main benefit noted for staff, identified by fifty-seven respondents (36%), was that staff had a better understanding of the child/family. A small number believed that parent involvement resulted in staff having better relationships between parents and improved communications.

Table 5.5 Summary of the key benefits of parent involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits for children</th>
<th>Continuity 30 (20%)</th>
<th>More time with/share skills &amp; experiences with parents 27(18%)</th>
<th>More confident 25 (16%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benefits for parents</td>
<td>Know their own child better 44 (27%)</td>
<td>Know their child’s routine 42 (26%)</td>
<td>Relieves anxiety 17 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits for staff</td>
<td>Understand child/family better 57 (36%)</td>
<td>Have better relationship with parents 19 (12%)</td>
<td>Better communication 16 (10%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.4. Disadvantages of parent involvement

Almost two-thirds of respondents (64%), including twenty seven managers, believed there were disadvantages to parent involvement while 29% believed there were none. The most significant disadvantage identified were costs of parent involvement3, however, information on staff were not identified, and children’s behaviour changing. For example, children ‘acting up’ was identified as a disadvantage for

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3 It was suggested in the survey that ‘costs’ may refer to home visits
staff, parents and children. Themes were established from qualitative data highlighting disadvantages and categorised as follows:

5.4.1 Disadvantages of parent involvement for children

Forty-nine respondents believed there were no disadvantages for children from parent involvement. Eleven did not know if there were disadvantages. However, thirty respondents failed to answer the question which may indicate they had not considered this possibility. The main disadvantage for children, identified by 56 respondents (34%) was that it was unsettling. Respondents specified that children could not be themselves; their routine would be upset; or they would not join in activities with other children. Fifteen respondents (9%) believed that children would suffer separation anxiety when parents left and eleven respondents (7%) believed that children would expect parents to be present on a daily basis. Twelve respondents (7%) believed that children would be confused as to who was in authority.

5.4.2 Disadvantages of parent involvement for parents

Forty-four percent of respondents believed there were no disadvantages for parents, but thirteen respondents believed that parents were pressured to be involved however no indication was given as to where the pressure originated. In addition, 7% believed that parents suffered 'separation anxiety' when leaving their children while another suggested that parents 'may feel inadequate, undermined'.

5.4.3 Disadvantages of parent involvement for staff

While fifty-one respondents believed there were no disadvantages for staff from parent involvement, fourteen did not know if there were disadvantages and thirty failed to complete the question. This may indicate that because there was little parent involvement in practice, respondents had not considered this possibility. One respondent specified that disadvantages applied 'If parents are involved in day-to-day activities'. The most frequent disadvantages identified were that staff would 'lose control/routine upset', they would feel 'uncomfortable/observed', 'pressured', 'intimidated', staff would feel 'parents were interfering' or '[parents] may want to change procedures in centre' while the fact that parents pay for a service resulted in:
'[parents] *see us as employees just providing a service*'

'Parent involvement in a private crèche will not work as the parents are paying someone to take care of their child'

All disadvantages identified for children, parents and staff appear to indicate that respondents believed involvement entailed the physical presence of parents in services which may explain why respondents felt 'uncomfortable' or 'pressured'.

5.5. Report on non-participant observations

As part of the initial data collection the researcher carried out a number of non-participant observations in two early years services. The first, a community service located in an area designated disadvantaged, while the second was a private service located in a suburb of the city. Two visits were made to the community service, and as this research was focusing on private services, four visits were made, over a two-day period, to the private service. Visits covered morning and evening transitions only. The purpose of the exercise was to observe, at first hand, how parents and staff interact during these times and also to familiarise the researcher with the experiences of parent-practitioner interactions. When the observation sessions were completed the managers discussed their practices of parent involvement with the researcher. These discussions provided a vital insight into the views of managers, which may not have been evident in the written responses to the survey.

In both services, communication between parents and staff was friendly and relaxed. Parents were familiar with the layout of the services and most settled their children before leaving, for example, giving children their favourite toy or game and hanging their coats in the designated area. In the private service, transition time was approximately 2-3 minutes and both mothers and fathers were present. In the community service, no father was involved in bringing or collecting children but a number of mothers stayed for approximately 10-15 minutes.

In the community service, great efforts were made to involve parents, for example meetings and concerts were organized, and photographs of children’s families were displayed. However, while lectures on parenting skills and meetings to set policies in place were organised, the manager reported that the response from parents was poor. This applied also if meetings were organised to discuss an individual child’s
development. However, parents did attend concerts or lectures with videos, if they were aware their child would be appearing in the video.

Qualifications of staff were displayed in the community service. However, the manager suggested this could cause difficulty for staff lacking qualifications. In addition, in-service training was encouraged and a number of staff held FETAC level 1 or 2 qualifications. Many of the staff were mothers of children in the service and they were participating in in-service training. The manager, confirmed that staff turnover was low, and that there was a waiting list of parents who wished to be employed in the service.

Parents in the private service were generally not asked to participate in the service but occasionally they were asked to assist when children were going on an outing. Parents were not encouraged to stay until their child settled or to visit during the day. A small number of fathers brought and collected their children. The manager considered parent/staff meetings unnecessary, explaining that if a problem arose it could be discussed with parents at transition time. Parents were consulted and accommodated regarding opening and closing times during Christmas and Easter holidays. A before and after-school service was provided. The manager was a qualified Montessori teacher and a majority of the staff were from Russia.

The focus of this study was on the involvement of full-time working parents in their children’s early years services. Because only private services provide full-time care and education for preschool children, community services were excluded. However, using both types of service allowed comparisons of parent involvement practices between these different services.

The observations highlighted the need to focus on how parent involvement was understood and implemented by staff employed in private services. This was believed necessary because during the observation there appeared to have been little encouragement for parent involvement and little interaction between parents and staff. In addition, as interactions between parents and staff at transition appeared short it was considered important to investigate the area of communication and also staff training to involve parents.

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4 This would now equate to FETAC levels 4 and 5
5.6 Parent involvement in practice

In order to establish the practices that occurred in the services surveyed respondents were provided with a list of involvement activities and were asked to identify any that occurred in their service (*Questions 18 and 24 in Appendix B*). These questions focused on activities related to the induction process, facilities for parents, ongoing service-home links. The extent of parent involvement was also investigated.

5.6.1 Parent involvement at induction to services

Activities that may occur at induction were presented to respondents and they were asked to indicate any that occurred in their service.

**Fig 5.5 Involvement activities at induction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Invited to visit the service</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asked for information about their child</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Given written information about the service</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed that they are welcome at any time</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged to stay until child settles</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed of opportunities for their involvement</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed of the benefits of involvement</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff make a home visit</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Practices at induction were positive as a majority of respondents confirmed that parents were invited to visit services before their child started. A two-way exchange of information was evident as parents were given written information about the service and were asked for information about their child. One respondent believed parents needed more information:

*Parents are unsure when they start of their role – more information on how they should be involved would be great* [sic]

A majority of respondents confirmed that parents were encouraged to stay until their child settled and were told they were welcome at any time demonstrating a partnership approach.
5.6.2 Facilities and social events for parents

However, while parents were told they were welcome at any time and were encouraged to stay until their child settled, a minority reported that adult seating, tea/coffee facilities or that a room was provided where parents could meet away from children. While 37% of respondents confirmed that social events were organised for staff and parents, 19% reported that parents regularly attended these events.

5.6.3 Service-home links

Links between children’s homes and services were promoted in many ways. Parents and staff used first names and staff knew the names of special people in children’s lives. Notice boards were used to inform parents about events/activities and a majority confirmed that parents were given a daily written record about their child’s day, particularly, if their child was in the baby room. Over half of all respondents reported that individual parent/staff meetings were held while one-third confirmed that key workers were used to liaise with families.

Fig 5.6 Activities to promote service-home links

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents and staff use first names</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff know names of special people in child’s life</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on events on notice board</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents get daily written record (baby room...)</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children may bring items in to service from...</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual parent/staff meetings held</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents may bring books/videos home</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social event organised - parents/staff</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key workers used</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.6.4 Extent of parent involvement

In order to establish the levels of parent involvement respondents were asked to state if practices occurred regularly, sometimes or never.
Decision-making about their own children was the most frequent activity regularly undertaken by parents, while approximately two-fifths verified that parents regularly negotiated if family values differed from those of the service and accessed their child’s development records. One-third confirmed that parents regularly provided feedback or suggestions about the service. While 16% of respondents reported that parents regularly attended meetings/talks on child development, 38% confirmed that parents never attended.

The active involvement of parents in the general running of services was not a feature as a majority of respondents reported that parents were never in charge of certain activities, never helped with day-to-day activities, never contributed to policy development/programme planning or never served on a management committee. Parents were seldom involved in fundraising or provided materials for art and craft.

While these statistics may reflect staff preferences in parent involvement the finding that very few parents actively participated in services may not be unusual as a full-time service was being provided for working parents, so both staff and parents may not have considered it a possibility or an option. One respondent confirms this point:
'Parent involvement is not a big deal as they [parents] are paying for qualified staff to care for their children while they try to go back to work.'

However, establishing the extent of parent involvement may be problematic because of inconsistencies in responses from staff who were employed in the same services. Comparison of responses was facilitated because completed surveys were received from two respondents employed in thirty three services and from three respondents employed in thirty services. This comparison revealed inconsistencies regarding the extent and type of parent involvement practised in individual services. For example, in relation to whether photographs of staff were displayed two respondents employed in the same service one confirmed yes, while the other confirmed the opposite. In addition, respondents, when asked to indicate the extent of parent involvement, one respondent confirmed regularly another confirmed never.

Further inconsistencies related to the use of key workers, facilities available for parents or who decided if parents were to be involved. In addition, responding to a question regarding parents' attendance at meetings/talks on child development, three respondents employed in the same service, reported regularly, sometimes and never and when asked if their service had a written policy on parent involvement, respondents stated: yes, no and unsure. Four respondents (2%) reported home visits were made, but in one service, one respondent reported these visits were made, another confirmed the opposite. The use of web cameras provides a further example of inconsistency. One respondent stated:

'We have webcams so parents can watch their children all day if they wish. This adds to their involvement as they can question any activity they see their child in.'

However, two respondents employed in the same service omitted to report the use of web cameras. From a parent’s perspective, being able to see their child during the day may be appealing, but staff may not have considered cameras as an aid to involving parents but may have seen them as a monitoring device or a child protection measure.

Inconsistencies were also evident when comparing responses from managers and staff employed in the same service. However, the observation by one respondent may help explain this finding: 'No conversation with me only the manager.'
Consequently, if managers alone are involved with, or control communications with parents, and other staff members completed the survey, responses may be different.

Differences also emerged in relation the extent of problems experienced when involving parents, as staff employed in the same service identified problems as significant, while others suggested there were no problems. This may indicate a lack of shared understanding or it may reflect individual differences, as staff’s perceptions were being investigated.

Comparisons between qualitative and quantitative data also revealed inconsistencies. Quantitative data revealed that one hundred and forty four respondents (78%) agreed that parent involvement enhanced parent/staff relationships, but in response to a qualitative measure, only nineteen respondents (12%) identified this benefit. Many respondents highlighted difficulties in these relationships:

-'Parent involvement in the crèche can cause all kinds of problems between child, parent, and care worker’ (owner/manager)

-'Due to stresses of work and little time with their children parents can sometimes not want to hear or know about a child being ‘naughty’ and cut you short’ (staff)

In addition, quantitative data revealed that a majority believed that parents/staff find it easy to approach each other if there is a problem but while one respondent identified that involvement: ‘Enables parents feel comfortable voicing concerns/queries’, this benefit was not identified among the top three benefits, with qualitative data revealing that this was not always the case:

-'I feel parents involved in the direct running of a service is a bad idea, conflicting opinions would lead to ill feelings. I would not like to work directly with the parents too many cooks spoil the soup’

Seventy-seven respondents (41%) agreed that a wider curriculum is offered when parents share their talents and skills in services but this was not identified as one of the top three benefits in qualitative data. In addition, while almost two-thirds of respondents agreed that parents develop new skills and confidence from their involvement, a finding widely reported in the literature, these benefits were not identified in response to a qualitative measure.

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Major inconsistencies between qualitative and quantitative data may indicate that involvement was not considered necessary or an option for working parents. It may also indicate that because there was minimal involvement in their service staff had not considered these benefits, until they were prompted.

5.7 Communication between staff and parents

Communication plays a vital role in parent involvement and in the development and maintenance of parent/staff relationships. Fifty nine percent of staff, including thirty seven managers, rated their communication with parents excellent; 38%, including thirteen managers, rated it good; 2% as fair and 1% as weak. Just over half (51%), confirmed their conversations with parents lasted between 3-5 minutes, 13% believed they spent over 10 minutes and 4% indicated a typical conversation lasted less than two minutes. The telephone was cited by 66% of respondents as the most common method of communication used by parents and staff. Face-to-face conversations were rated second. Written communication the least common (Question 20 Appendix B).

Respondents were aware of the importance of regular, informal communication as over four-fifths agreed that informal communication with parents was important and that regular dialogue ensures parents know the aims of the service. Moreover, 67% believed they were responsible for initiating contact and sharing information with parents but eleven managers were unsure and six disagreed this was their responsibility. Respondents stated:

'The children I have spend most of their days in crèche so parents can miss out on a lot so it is important to talk and exchange ideas with parents'

'Parents have many demands on their time. They rely on the service provider to be professional and take the lead regarding communication of information'

'The best attitude you can have, sometimes parents need to know everything that goes on'

'Our crèche is small so we find the evening time chats with parents are enough for us'

'We wouldn’t have a lot of parent involvement other than conversations about the child'
5.7.1 Topics of conversation initiated by parents and staff

From a list of eight topics, staff were asked to identify the three most common topics of conversation initiated by both parents and staff (Question 21 in Appendix B).

Fig 5.8 Topics of conversation initiated by parents and staff

![Chart showing topics of conversation](image)

Staff identified issues related to children's physiological needs as the most common topics of conversation initiated by both parents and staff. This was followed by sharing positive experiences in the child's day, confirmed by 45% of respondents. While 35% of staff believed that sharing/seeking knowledge on child development was one of the three most common topics raised by parents, it was not among the top three initiated by staff. When identifying the type of involvement preferred by parents one respondent stated:

'Parents love to stop and have a chat about their children or any other interest of the day'

This comment demonstrates that besides wanting to talk about their own children parents also wished to engage in social conversations. However, while 32% of staff believed parents initiated social conversations less than half (15%) stated they initiated these conversations. Managers placed social conversations sixth in order of importance.

5.8 Problems experienced when involving parents

In order to identify the type and extent of problems experienced when involving parents respondents were asked to rate problems that had been identified in the
literature as ‘significant’, ‘minor’, or ‘no problem’ (*Question 27 in Appendix B*).

Children’s behaviour was the most significant problem identified in parent involvement as overall 92% of staff agreed that children’s behaviour changes, with 56%, including twenty six managers, identifying it as a significant problem. However, an inconsistency was evident between qualitative and quantitative data as children’s behaviour was identified as a disadvantage for staff and parents by only 12% and 9% of respondents respectively in response to a qualitative measure. One respondent stated: ‘*kids will always behave differently around parents*’ while twenty-three (12%) believed the most likely reason parents might not be involved was because their own child might be disruptive.

**Fig 5.9 Levels of Problems Experienced When Involving Parents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No Problem (%)</th>
<th>Minor Problem (%)</th>
<th>Significant problem (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children’s behaviour changes e.g. they ‘act up’</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff’s shortage of time</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff feel stressed</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Shortage of time was identified by 78% of respondents as a problem in parent involvement with eighty three respondents (45%) identifying it as a significant problem. Respondent highlighted the issue of time:

‘*Depends on the time I have to speak, there are always children needing my attention*’

‘*More time for staff to dedicate to parents*’

Staff feeling stressed was identified as a significant problem by 22% of respondents. One respondent believed that a disadvantage for staff from parent involvement was that: ‘*Bossy parents may intimidate staff*’. Qualitative responses also revealed that
respondents believed parent involvement required an effort on their part which may lead to stress.

'Parent involvement is a great idea but sometimes the practical side of doing it isn't very easy' (manager)

'Parent involvement is important to staff and children and the parents themselves, but can cause many problems, it is something that would need a lot of consideration and planning' (staff)

'A lot of things sound wonderful in theory but reality can be quite different. I feel that it is great to get parent involvement but it takes a lot of organising and a lot of hard work to reap the benefits' (staff)

'Parents can sometimes cause chaos in a room' (staff)

Twelve percent of respondents identified parents having difficulty accepting their child’s close relationship with staff as a significant problem in parent involvement. One respondent suggested:

'In theory, parent involvement is good. But it may lead to a lack of trust between staff/parent making staff feel inadequate. Parents may feel overwhelmed by carer/child relations' (manager)

All disadvantages and problems identified by respondents may demonstrate a perception that parent involvement entailed the physical presence of parents in services. However, only a small number of respondents identified as a significant problem the fact that confidentiality could be compromised, that parent involvement endangered role boundaries or staff losing some control of the programme/service. Respondents stated they needed to be in control:

'Staff need to be organised and in ‘control’ of the class/group of children. They need to be able to delegate to parents and involve them in the group'

'They [staff] need to be assertive towards parents in order to control the running of their group'

From a service perspective the most significant problem in relation to parent involvement and identified by 59% of respondents were costs. Respondents may have considered the costs involved in training staff to involve parents or home visits.
5.9 Attitudes and beliefs needed to involve parents

Respondents appeared positive about encouraging parent involvement as 70% agreed that staff should encourage all parents to be involved at some level and 53% agreed that a variety of opportunities should be available to involve all parents. However, while 50% of respondents confirmed that parents were told about the opportunities available for their involvement a small minority believed that lack of information about the opportunities or dissatisfaction with the opportunities offered was a reason for the non-involvement of parents. In addition, the fact that approximately three-fifths of respondents had not told parents about the benefits from their involvement; did not believe staff should continuously review involvement activities with parents or that parents should be asked to volunteer for specific activities may indicate that staff were acting as ‘gatekeepers’ which may have resulted in parents being unaware of the opportunities available and importance of their involvement.

Managers may also have contributed to this situation as approximately 50% told parents about the opportunities available or about the benefits from their involvement; believed a variety of opportunities should be available to involve all parents or that staff should continuously review involvement practices with parents.

Centres having a policy on parent involvement are more likely to be working towards partnership with parents (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989). However, while approximately two-fifths of respondents, including twenty six managers, confirmed their service had this policy in place, 21%, including five managers and one owner of a service were unsure if their service had a policy. One respondent suggested she would like a ‘more defined policy structure’ in relation to parent involvement while another highlighted a change she would like:

‘Every crèche should have written policy about parents involvement provided by the government’

A consensus was not evident among staff and managers, regarding their need for specific training to involve parents as equal numbers agreed, were unsure and disagreed that training was necessary. An open-ended question asked respondents what skills they needed when involving parents. Respondents had divergent views:
'Patience, to be objective, to be able to calm or foresee a difficult situation, to instruct without seeming to be pushy'

'Don’t need skills, just have to be friendly – always be nice'

Additionally, while 44% of respondents agreed that staff should keep up-to-date with research on parent involvement equal numbers (28%) were unsure and disagreed.

However, respondents were clear about their need for support and confidence as a majority agreed they needed support and confidence when involving parents. Qualitative responses highlighted the need for confidence:

'Getting your point across without parents thinking who do you think you are'

'Need to be confident about their own position + role in the children’s care - be open + direct + not feel insecure' [sic]

'The majority of parents treat childcare workers as somebody they can look down on'

5.9.1 Staff’s beliefs about their role and influence

Over half of all respondents (57%), including twenty nine managers, agreed that staff had an expanded role which involves working with parents as well as their children. However, 30%, eighteen of whom were managers, disagreed that working with parents was a priority for staff and 29% were unsure. One respondent did emphasise: ‘family service - treat the whole rather than part’.

Respondents were positive about their role in parent involvement as a large majority believed parents should be asked what they needed from the service, believed staff should accommodate parents’ expectations and that staff should explain to parents the educational purpose of activities undertaken in the service. In addition, 87% agreed that staff were a resource for parents, providing information/advice. However, while 49% of staff, including twenty seven managers agreed staff should provide linkages to other services parents may need, 23%, including eleven managers, disagreed.

One hundred and five respondents (56%) agreed that staff’s view of parents influenced parent involvement. One hundred and thirty five respondents (72%)
disagreed that parent involvement in services was unworkable and outdated. However, sixty-one respondents (32%), including nineteen managers agreed that parents should trust staff to do their job and not get involved. The following quotes may explain staff's views:

'Little involvement makes their [staff's] job easier','

'Where I work there is very little involvement which suits everybody'

'Maybe parents should have a one day course on caring for children'

A large majority (93%) believed that parent involvement required mutual respect, trust and understanding. One respondent demonstrated the importance of mutual respect suggesting staff needed to show respect, when involving parents while also confirming that parents were thankful and respectful. Another respondent reported that parents respected staff decisions. However, one respondent believed that parents did not always show respect stating:

'The majority of parents treat childcare workers as somebody they can look down on'

Respondents also highlighted that parent involvement led to the development of trust, noting how parents trust staff:

'They [parents] leave their most precious possession in our care'

'They trust us with the most valuable thing in their life - their children'

'They have the utmost trust in me and appreciate what we do for their children'

Table 5.6 highlights the views of managers/owner-managers about what they consider is needed for involvement to happen.
Table 5.6. Beliefs of managers/owner-managers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs of managers/owner-managers</th>
<th>Managers/Owner-Managers</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working with parents a priority for staff</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff have an expanded role involving working with parents</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training to involve parents necessary</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents/staff jointly share responsibility for children</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents should be asked what they need from the service</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff should accommodate parents’ expectations</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff should explain educational purpose of activities</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff should organise activities to be undertaken at home</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents should serve on management committee</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents should trust staff and not get involved</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Approximately two-fifths (43%) of managers had training to involve parents, but over 60% of managers disagreed that this training was necessary. Managers were positive about their role in parent involvement, ascertaining parents needs and accommodating their expectations, 42% chose parents as partners their first preference in parent involvement. Managers did not favour organising activities to be undertaken at home or having parents serve on a management committee. However, less than one-third agreed that parents should trust staff and not get involved.

5.10 Changes staff would like in parent involvement practices

An open-ended question asked respondents to specify changes they would like in the area of parent involvement (Question 30 in Appendix B). Of the 107 (55%) who responded, 64 (34%) were in favour of changes. Suggestions made included:

‘Allow them [parents] to come inside the crèche further than hall door’

‘Parents are becoming more involved and it should continue’
‘All parents should take an active role in their kids education’ [sic]

‘Dropping in if they want to spend time or take their child out at lunchtime’

Children are believed to benefit when parents share their talents and skills in early years services but only 6% reported that parents regularly participated in this way.
However, a small number of staff stated they would like parents: ‘Sharing their talents and skills’

Forty three respondents (22%) did not want any changes. One respondent suggested that parents had enough involvement, another believed parents liked minimal involvement and four believed that parents were happy not to be involved. One respondent suggested she would like more interest from parents confirming:

‘Parent involvement is only possible when parents are willing to participate, cooperate and work with carers’

Another respondent suggested:

‘Parents get involved when they can without pressure being put on them’

5.11 Staff’s perceptions of how parents viewed their role

In response to a quantitative measure one hundred and thirty seven respondents (71%) agreed that parents valued their role as a childcare worker (Question 31 in Appendix B). However, in response to a qualitative measure mixed views were expressed: ‘not always’; ‘most do’; ‘some do’ or

‘Sometimes it’s hard to know as some parents it seems do not fully appreciate how hard the job involved is and take a lot for granted’

‘At times I feel that parents take us for granted, don’t understand or appreciate the work we do’

‘A certain amount of parents can treat childcare workers as babysitters and not value their role in the child’s life or their educational influence on the child’

A number of respondents highlighted how they knew they were valued by parents:

‘They [parents] appreciate our time and effort in educating their child and bringing them on to their next levels’

‘They [parents] always say, “I don’t know how you do it” because most of them would not like to work in a crèche’

‘I feel I am valued as a lot of parents say, “how do you do it, you must have great patience”’
Many respondents believed parents valued them more as their relationship developed:

'Parents value the role more when they have had occasion to be involved'
'... if they were more involved they might value us more. Many don't realise the dedication and hard work involved. Others feel we are amazing and appreciate us so much!'

Respondents described how they judged if their role was valued:

'At Christmas and Easter we get presents and then you know if your appreciated or not' [sic]

'Most parents don't take your advice on board they sometimes treat you like a babysitter'

A number of respondents focused on the status of their job, highlighting the belief in society that childcare required low/no skills and the perception that staff did not need 'to be too clever'. Another suggested:

'Most people think it is a low-paid job with no skills required which is far from the truth'

Others focused on the remuneration they received:

'Although parent involvement seems to be important, people working in childcare are very badly paid and probably feel taken for granted a lot'

'Some [parents] would see childcare work as an easy job that people don't have to be too clever to do'

'Most [parents] understand the commitment involved from the staff and the wage sacrifice!'

One respondent suggested that employers should value workers and provide them with good working conditions and salaries while another stated: 'It's the most rewarding job I've had to date'. Eight respondents believed parents saw them as 'babysitters' or 'childminders'. One respondent stated:

'They [parents] sometimes appreciate the training staff have to qualify in childcare but often forget the level of training staff have and think they are just childminders'
‘It is about 50/50, some parents just see you as a babysitter, and do not fully understand how much you help in their child’s overall development’

However, a number of respondents referred to themselves as carers, as opposed to early years practitioners/professionals or educators. One respondent suggested:

‘Their [parents] children are left in our total care for most or part of the day. We become their primary carers’

5.12 Staff’s views on the survey

Ranking of some questions proved problematic for many respondents. For example, when asked to rank six statements, using numbers 1-6, (‘1’ indicating the most important to ‘6’ the least important) with the instruction: Please use each number only once, a number of respondents assigned all statements ‘1’ and their responses to these particular questions were eliminated. This problem particularly applied to questions 10, 11, and 12 (see Appendix B). One respondent highlighted the difficulty:

‘There are no strict guidelines that can be used in involving parents. I felt with most of your questions it is very difficult to give ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers or use multiple choice 1-6 etc’

In addition, a small number of respondents failed to complete/answer a number of questions. Question 26, which investigated staff’s beliefs about areas such as training, support and their role in encouraging, implementing and sustaining parent involvement, caused particular difficulty. Respondents also had difficulty with questions 27-32. Question 27 invited respondents to identify problems as significant, minor or no problem, when involving parents. Questions 28-32 were qualitative and enquired about the skills and attitudes staff needed when involving parents and changes they would like to make in the area of parent involvement. Question 31 also had a quantitative measure to establish staff’s beliefs about whether parents valued their role. Failure to complete these questions may have resulted from lack of interest, the questionnaire may have been too long or too difficult to complete. Perhaps questions were not seen as relevant as many respondents stated they did not have any parent involvement in their service. One manager/owner returned the questionnaires for re-use, explaining in her letter that she had no parent involvement in her service. Additional comments demonstrate the difficulty:
'We here at the crèche don’t have a lot of parent involvement so it is not easy to answer your questions'

'Found that this survey was inappropriate to our service and more suited to school'

However, a number of respondents reported that they found the survey valuable:

'This survey has been very valuable – it has made me question the way we can improve our parental involvement – and improve overall care of children.

'This questionnaire has ‘opened our eyes’ more in this area. Will definitely be organizing parent involvement on a bigger scale’

Positive feedback about information gleaned from completing the questionnaire was received when follow-up telephone calls were made reminding respondents to return questionnaires. One manager contacted the researcher requesting an additional copy of the questionnaire for use at a staff meeting, when policies and practices in the area of parent involvement were being reviewed.

5.13 Summary

The study aimed to establish EYPs’ views and practices of parent involvement. Evidence from the data would lead to the conclusion that staff had wide-ranging views of what involvement entailed and what they perceived as partnership. There was almost unanimous agreement that it was important to involve parents and generally, positive attitudes towards parent involvement were expressed. A large majority agreed that there were benefits and also disadvantages to parent involvement.

Staff ranked parents are their children’s first educators, the most important reason to involve parents, and the main reason parents got involved was to have a say in the care and education of their children. From a parent’s perspective, work or family commitments were considered the main barriers to their involvement. Parents as partners, was ranked as the most preferred involvement practice but this was chosen by only two-fifths of respondents. However, while partnership was evident at the initial introduction to services and when parents were involved in decision-making about their own child, parents were generally not involved as full partners.
A large majority of respondents considered informal communication and regular dialogue with parents important. However, despite a majority rating their communication with parents as excellent, many confirmed their need for communication skills. One respondent stated why she needed communication skills:

'Being able to tell a parent if their child has done something bold'

The telephone was cited as the most frequent way communication occurred between staff and parents. A majority emphasised their need for support and confidence when involving parents and while a majority believed parents valued their role, a small number believed parents treated them like babysitters.

A majority agreed they had an expanded role that involved working with parents, as well as the more traditional role of working with children. However, one-third disagreed that working with parents was a priority for them and also believed parents should trust staff to do their job and not get involved. A minority had received pre-service training in working with parents, and approximately one-third agreed and also disagreed that training was necessary. While a majority stated they held qualifications related to childcare, they were generally at a sub-degree level.

Generally, respondents expressed positive views about the survey, but a small number indicated they had difficulty ranking questions and giving a yes or a no answer.

In addition, inconsistencies were found when comparing qualitative and quantitative data and when comparing responses from staff employed in the same service. This is considered a major finding, which may lead to some difficulty in interpreting some of the findings. (This issue will be discussed further in 6.5).

In chapter 6 the data presented in this chapter will be analysed and discussed in detail.
CHAPTER 6

ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION
6.1 Introduction

In this chapter a summary of the study is presented together with conclusions drawn from results presented in the previous chapter and related to relevant literature. The implications of the findings will also be discussed.

6.1.1 Summary of the study

This exploratory study aimed to investigate the views of staff, employed in a sample of private early years services, on parent involvement. The three main research questions were reflected in the measures used to obtain an overview of staff’s views on parent involvement. The first section focused on staff understandings of parent involvement including their beliefs about the reasons for, and the ways they would like parents involved; their beliefs about why parents might or might not be involved; and the advantages and disadvantages of parent involvement. The second section aimed to establish the level and type of involvement practised including any problems staff experienced involving parents. The final section focused on staff’s attitudes and beliefs about what is needed to implement parent involvement, including their skills and training needs and changes they would like in parent involvement.

A stratified sample was chosen from the official list of preschool services provided by the Health Service Executive - Eastern Region. Managers of services were contacted by telephone and invited to participate. A self-administered postal questionnaire containing 32 questions was used to collect data. Quantitative and qualitative measures were employed. Three questionnaires, with letters explaining the study, were posted to services agreeing to participate. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, 11) was used to analyse quantitative data.

Themes to be discussed in this chapter include understandings of parent involvement; links between staff preferences and the implementation of parent involvement; factors that influence parent involvement, including the knowledge, skills and attitudes of EYPs and how they view their role; communication, the influence of power, status and confidence of EYPs and stress. The influence of children and the issue of gender and organisational factors are then highlighted. Inconsistencies in responses and the limitations of the study are discussed. Finally, a summary of this chapter is presented. Conclusions are drawn in the following chapter.
6.2 Understanding of parent involvement

In this study, there was almost unanimous agreement about the importance and benefits of parent involvement. However, many respondents had a traditional and narrow understanding of involvement, believing it required the active participation of parents in services or service-related activities. Few respondents seemed aware that working in partnership did not necessarily entail parents being present in services but a staff member stated why a partnership was needed:

'We need to involve the parents in order to build up a trusting relationship and if we experience any problems with the child we can work together as a team'

In addition, while face-to-face conversations are highly regarded in the literature (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Logsdon, 1998; McMillan, 2000; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001) and particularly appropriate for working parents (OECD, 2001) not all respondents appeared aware that by conversing with parents about their child they were working in partnership with them.

Parent involvement was considered important but a consensus was not evident regarding the rationale for involvement as almost equal weight was given to four of the six reasons presented in the survey. Parents are children’s first educators was considered the most important reason to involve parents while staff being more informed when parents share their knowledge about their child was rated second. Staff wishing to support parents in their child-rearing role was not considered important. Moreover, parent involvement, as an indicator of quality, was not deemed important, despite widely reported research confirming that parent involvement is an important component of and contributor to service quality (NAEYC, 1997; Powell, 1998; CECDE, 2007).

These findings may indicate that staff did not fully understand, or were not convinced by the rationale for parent involvement (McMillan, 2000); had not explored their beliefs, views, and feelings (Dale, 1996); had not addressed their assumptions about parents, professionalism and working together (Lindon, 1997) or were not keeping up-to-date with research in the field. Some respondents had difficulty rating questions, stating they considered all statements equally important. In addition, a minority had training to involve parents so many may not have understood what involving or working in partnership with them entailed. This finding is not unusual as these terms are not clearly defined in the
literature (Elliott, 2003; Martin, 2003).

6.3. Staff's preferences influencing parent involvement practices

Staff may have a major influence in the involvement of parents and this section investigates links between staff preferences and the levels and types of involvement practised. Pugh & De'Ath's (1989) framework, which describes dimensions of parent involvement in pre-schools, is used to compare EYPs’ preferences and the levels and types of involvement practised.

Two-fifths of respondents favoured the involvement of parents as partners, and an association may be evident between the level of partnership evident in services and the fact that a minority favoured this type of involvement. For example, while a majority agreed that parents and staff jointly share responsibility for the care of children and also confirmed that parents were involved in decision-making regarding individual children, parents were not involved as full partners, sharing information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability (Pugh & De'Ath, 1989). However, respondents may have believed this question referred to a parent’s own child, as the following quote illustrates:

'I think parents should be involved, but not regarding any other child, only their own, as every parent has their own ideas'

These findings concur with previous research which reported that few services achieve true partnership (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989; Foot et al., 2002; Martin, 2003; OECD, 2004) but results from this study are a long way from the aspiration of full partnership, as described in the literature (Wolfendale, 1992; Stonehouse, 1995; Rodd, 2006) and show that there was not even the beginning of an understanding of true partnership among many respondents.

Parents are their children’s first educators, was considered the most important reason to involve parents. A minority favoured the involvement of parents as educators of their own children and also confirmed that parents regularly supported service ideas at home. However, it needs to be considered that some parents select a service, where their input is not required (McMillan, 2000; Mitchell, 2003). Respondents in this study were aware of this fact suggesting that parents were happy not to be involved because they worked. One
respondent suggested that parents did not care what happens in the service ‘once a child appears happy/content’.

However, a majority of respondents, including thirty one managers, disagreed that they should organise parent/child activities to be undertaken at home. Staff may have considered it was not part of their role and may have been unwilling to undertake additional responsibilities. They may have believed it was akin to giving ‘homework’ which they may not have agreed with, or they may have believed parents could continue activities at home, without staff involvement, despite research to the contrary (Elliott, 2003). In addition, the continuation of work undertaken in services may not have been facilitated as less than half confirmed that parents could bring books, activities, videos, from the services to their home. However, parents may not have had time for involvement in their home, so taking ideas home may be just as significant and may be more appropriate as the continuation of work undertaken in the service, but this approach was not investigated in the survey.

A link may also be evident between staff’s preferences and the involvement of parents in the curriculum, as a majority disagreed and a minority confirmed that parents were regularly involved in sharing their talents and skills in services. However, research confirms that a broader curriculum is offered when the skills of both teachers and parents are utilised (McMillan, 2000). This demonstrates that staff may unintentionally influence the participation of parents by not striving to engage them in ways appropriate to their strengths or interests (Stonehouse, 1995; OECD, 2001). While the possibilities for working parents to share their talents and skills may be limited, for example, compiling newsletters at home, the NAEYC (2005) found that full-time working parents welcome opportunities to get involved despite limited availability. Parents could contribute to the curriculum if staff considered it important and took a broader view about how it could be implemented. Bridge (2001) demonstrated this broader view, when activities initiated by working parents with their children at home were continued by staff in preschool.

A majority of respondents in this study disagreed with and also confirmed that parents never served on a management committee or contributed to policy development/programme planning. The OECD (2001) state that parent involvement in management promotes parent leadership and empowerment but research confirms that
parents were rarely involved in managing services (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989; Murphy, 2001; Foot et al., 2002). Previous research may help explain staff’s reluctance to consider parents having a role in management. Staff may have considered this type of involvement a threat to their professional status (INTO, 1997); they may have believed parents would be selecting staff or setting wage levels (Pugh & De’Ath, 1987; Ferguson, 2002), they may have believed they lacked the necessary knowledge and skills (Shartrand et al., 1997) or they may have considered, as Foot et al., (2000) suggests, that involvement in management presents a challenge for parents who manage while at the same time, are recipients of a service. However, services in this study were run as private businesses and respondents confirmed: ‘small private crèches do not have management committees’ or stated that the question was ‘not appropriate’. McMillan (2005) found that parents and providers favoured this type of involvement but Martin (2003) found the opposite.

Staff did not favour the involvement of parents as supporters and a minority confirmed that parents were regularly involved in fundraising or provided recycled materials for art and craft. This finding concurs with previous research (Foot et al., 2002; DJELR, 2002) which found that fundraising was almost non-existent in private services. Research also found that parents found fundraising the thing they least liked about their involvement in services (Mitchell, 2003). In addition, a minority reported parents regularly provided recycled materials for art and craft, despite research highlighting an over-abundance of ready-to-buy plastic toys in private services (OECD, 2004). It is unclear why staff did not agree with this type of activity, although, recycled materials may not have been favoured. However, this type of involvement may be convenient and attractive for working parents and may be a means of involving children, parents and staff, linking children’s two contexts, resulting in more staff-parent communication.

A minority of staff favoured the involvement of parents as volunteers, for example, helping with day-to-day activities, and, similar to previous research (Foot et al., 2002; OECD, 2006) a majority confirmed parents never participated in this manner. However, parents who work full-time may not be available to volunteer on a regular basis. One staff member explains why she did not consider day-to-day involvement necessary:

‘All parents should take an active role in their kids education, however, on a day to day basis I don’t think it’s necessary for parents to be involved in school as well as at home. Children need to develop away from them as well as with them’
However, Bridge (2001) has shown that active participation in services is not a requirement to implement a partnership relationship. Moreover, programmes in Sweden function without parent participation in daily activities, as parents are expected to work or study while their children attend childcare, yet Sweden has highly developed laws and policies promoting and supporting partnership between early year’s staff and parents (OECD, 2006). Mixed views were expressed regarding parent’s willingness to be involved:

‘Most of our parents are very willing to take a day off work to join their children on an outing to the zoo or picnic etc. and both children and parents and staff enjoy these occasions’

‘When we do ask for help (trips) parents are too busy with their own lives’

Similar to previous research (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989; Whalley, 1997; OECD, 2001), these comments highlight that parents get involved in different ways and at different levels while also demonstrating that parents do not always participate even when they are encouraged (Shartrand et al., 1997). The comments may also demonstrate how individual attitudes play a major role in the promotion or absence of parent involvement. The findings may indicate that newer forms of involvement are needed to reflect changes in parents availability (Logsdon, 1998; Bridge, 2001; Murphy, 2001; McWayne & Owsianik, 2004) and also the necessity to engage parents in ways appropriate to their needs, strengths and interests (OECD, 2001; Whalley, 2001).

Overall, while staff may have positive attitudes or have training to involve parents and while links were established between staff preferences and parent involvement practices, staff in general may not have been involved in decisions regarding the involvement of parents, as a majority confirmed that managers, either alone or in consultation with parents, made these decisions.

6.4 Factors that influence parent involvement practices

6.4.1 Knowledge and skills

In this study, virtually all staff confirmed they held qualifications but there was a wide diversity in the type and level of their qualifications and they were generally at a very low level. Seven respondents held a degree, only one in ECCE. This finding may not be
unusual as nationally, 2.4% of full-time staff held a degree, (now referred to as a FETAC level 8 qualification) (DJELR, 2002). However, it is speculated that the numbers of graduates will have increased when consideration is given to the number of colleges now offering level 8 qualifications.

The formal qualifications of managers are also considered important in parent involvement. In this current study, a small number of managers had no formal qualifications and only two managers held degrees. This finding is important because the literature highlights the importance of managers being trained to degree level (Hirst, 1996). In addition, research confirms that staff who have low levels of qualifications demonstrate better practices when they have qualified teachers supporting them (Sylva et al., 2003; Taggart, 2007). Highly qualified and trained managers may play a crucial role in helping staff update their skills, by providing additional training or practical experience of interacting with parents, or as Whalley (2001) suggests, by encouraging staff to observe and discuss others successes or difficulties.

The finding that staff in this study held low levels or lacked formal qualifications may be surprising because the Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations (2006) state suitable and competent adults should be employed. International research also highlights the importance of formal qualifications, training, and experience in promoting parent involvement (Moriarty, 2000; Burchinal et al., 2002; Wilkins & Walker, 2002; Harris, Jacobson & Hemmer, 2004; Ginsberg & Hermann-Ginsberg 2005; Saracho & Spokek, 2007). In addition, because professional growth is a developmental process research highlights the importance of ongoing training, which enables teachers maintain and adapt their skills and knowledge (Shartrand et al. 1997).

In addition to their low level of formal qualifications, a majority had not been trained to involve parents, so they may have lacked the knowledge and practical skills necessary to effectively involve parents. This is a similar finding to that found in previous Irish research (Murphy, 2001; Martin, 2003; OECD, 2004) but the OECD (2001) point out that few courses focus on strategies to work with parents and families. Despite international research highlighting the need for training, a consensus was not evident, as similar numbers, agreed, disagreed and were unsure that training was necessary. One staff member believed staff did not require skills and another stated:
'You don’t need a skill you just have to be friendly and make friends with them [parents], always be nice'

Respondents may have considered their initial training to involve parents or the practical experience they had gained was sufficient, or they may have considered parents responsible for any difficulties they experienced.

Of the respondents in this study who had training to involve parents, a majority reported their training included communication skills; others confirmed they were trained during work experience or college based role-play. However, it is important that education programmes offer experience of working directly with parents otherwise staff may have the theory of involvement but may lack the practical experience necessary. Epstein (2005) reported that only 7% of schools and colleges agreed that teachers graduating from their institutions were well prepared to conduct family/community practices. McMillan (2000) considered such training difficult, prior to working in the field.

A lack of professionalism may have been evident in this study when three respondents described their close relationship with particular parents. One regularly babysat for families, another attended parents’ social events while another suggested:

'I have a great relationship with the parents. I have an open door policy. They often ring or text me outside work hours and I am still in touch with parents who have left the service'

While these respondents had close relationships with particular parents, Katz (1995) highlights that close relationships with particular parents may be detrimental to relationships with other parents or may lead to unequal treatment of children. However, a number of respondents also reported their role as professionals necessitated: ‘keeping their personal view of some parents to themselves’; being ‘impartial’; ‘listen and not judge’ demonstrating respect and sensitivity and a professional attitude.

Just over two-fifths of staff in this study believed they should keep up-to-date with research on parent involvement but nationally and internationally the importance of staff keeping up-to-date has been highlighted. For example, Sumsion (1999) highlights the benefits of a commitment to reflection on professional practice. The finding that a majority disagreed that they should keep up to date with research may indicate that they were happy with their present level of involvement, were not open to change, or they may have
believed that keeping up-to-date would require additional effort on their part, for example, studying. One respondent confirmed that issues raised in this survey were discussed at staff meetings and a small number confirmed they had become aware of ways to improve involvement from information gleaned from the study, that is, they learned about parent involvement in the course of completing the survey. However, a number of staff commented on the high number and length of questionnaires they are asked to complete. The issue of early childhood workers becoming ‘objects of research’ has been highlighted by Urban (2004:31) who states: ‘there is a danger of solidifying hierarchies in the field, as practitioners remain objects of research’. This statement may be relevant if information gleaned from research is not circulated within the early childhood field or implemented in practice.

Age and experience of staff may play a role in the development and implementation of parent involvement. In a study in England, Cameron et al., (2002) found that three-quarters of early years staff were under the age of 30. In this study, just over half of the participants were aged between 26-40 years, 88% were under 40 years. Two-thirds had over five years experience in childcare, which may indicate they had made a career commitment. This is important as research confirms that experienced teachers possess ‘more positive attitudes about working with parents, were more tenacious in their approaches, and had more strategies and techniques to interact positively with parents’ (Ginsberg & Hermann-Ginsberg, 2005:2). They were also more likely to provide a collaborative approach (McMillan, 2000). However, while Ashton et al. (2004) reported that experienced teachers were unwilling to adopt new ideas, Katz et al.(1996), believed that lack of experience may cause teachers to be anxious about meetings with parents or to be less effective in engaging families (Tait, 2001); but through experience these problems can be overcome (Sumsion, 1999).

In this study, two respondents, who had eight and twelve years experience stated that the questionnaire had been valuable and confirmed that they would be organising parent involvement on a bigger scale. This demonstrates an openness to parent involvement when presented with ideas about how it may be implemented, and highlights the benefits of keeping up-to-date with research. This may also show that experienced staff are more likely to work with parents and may indicate that they had reached level 4 in Katz’s (1995)
stages of professional development, having a comfortable level of confidence in their own ability. Both were trained to involve parents – one had a Montessori qualification and the other, the owner of a service, had a Diploma in Childcare Management and completed a course in child development.

Being a parent and also an EYP may influence practitioners’ attitudes towards the need for training to involve parents. In this study, of the sixty-seven respondents (35%) who were mothers twenty seven ‘agreed’ that training to involve parents was necessary. The remaining forty, who considered training unnecessary, may have believed that being a mother was sufficient in itself. This finding reflects research which suggests that after having their own children staff were more likely to discourage parent involvement and to believe training to involve parents was unnecessary (Laloumi-Vidali, 1997; McMillan, 2000). One respondent, a mother, demonstrated a traditional view of involvement, asserting that parents may want to sit and chat rather than help with the children, but positive views were also expressed regarding changes staff would like:

‘To have space for a parent room - more regular meetings (one to one) with staff. More time for staff to dedicate to parents’

Overall, staff’s lack of formal qualifications and training to involve parents may hinder the involvement of parents and prevent the development of shared understandings with parents.

6.4.2 Attitudes

Individual attitudes play a major role in the promotion or absence of parent involvement and in this study many positive attitudes were expressed. There was almost unanimous agreement about the importance and benefits of parent involvement and a majority agreed that all parents should be encouraged to be involved at some level, and that a variety of opportunities should be available to involve all parents. This demonstrate awareness that parents and families have different needs and want to get involved in different ways and at different levels (Whalley, 1997; OECD, 2001). These positive attitudes are important because research (Shartrand et al., 1997; Keyes, 2000; Murphy, 2001; Goodfellow, 2003) confirms that attitudes, feelings, beliefs and values influence staff actions.

However, a minority told parents about the benefits and only 50% told them about the
opportunities available for their involvement, despite research highlighting that failure to provide this information prevents collaboration between parents and staff (Erwin & Rainforth, 1996; Rous et al., 2003) and may prevent parents making informed decisions. While staff may have presumed that parents were aware of the benefits, it may also indicate that rhetoric and reality differed as respondents appeared unwilling to put their positive attitudes towards parent involvement into practice. This may also signify that staff believed the disadvantages and problems associated with involvement outweighed the benefits, particularly as many respondents indicated that involvement required the physical presence of parents in services.

In addition, while research confirms that inviting parents to be involved in specific activities ensures parents know their involvement is welcomed (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997), a majority in this study disagreed that parents should be asked to volunteer for specific activities. This finding may indicate that staff were unaware that parents: need encouragement (Foot et al., 2002; Elliott, 2003); may not know how to become involved (Wright et al., 2000; Arnold, 2001; Martin, 2003) or that parents may have difficulty getting started, even if they were aware of involvement opportunities.

Openness to developing shared understandings with parents and learning about their childrearing practices was also demonstrated when a staff member stated:

"They are the children's parents at the end of the day and any help and info are welcome as we don't know everything ... not telling the parent how to look after their child but them telling us"

This positive attitude is important not alone because information about parents' preferences is vital if constructive partnerships are to be established (Foot et al., 2000) but also because little is known about how parents would like to share the care and education of their children (Elliott, 2003). However, this respondent was not highly qualified, and she had little training to involve parents, but her openness to involvement may reflect the fact that individual attitudes play a major role in parent involvement (Keyes, 2000; Goodfellow, 2003) and that personal attributes may be more important than formal qualifications (Pugh & De’Ath, 1987).

However, difficulties developing shared understandings were evident as respondents
suggested that parents were not always co-operative, did not always listen or suggested that conflicting opinions would lead to ill feeling. In addition, a minority reported that parents regularly provided feedback or suggestions about the service, perhaps because of fear of displeasing teachers (Mendoza et al., 2003) or their child being disadvantaged (Katz et al., 1996). Previous research may help explain some of the anomalies. While staff play a key role in the development and maintenance of relationships with parents (Laloumi-Vidali, 1997; Elliott, 2004), they may have mixed feelings about their work with parents (Sumson, 1999; Keyes, 2000) as collaborative relations or developing shared understandings with parents does not come about naturally or easily (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001).

While respondents believed their views of parents influenced parent involvement many negative views about parents in general were expressed, with working parents specifically targeted by a small number of respondents. One respondent stated: ‘I would like to see parents putting their children before their careers’. However, research highlights the need for teachers to develop positive attitudes about working with parents because a poor attitude can negatively impact on their success with parents (Shartrand et al., 1997; Ginsberg & Hermann-Ginsberg 2005) and may create a barrier to their involvement (Whalley, 2001). Cameron et al. (2002) cite research confirming that a majority of childcare students would not work full-time if they had preschool children, which may highlight a belief that young children should be in the exclusive care of their mothers (Katz, 1995). However, it undermines the concept of full-time care for young children if staff providing that care do not agree with it, in principle, or would not use childcare for their own children. One respondent demonstrated awareness of parents’ feelings:

‘[Staff] need to be sympathetic and non-biased, not be judgmental about the situation and not to show the ‘I’m right you’re wrong attitude’ and to realise that you, the staff, are there to do a job and not to tell parents how to do their job as a mother’

However, staff’s attitude towards working parents may be inferred from the comments that staff must ‘not be judgmental about the situation’, must not show the ‘I’m right you’re wrong attitude’. These beliefs may account for some of the negative views expressed by respondents, but these opinions may also influence staff attitude towards the involvement of working parents.
A minority of respondents in this study believed that parents were interested and had a right to be involved was the most important reason to involve parents. A number of respondents expressed the view that parents lacked interest in involvement or suggested that parents were interested in their children’s day-to-day progress but believed they did not want to give up free time for outings. This may indicate that staff assessed parents’ interest by their involvement in outings, but not by their interest in day-to-day progress, demonstrating a traditional view of involvement. One staff member highlighted:

'I would like parents to be involved but some parents have no interest in their children at all, most parents don’t want to be involved, they had no time for their children let alone time for staff'... 'some parents are just not interested in the development of [their] child'

Research (Keyes 2000), highlights that staff may consider lack of involvement indicates a lack of interest, but in this study, staff confirmed how parent’s interest in their children was demonstrated. For example, staff confirmed that parents were involved in decisions about their own child; two-fifths confirmed that parents negotiated if family values differed from those of the service and also accessed their child’s developmental records. Staff also confirmed that some parents supported service ideas at home while conversations parents initiated also demonstrated interest in their children. These findings concur with previous research which found that the majority of parents are highly interested in their children’s development (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler 1997; Tait, 2001; Foot et al., 2002; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Elliott, 2003; Vincent & Martin, 2005) and they want to work in partnership with EYPs (Whalley, 2001).

6.4.3 Staff’s view of their role

In this study, almost three-fifths of respondents agreed they had an expanded role that involved working with parents as well as children, a role highlighted in the literature (Shartrand et al., 1997; Murphy, 2001; Rodd, 2006). In addition, a majority agreed their role involved asking parents what they needed from the service and accommodating their expectations. A majority also agreed that they were a resource for parents, agreed they shared responsibility with parents for the care of children, and believed they should explain the educational purpose of activities to parents. This is important as Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests that how staff view their role, how they act, think and feel may be affected by expectations of particular behaviour associated with their role.
However, a majority disagreed they should continuously review involvement practices with parents, despite research highlighting this important practice (Elliott, 2003; Billman et al., 2005). This finding may suggest staff were unwilling to change or adapt established practices (McMillan, 2000); to accommodate parents’ expectations; offer new involvement opportunities; or see parents as partners in the care and education of their children.

In addition, a reluctance to involve parents may be gleaned from the fact that only two-fifths agreed, and approximately one-third disagreed that working with parents was a priority for them. This may indicate that many respondents believed their role was largely child-centred and that they had not considered an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and had considered children’s development only in the context of the early years setting and not in the context of their family and/or the wider community. This finding may not be unusual as research has shown that children were considered the primary clients (Katz, 1995; Shartrand et al., 1997) and parents believed services were child-centred but not family friendly (Elliott, 2003).

Staff in this study believed they played an educational role, and while some believed parents appreciated this role, others believed parents considered them ‘babysitters’ or ‘childminders’. The attitude of parents towards staff may reflect the perceived distinction between care and education internationally, as parents may believe that childcare centres provide maintenance rather than an educational role. In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests parents look for an experienced ‘mother figure’ when choosing childcare. However, a number of respondents referred to themselves as ‘carers’ and one respondent highlighted that parents appreciated the fact that their child was being well-minded. A staff member may have believed she was expected to provide ‘substitute mothering’ (Cameron et al., 2002) as the following comment highlights:

‘They [parents] are confident I care for their child as I do my own and we try to provide the child with a home away from home with love, care, discipline etc.’

However, care has traditionally been linked with mothering, unskilled and custodial while education is typically associated with learning and development and is more likely to have public support (OECD, 2001; Maloney 2002). In addition, providing substitute mothering may result in a highly gendered workforce (Dahlberg et al., 1999) or in staff finding it difficult to view childcare as a career (Cameron et al., 2002). The term ‘educarer’, used by
Abbott & Moylett (1997), which incorporates both roles, carer and educator, may be more appropriate for EYPs.

A number of respondents expressed positive attitudes about their supportive role but a minority believed that being positive/supportive were important attitudes to have; that supporting parents in their child-rearing role was important or that they should provide linkages to other services parents need, despite widely documented research highlighting staff's role in supporting parents and families (Oberhuemer & Ulich, 1997; Dowling, 2000; Moriarty, 2000; Murphy, 2001; Foot et al., 2002; Karila, 2006). However, staff's supportive role was demonstrated during children's and parent's induction to services. While providing parents with information is necessary to comply with the Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations (2006), a partnership relationship was evident when parents were invited to visit services before children started, a two-way exchange of information was the norm, and contrary to previous research (Martin, 2003), parents were encouraged to stay until their child settled. These positive measures are vital because the induction period is crucial in the development of parent/staff relationships, (Laloumi-Vidali, 1997; Keyes, 2000; OECD, 2001; Tait, 2001). In addition, a majority told parents they were welcome at any time. This is important as not welcoming parents is a barrier to their involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). However, one staff member stated:

'The work in a childcare setting is unending and to have parents dropping in and helping out could really add to stress levels. I would feel as if I was being watched'

This comment not only demonstrates a traditional view of involvement it may indicate that opportunities for parent involvement were not realised after initial good contact practices.

Respondents in this study were aware that parents may feel guilty about leaving their children as a number highlighted that parents found it hard to leave an upset child, highlighting 'separation anxiety'. This suggests that both children and parents suffer anxiety when parents leave, but staff did not believe parents got involved to relieve anxiety or that it was a main benefit of parent involvement. However, research confirms that parents may need on-going support because working parents may be anxious or feel guilty about leaving their children in childcare (Marsh, 1997; Bridge, 2001). In addition, research confirms that parents' anxiety is relieved when staff empower and involve them (Bridge, 2001), by positive, friendly and respectful relationships (Marsh, 1997) and/or by effective
staff/parent communication, based on mutual respect and trust (Elliott, 2004). Another respondent highlighted the importance of an open door policy to ensure parents knew their child was in a safe learning environment with caring staff. This may be the first priority for many working parents and the most fundamental reason why they get involved. Parents may also be affected by expectations of their role vis-à-vis staff (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, if staff exclude or do not encourage or include parents, parents may believe they have no role to play in their child’s early years service. A mother in an Australian study stated:

*It’s like services are child centred but not family friendly... once our child starts at the centre it’s drop them off and go ... it’s like there is no place for you as a parent to be part of their day’*  

(Elliott, 2003:20)

A respondent in this study who did not divulge her position in the service suggested:

*’I would like to see more parents involved rather than just drop their child + run!’ [Sic]*

6.4.4. Communication

Communication is a vital component of parent involvement, needed to negotiate and develop shared understandings with parents. Respondents in this study were aware of the importance of communicating with parents, particularly the importance of informal, regular communication. Research (Stonehouse, 1995), highlights that sharing information facilitates joint decision-making, and while a majority of respondents agreed that they were responsible for initiating contact and sharing information with parents, a sizable number disagreed this was their responsibility, despite research to the contrary (Shpancer et al., 2002; Billman et al., 2005).

An unexpected finding was that the telephone was cited as the most common way communication occurred between parents and staff, particularly as face-to-face conversations are highly regarded in the literature. In addition, previous research (Martin, 2003) found that the telephone was only used if there was a problem. However, the telephone is considered an important link for parents who do not enter the service (Powell, 1989). Staff may have been influenced by the fact that the telephone was used as an example in the survey. Modern technology such as emails, were not cited as methods of communication and only two respondents reported the use of web cameras and text
messaging.

A majority of respondents rated their communication with parents excellent, and almost two-fifths rated them good. However, parents may not concur with this rating because McMillan (2000) found that while staff rated their communications good, parents rated them weak. In another study (Martin, 2003), parents believed staff did not have enough time to speak to them but Foot et al. (2002) found that parents were satisfied with the information they received, confirming that staff were willing to talk to them at any time. In this current study, some communication difficulties were evident but Mendoza (2003) asserts that staff need to be aware of how aspects of their own communication practices may affect parents’ motivation or possibility to engage with services.

Lack of time has been identified as an issue in communication between parents and staff. In this study, both qualitative and quantitative data identified time as an issue for staff and parents. Half of all respondents reported their conversations with parents lasted between 3-5 minutes but it needs to be considered if this time is adequate to develop relationships and shared understandings. Endsley & Minish (1991:130) found the median length of conversation with parents was 12 seconds, but in 43% of cases, no communication occurred between parents and staff. Another issue to consider is that staff and parents may be relatively more accessible at different times of the day (Karila, 2006) and while transition time is important for information sharing it is not always conducive to meaningful exchanges (Mendoza et al., 2003).

A majority in this study agreed that parent involvement enhances parent staff relationships and also agreed that parents and staff find it easy to approach each other if there is a problem. However, a majority also identified their need for communication skills when involving parents. In addition, parents believed communication was the most common area where relationships might be improved (NAEYC, 2005). This finding may not be unusual as research confirms that communication is stressful, complex and causes difficulties for the staff and parents (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2002). One respondent believed that due to stresses of work and little time with their children parents may not want to hear about a child being naughty and ‘cut you short’.

However, research (Elliott, 2004), also confirms that limitations in staff-parent
communications may cause a disconnection between children's services and their homes. Limitations may be evident in this study. For example, a large majority confirmed that information on events/activities was posted on notice boards, but Elliott (2004) suggests that notice boards do not always contain the information parents need while Powell (1989) believes notice boards are not an option for parents who do not enter the service.

The most common topics of conversation, initiated by both staff and parents, in this current study, related to children's physiological needs, reflecting the first stage in Elliott's (2004) accretion spiral (This spiral is discussed in section 3.12.2). Sharing children's experiences was also a common topic of conversation, concurring with Endsley & Minish (1991) and reflecting stage three of Elliott's accretion spiral. Sharing positive experiences is important as one respondent emphasised that parents did not want to hear any negative feedback because they believed it reflected negatively on them, as parents. And while the importance of linking children's two contexts has been widely documented (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Shartrand et al., 1997; Bridge, 2001; Pelletier, 2002; Weiss et al., 2006), approximately one-fifth of respondents reported that discussing continuity between children's homes and early years services was among the top three conversations they initiated with parents.

Shpancer et al. (2002) believe childcare centres must accept part of the responsibility for gaps in parent's knowledge and in this study, despite awareness of parent's interest in child development, and research (Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999), confirming this interest, child development was not among the top three topics raised by staff. While this finding may indicate that staff lacked time, confidence or the skills to communicate with parents, it may also reflect Elliott's (2004) view that not all services share the type of information parents need.

Respondents confirmed that written communication was the least popular method of communicating with parents. This finding may reflect research which found that written communication and formal meetings were ineffective ways to communicate with parents (Murphy, 2001; Elliott, 2004). However, a majority confirmed that parents got a daily written record about their child's day which may be beneficial for parents, because in a Japanese study of parent involvement (Hiura, 1996), the parent-teacher notebook was of significant value.
Powell (1990) maintains that little is known about the effects of programmes that promote parent education and support, such as periodic lectures. Respondents in this study reported that a minority of parents regularly attended talks on subjects, such as, child development. However, the OECD (2001) confirm that working parents have little time for formal meetings and while parents may not have been available or did not wish to attend, it may also need to be considered if parents’ work schedules were taken into account when meetings were arranged. Lack of government support for parents to take time off to visit their children’s centres also needs to be considered. The finding may highlight that alternative methods of providing parents with information are needed. Examples include technology such as, text messaging, web cameras, email, or providing information leaflets and/or regularly scheduled newsletters at reception areas.

6.4.5 Power

The issues of equality and power are central in parent involvement, particularly in the negotiation and implementation of partnership relationships. To an extent, power sharing was implemented as a considerable majority confirmed that parents were regularly involved in decision-making about their child and two-fifths confirmed that parents accessed their child’s developmental records or negotiated if family values differed from the service. In addition, staff losing some control of the programme/service was not considered a significant deterrent to promoting parent involvement. However, respondents suggested they needed to be assertive towards parents or needed to be able to delegate to them in order to control the running of their group. One owner/manager’s comment may indicate an element of a ‘turf war’:

‘Confidence to talk to parents and set rules as this is their [staff’s] environment’

These comments highlight staff’s perception that parent involvement entailed ‘activities’ either in services or at home, as opposed to sharing information, or power, considered key elements of a partnership relationship.

In addition, a number of respondents adopted an ‘expert’ approach, as elucidated by Dale (1996), which is not conducive to developing shared understandings with parents. One staff member believed she needed ‘to instruct without seeming to be pushy’ while a
manager was happy to have parents involved ‘provided it doesn’t interfere with child’s progress and development’. Another respondent stated: ‘parents are here to help not take over’ which not only demonstrates a traditional view of involvement, with professionals in control, it also reflects findings from previous research confirming that while partnership relationships sound equitable, ‘in practice they tend to be determined by preschool staff’ (Bridge, 2001:8).

The power of managers was also evident as a majority of respondents confirmed that managers were involved in decisions regarding the involvement of parents. However, staff’s motivation to involve parents may be affected by managers who exclude them from communicating with parents or the implementation of parent involvement. In this study, not all practitioners had an opportunity to interact with parents as one respondent confirmed that the manager controlled all communications with parents: ‘no conversation with me only the manager’. Others highlighted how parent involvement was ‘not allowed’. One staff member who had a Master’s Degree stated:

‘I don’t see the parents because children are taken from class to the office by the manager and I don’t get an opportunity to talk to them’

However, these respondents expressed positive views: ‘parents should be allowed to enter the class, encouraged to get to know the staff better’. This view is important because lack of interaction between parents and staff may prevent parents and staff getting to know each other as individuals which is considered important to overcome barriers to parent involvement (Whalley, 2001). Lack of interaction may also result in parents and staff being unaware of the expectations of the other (Weiss, 2006). These findings demonstrate that power lies with decision-makers and that non-managerial staff may be powerless to implement parent involvement, even if they have positive attitudes or have training in this area. These practices concur with previous research which highlighted the need for specific training for managers, their need for skills (Rodd, 2006) and a change of attitude (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989).

Parents may also influence power sharing. A number of respondents highlighted how ‘parents take offence if things don’t go their way’ or suggested there would be ‘conflicting opinions’ demonstrating some of the difficulties staff experience when developing shared understandings with parents. One owner/manager believed parents were not interested in
power sharing:

'Parents trying to take over, as they think they know best for their child'

This comment may negate the finding that parents’ knowledge about their child and staff’s knowledge about children in general are equally important or that parents and staff jointly shared responsibility for the care of children. It may also demonstrate how staff claim professional status by ‘othering and subordinating parental knowledge’ (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000:247). Another respondent suggested that parents may want to change procedures in services. While Foot et al. (2002) found that parents wanted more power and control because it gave them greater access to information about their child’s progress, this comment may reflect previous research which found that when parents join in they can challenge staff practices and undermine shared understandings about children (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001) or interfere with the work of professionals (Foot et al., 2002).

6.4.6 Parents as consumers

Services in this study were private services providing childcare for parents who worked full-time, so consideration needs to be given as to if and how, parents paying for childcare may affect relationships between parents and staff. Research confirms that the type and function of a service can help or hinder partnership (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989). One respondent stated:

‘In general, over 90% of both parents work in our facility so there is no option for them to do any work in the crèche facility and as they are paying a fee for this service they don’t expect to be asked’

Staff in this study appeared to be positively disposed towards identifying parents’ needs and accommodating their expectations, which is important if constructive partnerships are to be established. However, many may have perceived parents as customers, who needed to be pleased. A number of respondents believed that parents saw them as employees providing a service. One manager’s training to involve parents consisted of ‘customer care’. An additional reason to involve parents was suggested:

‘They are the clients. They expect and deserve a good service and therefore must be involved in order for us to fulfil their expectations’

Staff in McMillan’s (2000) study suggested that some parents adopted the attitude ‘I paid
Respondents highlighted parents’ expectations, for example, ‘they expect a good service’ but this may result from parents’ perceptions that they are paying too much for a service they may be unhappy with. Research highlights that the cost of childcare has become prohibitive for low-income or even middle-income families and as a result low-income groups may be excluded from access to centre-based services (OECD, 2004; Bennett, 2007). One respondent in this study highlighted the significance of high childcare costs in Ireland suggesting that for parents ‘work takes over and there are money issues’. The fact that not all childcare is subsidised in Ireland may indicate that childcare is considered the private responsibility of parents and not a public liability (Bennett, 2007). However, since January 2010, parents are entitled to free childcare for their child in the year prior to their child’s entry into national school.

Research highlights how parents did not appreciate the usefulness of partnership with a private service as opposed to a community service (Martin, 2003), demonstrating that partnership with parents is unlikely if a purchaser-provider, parent-as-consumer model of education is practised (Edwards & Knight, 1994). However, it may reflect social attitudes which undervalue childcare work, particularly the belief that childcare is a commodity to be purchased, and that those who work in childcare are ‘workers’ not early childhood educators (Ferguson, 2002). The issue of parents as consumers may have implications for partnership and needs further research.

The staff/parent relationship may be affected in another way by the fact that parents pay for a service as one respondent who had 20 years experience explains:

‘They [staff] have to accept that the parent is always right which at times can be frustrating’

While this respondent also agrees that parents and staff find it easy to approach each other if there is a problem, this comment appears to indicate that this is not always the case and demonstrates how tensions can build in relationships. The fact that this respondent is the owner of a service may demonstrate that she is providing a service to a customer/client, and as such, feels unable to work on the basis of two-way negotiation. This may reflect
Dahlberg et al.'s (1999) assertion that early childhood institutions are increasingly seen as businesses, with early childhood staff not only viewed as 'substitute mothers' but as 'technicians' who ensure children have reached specific milestones based on developmental psychology, or as entrepreneurs who must successfully market and sell their product to customers or consumers, most often parents.

Another respondent demonstrated a lack of equality in the relationship, which may result from the fact that parents pay for the service:

'Staff need to be open to all suggestions from parents and seem eager to have them involved'

This comment may also indicate that staff and parents do not negotiate to reach a shared understanding about what is necessary for the benefit of children or that staff treat parents as 'customers' to be pleased and not as equal partners involved in what Rodd (1998:163) suggests is a theme of partnership, namely, the philosophy of 'shared child-rearing'.

Overall, it would appear that as parents pay for childcare the philosophies of partnership, such as, power-sharing, two-way communication, or the development of shared understandings are not realised. However, not implementing partnership may have negative implications for children.

In addition, children's experiences in childcare may be negatively affected by the fact that parents pay for the service. Staff qualifications have been identified as one area where differences are evident between private and community services. In New Zealand, 42% of staff in community services held a teaching qualification compared to 35% in privately run services, additionally, private services had the highest number of staff with no early childhood qualification and parents tended to be less involved also (Mitchell et al., 2002:2). Furthermore, research confirms that children in private services experienced more instability in the classroom, including teacher turnover, while children in non-profit centres experienced higher levels of quality in areas such as: teacher qualifications; class sizes, and more frequent meaningful interactions from teachers (Whitebrook et al., 1990; Clawson, 1997).
6.4.7 Status, confidence and needs of early years practitioners

A large majority of respondents in this study identified their need for confidence when involving parents, a need already highlighted in the literature (Shartrand et al., 1997; Whalley, 2001; Urban, 2004). Confidence is considered particularly important to achieve successful interactions (Garcia, 2000). However, while their need for confidence was evident one staff member suggested: 'but not too much'.

The belief that status was an issue for EYPs may be deduced from the fact that a number of respondents highlighted their wage sacrifice or stated they were badly paid. Cameron et al. (2002) confirm that low pay is the clearest signal of low social status. Others believed they were treated like babysitters. A small number suggested that their qualifications were not recognised or believed their work was seen as an easy job that did not require staff to be too clever. However, staff who consider they are not valued by parents or by society, may lack the confidence or motivation to initiate or sustain parent involvement. While research suggests that higher salaries and status may help facilitate more equal partnerships between staff and parents (OECD, 2000), the low status of EYPs is widely reported (Clawson, 1997; Murphy, 2001; Ferguson, 2002; Martin, 2003; OECD, 2006; Taggart, 2007).

Explanations for low status in the literature range from a lack of recognition of the expert knowledge held by EYPs (Goodfellow, 2003); or of the benefits of high quality early childhood education to society (Katz, 1995; Daniel, 1996) to the belief that early childhood education is not recognised as a separate field of education, with childcare perceived as women’s work rather than a skilled occupation (OECD, 2001). Low status may also relate to the age of the children in early years services as Katz (1995) asserts that less training and ability are expected from those who work with very young children, resulting in lower pay, fewer employment benefits and poorer working conditions. In addition, Whitebrook & Sakai (2003), maintain that those who teach older children gain greater financial reward, more respect and recognition, while Cameron et al. (2002) assert that more highly qualified experienced teachers are assigned to older children, which may indicate that staff who work with younger children are seen as ‘babysitters’.

The status of EYPs may also be affected by differences in educational levels between parents who use, and staff in early years services. Many participants in this study were
experienced childcare practitioners, but their lack of formal qualifications and training to involve parents, may have affected their self-confidence and ability to relate to parents who may be highly educated. Research confirms that early years services are ‘disproportionately used by parents with high levels of education, working in full-time, higher status jobs’ while nursery staff generally have ‘low levels of education and work in low status jobs’ (Cameron et al., 2002:577). While this finding may apply particularly in Ireland, it may not be the norm in countries where EYPs have degree level training and enjoy parity with teachers. For example, in Nordic countries, pedagogues are employed in early years services and enjoy contracts and remuneration roughly equivalent to primary school teachers (Bennett, 2008). Further research is needed to explore how differences in educational qualifications may affect the power balance in parent-staff relationships.

Signs of professionalization are important (OECD, 2001) particularly as parents may perceive staff to be unskilled or low skilled. Displaying staffs’ qualifications may improve their status by demonstrating to parents that training and qualifications are important. A manager in this study suggested that displaying qualifications could cause difficulties for staff who lacked or who had low levels of qualifications. However, displaying qualifications may encourage others to work towards achieving or improving their qualifications or it may motivate managers to provide training for those who lack qualifications.

While there was almost unanimous agreement that mutual respect, trust and understanding were required in parent involvement, comments from staff may indicate that respect was not always apparent. However, Katz et al. (1993) asserts that the perception that parents do not treat staff with respect may have critical implications for children and affect staff’s confidence.

Quantitative data revealed that a large majority of respondents believed parents valued their role but not all comments supported this view. One staff member stated:

'Some parents do and are v appreciative, some don’t and you might as well be the cleaner because they expect you to do everything + pick up after them’ [sic]

However, staff’s negative perceptions about how they are viewed by parents and by society in general may affect their self-esteem and indirectly their motivation to involve parents. Elliott (2004) refers to Maslow’s (1968) theory which states that individuals can
only reach their full potential when they have acquired self-respect and a healthy self-esteem based on a sense of being valued by others, which influences motivation and affects the way individuals communicate with each other. Many respondents stated that parents did not appreciate how hard their job was or suggested that parents took a lot for granted. However, negative views of crèches are prevalent in the Irish media, particularly, when the Health Service Executive Pre-school Inspectors Reports are published, for example (Downes, 2008). One manager suggested:

‘I would like parents to be more aware of how much work staff do. I think crèches in general still have bad feelings from parents when there are a lot of excellent services out there’ [sic]

This comment not only highlights awareness of the high intrinsic value of childcare to parents, but also recognition that society has a different view (Cameron et al., 2002). This demonstrates how society’s view of early years services and EYPs, may affect staff’s motivation and indirectly affect the children in these services, reflecting Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory.

One respondent suggested that initially staff felt undervalued but a number of respondents believed parents valued them more when they, the parents, became more involved. These findings reflect previous research confirming that parents who work alongside staff are more likely to understand their goals, practices and the reality of their work (Katz et al., 1996; NAEYC, 1999; Wall, 2003). One staff member suggested: ‘parents can sometimes be overly involved’, while another stated ‘parents tend to be involved when something annoys them or seems ‘off’ to them’.

Similar to previous research, (Keyes, 2000), staff in this study used low attendance at meetings and a belief that parents lacked interest as measures to evaluate if parents appreciated them. Another criterion used was the receipt of presents at Christmas and Easter. However, giving gifts may not necessarily indicate that staff are appreciated, as parents may feel obliged to give gifts.

Concurring with findings in a previous study in the United States (Olson & Hyson, 2003), a majority of staff in this study highlighted their need for support and confidence when involving parents. However, it is unclear from the data what type of support was needed.
Staff may have expected employers to support them in the form of financial recognition as research suggests that teachers often need incentives before they extend themselves to family involvement (Shartland et al., 1997). One respondent stated that she would like employers to provide good working conditions/salaries. Staff may also have expected employers to support them to acquire/expand their educational qualifications.

In this study approximately half of all respondents had over 6 years experience in childcare, but turnover may have been an issue as two-fifths had up to 2 years experience in their current service. However, research (Whitebrook & Sakai, 2003), has established a link between a supportive work environment and staff stability and Cameron et al. (2002) found that inadequate compensation was the single most important factor contributing to high staff turnover and difficulties in recruitment and retention of staff. In Ireland, low status, low rates of pay and high staff turnover have been identified as issues in childcare services (OECD, 2006). High turnover rates have not only been associated with lower-quality services, they also interfere with the continuity and consistent relationships that are important for young children’s development and learning (OECD, 2001; Whitebrook & Sakai, 2003). High turnover is also unsettling for parents and is considered a barrier to their involvement (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989) particularly because partnership relationships require time to develop.

A number of respondents in this study were unhappy with their working conditions in general and research suggests that despite low salaries and poor working conditions staff gained high levels of satisfaction from their work (Cameron et al, 2002; Fine-Davis et al. 2005). However, Katz et al. (1993) suggest that staff may be encouraged to improve their knowledge and skills or make a career commitment if their working conditions were better. In addition, higher salaries and status may help facilitate more equal partnerships between staff and parents (OECD, 2000).

Staff may also have expected support from parents in the form of sharing responsibility for the development of their children, or by their supportive attitudes, but a minority believed parents got involved to support them. This belief may have resulted from their negative perceptions of how parents treated them although parents supporting staff may result in a change in the balance of power, which may be hugely significant in parent involvement. A small number of staff may have been suggesting how the balance of power would change.
when they stated that parents would ‘take over’ or ‘become over-bearing’. However, parents may not have known that staff needed or expected their support, or parents may have lacked the confidence to offer support.

Almost one-fifth of respondents did not consider they needed support when involving parents. One respondent, who held a degree in childcare, disagreed that staff needed support, confidence or training to involve parents, while also confirming that parents valued her role stating: ‘they listen to me and respect my opinion’. In a study, (McMillan, 2002), staff expected parents to support them and this included active participation, but staff in this study may have considered that full-time working parents could not be expected to actively support staff.

While active participation in services highlights the traditional view of involvement, a majority of respondents in this study did not consider parent involvement in services was unworkable and outdated. However, contrary to previous research (McMillan, 2002), almost one-third of respondents believed parents should trust staff to do their job and not get involved. Staff may have been influenced by a belief that working parents would not have time for involvement or they may have believed that involvement was related to the issue of trust:

‘Most parents trust the childcare service they have chosen for their child and let the service get on with it’

6.4.8 The Influence of Stress

A majority of respondents identified stress as an issue for them in parent involvement, with a minority identifying it as a significant problem. However, this finding may not be unusual as research (Stonehouse, 1995; Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999; Keyes, 2002) point to a number of tensions that can exist when parents participate. One respondent described the problem:

‘Some staff feel that they cannot work well while parents are watching + feel stressed’ [sic]

‘[Staff] feel they are being monitored/can’t get on with daily tasks, feel inadequate’

However, in response to a quantitative measure, only 2% of respondents believed parents got involved to monitor staff, but views expressed by fifty-five respondents (34%) in
qualitative data, demonstrated that parents wished to monitor staff, which may lead to stress. While many comments highlight a traditional view of involvement, research confirms that tensions may arise resulting from staff’s beliefs about parents’ motives for involvement (Howe et al., 2001). However, while Martin (2003) found that parents wished to monitor staff, Foot et al. (2002) found that parents wanted more information about their child’s progress.

Respondents also believed parent involvement required a lot of consideration and planning so a belief that involvement entailed additional work or responsibilities, or would cause stress, may affect staff’s attitude towards involvement. In addition, staff may be unwilling to take on extra work or responsibilities because of their stated beliefs that parents were ‘demanding’, ‘caused chaos’, ‘lacked interest’ ‘want everything their way’ or ‘may put undue pressure on staff’. However, while many respondents in this study lacked formal qualifications or had little training to involve parents research (McMillan, 2000; Wilks, 2000; Rodd, 2006), confirms that minimal qualifications and lack of training to involve parents are barriers to parent involvement, causing stress to those who lack an understanding of the process (Garcia, 2004).

Stress may also be an issue for parents. A majority of respondents agreed that the reason parents use a service influences their level of involvement, and concurring with previous research, (Whalley, 1997; NAEYC, 1999; Bridge, 2001) respondents ranked work or family commitments as the most likely reason for the non-involvement of parents. This finding reflects research confirming that modern family pressures cause parents to participate less in their children’s lives (NAEYC, 1999) although research also confirms that parents involved in early childhood programmes experienced alleviation of maternal stress (Wylie, 1994, cited in OECD, 2001). However, while a number of respondents acknowledged that parents may be stressed, the finding that less than one-third agreed that involvement puts an extra burden on stressed parents may be surprising, as many staff focused on parents physical presence in services, or their involvement in activities, which would put an additional burden on parents who work full-time.

6.4.9 The influence of children

In this study, while little consideration was given to the role children might play in shaping parent-teacher relationships, it is widely accepted that adults are influenced by children’s
behaviours, so children need be included as part of a broader ecological perspective (Shpancer, 1998). A small number of respondents highlighted the role children might play in the involvement of their parents. One respondent stated: 'children themselves seek their [parent’s] involvement' while another, a manager, reflecting previous research (Whalley, 1997) confirmed:

'Children are happier when parent and care worker work as a team and support each other'

Respondents in this study may have believed parents were more interested in involvement when children were young and the priority given to younger children was reflected by the fact that while parents got a daily written record about their child's day, many staff specified that this applied only in the baby room. Staff may have believed that parents were more anxious about very young children. This finding reflects a relationship between the age of the child and the forms and levels of parent involvement implemented (Caplan et al., 1997). Research confirms involvement is more beneficial the earlier it takes place in the child's education (National Education Association, 2005), with parent/staff relationships evolving and changing depending on the age of the child (Murphy, 2001). In addition, research confirms that new parents want reassurance and guidance (Arnold, 1997; McMillan, 2000; Elliott, 2003). One respondent stated:

'First-time parents want to learn more about what they should be doing at home'

This may indicate that more involvement opportunities are needed for parents of younger children, to accommodate their preferences regarding how and when they wish to be involved.

There was almost unanimous agreement that children's behaviour was a major issue in parent involvement and respondents highlighted disadvantages and problems associated with it. For example, it was suggested that children often 'play up' when their parent is present. While this comment highlights a traditional view of involvement, it is difficult to explain in this current study, as parents seldom participated in services. However, children's behaviour may have been an issue at transition times. Research reported that children's social behaviour changes when they first attend early years services (Smith & Howes, 1994; Bridge, 2001). However, McMillan (2000) found that staff anticipated problem behaviour when parents were involved, so if respondents anticipated or believed
that children's behaviour would be an issue in parent involvement, this demonstrates how staff's beliefs may affect the level and type of involvement practised. It may also indicate that respondents lacked confidence when dealing with this issue.

6.4.10 Gender

The issue of 'gender' was not a focal point for consideration in this study but a number of findings emerged that related to gender. When asked to identify who was generally the involved parent, approximately two-fifths stated it was both mothers and fathers, just under one-third stated it was mothers alone but no respondent identified that it was 'fathers' alone. One respondent stated: 'Most of the children's mothers would be in touch with us'. These findings concur with previous research highlighting that while reference is made to 'parent involvement', it is principally mothers rather than fathers who are the involved parent (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989; Caddell, 1996; Crozier, 2000; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002).

Respondents also believed that communication was much higher with mothers than fathers. Jones et al. (2005) suggest that fathers' involvement may be affected by the fact that the majority of EYPs are female, and some fathers prefer to communicate with male staff. In addition, Mitchell (2003) confirmed that teachers tended to hold back from initiating conversations with fathers. Whalley (1997) reported poorer quality interactions with fathers and in this current study poorer quality interactions may also be evident. A respondent when asked if parents valued her role as a childcare worker stated: 'Mothers do, a lot of fathers don't respect us'. However, the involvement of fathers, perhaps by coming in occasionally and sharing their talents or skills, may be vitally important, not just for their own children, but with increasing numbers of single parent households headed by mothers, fathers' involvement may bridge a gap in the lives of children, providing a positive male role model.

Only two participants in this study were male and they both held managerial roles. The significance of this finding relates to the fact that a highly gendered workforce, not only helps reproduce cultural values related to gender (Dahlberg et al., 1999), it also has implications for the status of the ECCE profession, as an association has been made between a gendered workforce and poor pay and low social value (Cameron et al., 2002). Fine-Davis et al. (2005:28) state:
'It is widely acknowledged that occupations dominated by women often tend to be less valued and in turn lower paid than those with a gender balance or dominated by men.'

This highlights the importance and urgency of tackling issues related to gender in the profession, otherwise the low status and self-esteem of female staff will continue to be problematic, affecting the quality of the service provided for children, and may hinder the involvement of some fathers. However, the recruitment of men is not only affected by low pay and conditions. There are low numbers of men involved in childcare in countries that have campaigned to include more men in ECCE and where relatively higher pay and conditions are in operation (OECD, 2001). It may seem ironic that while EYPs may be helping to facilitate the achievement of gender equality in the workforce for the mothers who use childcare, a highly gendered workforce in early childhood services may have negative consequences for them.

6.4.11 Organisational factors

The institution and its characteristics can also play a role in the kind of parent involvement promoted (Epstein, 1995). In this study, approximately 40% of respondents confirmed their service had a written policy on parent involvement and nationally, 26.5% of services had a written policy on partnership with parents (DJELR, 2002). In a small Dublin study this figure was 27% (Martin, 2003). However, 60% including a majority of managers agreed that services should have a written policy on parent involvement. This is important because research confirms that involvement is more likely to occur when policies are in place to encourage it (Pugh & De’ Ath, 1987; Shartrand et al., 1997). In addition, the aims and objectives of the service determine the nature of the partnership (Foot et al., 2002).

Respondents may have believed that having a written policy would enhance parent involvement; would establish clear and agreed guidelines; or would result in staff having more authority and autonomy, supporting them in their efforts to involve parents.

However, almost 40% ‘disagreed’ that services should have a written policy on parent involvement. Staff may have considered this a ‘top down’ approach which would result in them implementing a policy they disagreed with; had little input into; or had inadequate training to implement in practice (Pugh & De’ Ath, 1987). They may have believed a policy conferred rights on parents, resulting in their physical presence in services or they
Consulting with staff when implementing involvement strategies may help overcome these
difficulties (Caplan et al., 1997).

However, approximately one-third of managers confirmed their service did not have a
written policy on parent involvement. In addition, one-fifth of all respondents, including a
small number of managers, were ‘unsure’ if their service had a written policy, despite
research highlighting the importance of written policies and procedures being
communicated to all staff and parents (Byrne, 2002). While this may indicate that parent
involvement was not a priority and that even if policies were in place, they were not being
implemented it may also concur with research (Bridge, 2001; Martin, 2003) which found
that staff and parents believed that having a written policy for working with parents did not
positively affect partnership. Similarly, Caplan et al. (1997) noted that teachers who were
enthusiastic about a particular strategy were more successful than those who involved
parents because it was the policy of the service.

A minority of respondents in this study reported a parent’s room was provided. However,
research confirms that providing facilities for parents encourages their involvement
(Arnold 2001; Tait, 2001) while lack of appropriate space for parents has negative
implications (McMillan, 2000; MacNaughton, 2004). However, having a separate room
may not be necessary provided there is a space where parents can discuss their child in
private, for example, an office. A number of respondents indicated they would like more
space and time to organise parent involvement, and while staff may not have an input into
how facilities are allocated, Martin (2003) found that having space for parental activities
did not positively influence partnership, as the space may not have been used.

A policy/practice that may encourage parent involvement is having a ‘key worker’ system
in operation, whereby one member of staff has overall responsibility for particular children
and for liaising with their families. ‘Key workers’ enhance the quality of the experience of
the child and also create positive bonds between staff and parents (Marsh, 1997). One-third
of respondents in this study and half of the respondents in Martin’s (2003) study operated
this system.
However, it also needs to be considered that while many factors may influence the involvement of parents in their children’s education ‘behaviour is a result of the interplay between the role and expectations and the personalities of the individuals involved’ (Keyes, 2000: 114).

6.5 Inconsistencies in responses

Similar to findings in Martin’s (2003) study, in this study inconsistencies were evident when comparing qualitative and quantitative data. This highlights the importance of using both measures. The overall impression from quantitative data, suggests that staff had very positive attitudes towards parent involvement. However, rhetoric and reality differed as a reluctance to involve parents was evident in many qualitative responses and also from some quantitative data. For example, a minority of respondents, including managers, confirmed that working with parents was a priority for them and almost one-third, including nineteen managers, believed parents should trust staff to do their job and not get involved. While inconsistencies may present problems interpreting some of the findings qualitative measures assisted the respondents who reported difficulty providing ‘yes’ or ‘no’ responses, or who had difficulty rating statements:

‘The survey is very vague and doesn’t give a chance to express your opinion why you disagreed with some issues’ [sic] (owner/manager)

However, this respondent did not avail of all opportunities provided to express her opinions.

Evidence of inconsistencies within individual services were also found. This may highlight a lack of an agreed and implemented policy on parent involvement, particularly as many staff were unsure if their service had a policy on parent involvement. Inconsistencies may also indicate a lack of teamwork or regular meetings, lack of in-service training or it may suggest that different policies and practices were employed in each room. In addition, if managers alone were involved with, or controlled communications with parents and other staff members complete the questionnaires, responses may be inaccurate and or inconsistent. Inconsistencies may also be linked to isolation from the support of colleagues, which Pugh & De’Ath (1989) identify as a hallmark of working in early childhood services which needs to be changed. Whalley (2001) asserts that relatively few settings have appropriate levels of non-contact time for staff to reflect on their practice, to
learn to converse with parents, with each other and with the wider community. In Reggio Emelia in Italy and in the Pen Green Centre of Excellence in the UK, staff are considered ‘reflecting practitioners’ and time is set aside for professional dialogue and development (Abbott & Nutbrown, 2001; OECD, 2001; Whalley, 2001).

Overall, the findings may concur with Haralambos & Holborn’s (1991:733) assertion that ‘it cannot be assumed that stated attitudes will be translated into actual behaviour’ as staff appeared fluent in the rhetoric of partnership (Moriarty, 2000) but ambivalent with regard to its implementation (Murphy, 2001). The findings may also highlight that staff were not keeping up-to-date or were not informed about current research in the field. The findings of inconsistencies may also highlight Keyes (2000: 114) assertion that ‘real individuals occupy roles and each individual stamps a role with a unique style’.

6.6 Limitations of the study

The aim of this exploratory study was to establish the views and attitudes of EYPs towards the involvement of full-time working parents in their children’s early years services. The study also aimed to establish types and levels of parent involvement practised in the services surveyed, with particular focus on partnership relationships between parents and staff.

A major limitation of this study was that focus was placed exclusively on staff views. It was considered that even if parents wished to be involved in their children’s service, staff may play a major role not only in the type and level of involvement practised but also whether parents were involved or not. However, the views of parents are essential to provide balance, particularly as Martin (2003) found confusion among parents regarding their role and the opportunities available for them to participate.

A further limitation was that issues related to gender were not considered. However, the involvement of fathers in their children’s early years services and their relationships with EYPs arose. In addition, issues related to social class were not considered but many authors highlight how economically disadvantaged and minority parents face many obstacles to their involvement and are unlikely to develop partnerships with staff (Shartrand et al., 1997; Martin & Vincent, 1999; Crozier, 2000; Keyes, 2002; Weiss et al., 2006). One staff member may have referring to social class differences when she stated:
Furthermore, while acknowledging that the involvement of all parents in their children’s education is important, the involvement of parents whose children’s first language is not English; who are from a rural background; who are disabled; who are from the Travelling Community; who require after-school care, these issues were not considered in this study.

As the purpose of the study was to establish how full-time working parents were involved in the services their children attend, focus was placed exclusively on private early years services providing full-day care and education. This resulted in services such as, playschools, community/voluntary services, Naíonraí (preschools where Irish is spoken) and infant classes in Primary schools being excluded from the survey.

A further limitation may relate to the length of the questionnaire, as a number of respondents did not complete all of the questions. Many respondents stated they had difficulty ranking responses. This difficulty was highlighted by one respondent who stated: ‘all aspects are equally important’. However, responses not ranked or ranked incorrectly were excluded.

In addition, because major differences emerged between qualitative and quantitative data, more qualitative measures may have provided a deeper insight to the beliefs, views and attitudes of staff, particularly as responses to quantitative measures were generally positive.

6.7. Summary

Parent involvement and partnership with parents is the primary focus in much of the current literature on early childhood education. Respondents in this study were aware of the importance and benefits of parent involvement but many had a traditional understanding of involvement.

While links were established between staff’s preferences and parent involvement practices, it may need to be considered that non-managerial staff may have little input into decisions regarding the involvement of parents, even if they have positive attitudes or training in this area.
Many factors influence parent involvement and a number of these were discussed in detail. These include: the knowledge, skills and attitudes of staff and how they view their role, the issues of equality and power-sharing and the development of shared understandings with parents, which are central in parent involvement, were also discussed. Status and confidence of EYPs are also considered factors in parent involvement as is the stress experienced by both parents and staff. Staff/parent communication was also considered as it is a major factor in helping or hindering the involvement of parents.

Other factors considered which may have implications for staff and parent involvement include differences in educational levels between parents and staff and the fact that parents are now considered consumers, who purchase childcare for their children. Organisational factors such as, providing facilities for parents and having written policies on parent involvement were also considered. Inconsistencies in responses from staff employed in the same services and between quantitative and qualitative data were also discussed. It was considered that these inconsistencies may relate to isolation of EYPs. Limitations of this study were then highlighted.

Chapter seven presents the conclusions drawn from information presented in previous chapters.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS
7.1 Introduction

Parent involvement in their children’s early years services is considered an indicator of quality, particularly when staff and parents work together in the interest of children. Individual attitudes play a major role in parent involvement and the aim of this study was to explore the views of EYPs on the involvement of full-time working parents in the services their children attend. A self-administered postal survey, which facilitated the provision of both qualitative and quantitative data, was used to elicit the views of the practitioners. This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from information presented in previous chapters and includes recommendations for future policy and practice in relation to parent involvement. To conclude, suggestions for future research are outlined.

7.2 Conclusions

7.2.1 Wide-ranging views of parent involvement

In this study there was almost unanimous agreement about the importance and benefits of parent involvement for children, parents and staff. However, a consensus was not evident on a number of issues, such as, why involvement was considered important, preferred involvement practices or why parents might or might not be involved.

Generally, respondents demonstrated a narrow, traditional understanding of involvement believing it required the physical presence of parents in services. This was evident from the disadvantages and problems they identified. However, this type of involvement is not appropriate for the needs and availability of parents who work full-time. In addition, a number of respondents did not appreciate the importance and benefits that can result from their daily conversations with parents. Respondents appeared unaware that a partnership relationship can be implemented without parents being present in services, demonstrated by Bridge (2001).

This lack of clarity about what involvement or partnership entails may not be surprising as the purpose, nature and methods of working with parents are not clearly defined or described in the literature. However, as McMillan (2000) suggests, staff may not support initiatives to involve parents if they are unconvinced by the rationale for involvement, are unsure about what it involves or unprepared for how it will affect them on a daily basis.
7.2.2. Minimal parent involvement and partnership practised

Generally, positive attitudes towards the involvement of parents and towards staff's role in their involvement were expressed. In addition, many benefits that accrue to children, parents and staff were identified. Despite the positive assertions, in practice parents seldom actively participated in services or in activities. Staff rated work or family commitments as the most likely reasons why parents were not involved. However, consideration needs to be given to the fact that a majority of respondents lacked training to involve parents so while they expressed many positive attitudes they may not have had the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to facilitate involvement of parents or to work in partnership with them.

It was believed that the main reason parents got involved was to have a say in their children's care and education, but a belief that parents lacked interest was also evident, despite evidence to the contrary. However, a perception that parents lacked interest may result in staff not encouraging or facilitating their involvement.

A partnership relationship was evident at transition. A two-way exchange of information between staff and parents was the norm, parents were told they were welcome at any time and they were encouraged to stay until their child settled. On an individual basis, partnership was also evident when parents were involved in decision-making about individual children and by their daily conversations with staff. However, concurring with previous research, (Murphy, 2001; Martin, 2003), the participation of parents fell far short of genuine collaboration as depicted by Erwin & Rainfoot (1996) and may in fact be described as 'active non-participation', as outlined by Pugh & De'ath (1989).

However, staff are not a homogenous group, and individual attitudes and beliefs play a major role in parent involvement. Behaviour is the result of a relationship between an individual’s beliefs about their role, their expectations and the personalities of those involved (Keyes, 2000). In this study, a number of respondents, who lacked or who had minimum qualifications or training, were open to involvement, demonstrating that individual attitudes and personal attributes play a role in parent involvement. However, consideration also needs to be given to the role parents themselves played, because how they view their role, their attitudes and expectations influences whether or not they become involved.
Parents have different needs and different starting points which must be accommodated. It is also important that involvement opportunities do not add stress to parents who work full-time. In addition, involvement practices must reflect the fact that while staff are interested in all children attending their service parents may only be interested in their own child. While parents do not always participate even when they are encouraged, parents who work full-time may choose a service where their involvement is not required. These views must also be respected.

Service factors also influenced involvement. Having a written policy on parent involvement in services is believed to encourage involvement but two-fifths reported having a written policy. In addition, one-fifth were unsure if their service had a written policy so it may not have been implemented even if it was in place. Facilities for parents in services were minimal so parents may not have been encouraged to stay and converse with other parents or staff.

While associations between staffs’ preferences and the implementation of parent involvement were evident, in practice, staff may have had little input into these decisions even if they have positive attitudes or training. The manager’s role is crucial in parent involvement, evident when it was confirmed that parent involvement was ‘not allowed’ or when staff were not given opportunities to converse with parents. In addition, many managers did not have training to involve parents and many had minimal qualifications. These findings highlight the need for specific training for managers, their need for skills (Rodd, 2006) and a change of attitude (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989).

7.2.3. Inadequate communications between staff and parents

Two-way communication is vital in the development of partnership relationships. Staff in this study were positive about their role in communicating, as a majority believed it was their responsibility to initiate contact and share information with parents. However, it is likely that many parents did not receive information on involvement policies and practices, evidenced by the fact that not all parents were told about the opportunities available or about the benefits that could be gained for their involvement. In addition, staff did not always initiate conversations they believed interested parents and information was posted on notice boards which may result in parents who are rushing or who do not enter the service missing out. Parents not entering the service may explain the unexpected finding that the telephone was the most frequent method of communication used by parents and
staff, rather than face-to-face conversations. In addition, many respondents confirmed that parents were busy rushing which may explain why one respondent reported that parents may 'cut you short'.

Many respondents rated their communication with parents as 'excellent' but some communication difficulties were evident and a number of respondents highlighted their need for communication skills. While this may reflect their lack of training to involve parents, it may also indicate that insufficient time was available to build meaningful relationships, particularly as not all staff had opportunities to converse with parents, not all services held parent/staff meetings or provided key workers to liaise with parents and home visits were almost non-existent.

7.2.4 Positive and negative attitudes to parent involvement

In response to quantitative measures many positive attitudes towards parent involvement were expressed. A majority believed they had an expanded role that involved working with parents, believed they were responsible for initiating contact and sharing information with parents, believed parents should be asked what they needed from the service and that parents’ expectations should be accommodated. Staff also believed they should encourage all parents to be involved at some level.

However, staff did not always encourage involvement as not all parents were told about the opportunities available or about the benefits of involvement and many did not agree that parents should be invited to volunteer for specific activities. A minority believed staff should provide linkages to other services parents may need, which may indicate they believed their role was child-centred. In addition, a sizable minority confirmed that working with parents was not a priority for them. This may indicate that staff believed the disadvantages and problems associated with involvement outweighed the benefits.

7.2.5 Inadequate qualifications and training of early years practitioners

Nationally and internationally the importance of formal qualifications and training to ensure staff have the skills, knowledge and positive attitudes needed to involve parents have been highlighted. A majority of staff in this study had minimal qualifications and also lacked training to involve parents. However, while a consensus was not evident
regarding their need for training, staff may need incentives to encourage them to update their skills. Research suggests that making changes at pre-service level would reach the greatest number of future teachers as collectively they could significantly raise the quality of home-school partnerships (Shartland et al., 1997).

One respondent believed that skills were unnecessary, while another believed that being 'nice' to parents was all that was required. However, openness to learning was demonstrated as respondents highlighted how they had become aware of ways to improve parent involvement practices through completing the survey.

Over a third of participants in this study were mothers and a majority of these believed training to involve parents was unnecessary. This may indicate that, as a mother, they believed they could anticipate parents' needs and wishes without consulting them.

7.2.6. Parents, as consumers, an influence in parent involvement

The fact that parents in this study worked full-time and paid for childcare may have had a major influence on relationships between staff and parents. This in turn may have had an influence on parent involvement practices. Comments from staff that parents treated them 'as employees', that they had to accept that parents were always right and that they had to seem eager to have them involved, demonstrates that the traditional view of parents as passive receivers of services, dependent on the opinions of 'experts' has now changed. However, parents perceived as customers who need to be pleased may put particular pressure on managers or owners of services as some reported that parents 'were demanding' or 'take over'. Overall, it would appear that as parents pay for childcare the philosophies of partnership, such as, power-sharing, two-way communication, joint decision-making, mutual respect, or the development of shared understandings are not always realised. This reflects Edwards & Knight's (1994) assertion that cooperative partnership with parents is unlikely if a purchaser-provider, parent-as-consumer model of education is practised.

7.2.7 Status - a key issue

Staff in this study were aware of the importance of their role in parent involvement but qualitative data revealed that many believed parents did not value their role or did not respect them. Many believed parents looked down on them, treated them like babysitters or
took them for granted. Lack of respect may not only indicate that some parents were unaware of the importance of high quality childcare and of the expert skills and knowledge held by many practitioners, but it may also reflect a wider societal view of childcare as a female dominated profession renowned for low status and low pay. Many staff in the study highlighted their wage sacrifice or low pay, but low pay is considered the clearest signal of low status (Cameron et al., 2002). Low status may help explain staff’s need for confidence and support in parent involvement.

7.2.8 Disparate responses from staff employed in the same service
Inconsistencies and differences in responses from staff employed in the same service may highlight individual perceptions of what was happening in the service. It may also highlight the lack of an agreed and implemented policy on parent involvement, lack of teamwork or regular meetings, lack of in-service training or that different policies and practices are employed in each room. However, it may also highlight lack of leadership, and ‘isolation from collegial support’ (Rodd, 1997:1), a hallmark of working in early childhood services, which needs to be changed (Pugh & De’Ath, 1989).

7.3 Recommendations
EYPs’ views on parent involvement need to be explored in a more comprehensive manner particularly as inconsistencies were evident when comparing qualitative and quantitative data and when comparing responses from staff employed in the same service. Individual interviews with staff may provide a more comprehensive understanding of staff’s beliefs, attitudes and practices while interviews with parents and observations at transition times may provide more accurate data of parent involvement practices.

A number of staff in this study believed parents did not appreciate the educational role they played in their children’s lives. A public awareness campaign highlighting the benefits of quality early years education for young children and the benefits of parent involvement could be promoted.

Minimum qualifications need to be applied in the childcare sector while opportunities need to be provided for staff to attend in-service training programmes, particularly for those who lack or who have minimal formal qualifications or training. To encourage attendance, these programmes could be partly or fully subsidised. After course completion, incentives need to be provided to discourage staff turnover, as turnover may have been an issue in
this study. Distance education programmes could also be considered, as many courses (including up to level 8) in early childhood care and education are now offered online. Interactive DVD ROMs, such as that provided by the Education and Training Inspectorate in Northern Ireland, Improvement through Self Evaluation might also be considered. Adopting a mentoring system, where well-qualified practitioners 'mentor' individual staff members when formal qualifications are at a low level, as was the case in this study could be considered.

Coolahan (1998) suggested that Ireland was fortunate in having a highly professional and well-respected teaching profession, recommending that this profile be extended to the early education sector. The government could play a major role in implementing this recommendation to ensure the status of EYPs is improved and work within the sector is recognised and respected. Having primary and preschool teachers educated together, may improve the status of EYPs but it is also important that salaries are sufficient to enable workers view childcare as a career. In addition, because childcare is recognised as a female dominated profession, the issue of gender needs to be addressed.

Having a national professional organisation for EYPs, similar to the Irish National Teachers Organisation, which represents primary school teachers, may help advance their cause and provide a sense of belonging to a network of practitioners, particularly as isolation is recognised as an issue for childcare practitioners.

Work or family commitments were considered the main reasons parents did not participate in their children’s early years services. Shortage of time was also considered an issue for parents. Flexible working arrangements are crucial to allow parents balance their work/family responsibilities. Employers could facilitate this by providing time for parents to engage with their children’s early years services. This is facilitated in Sweden where parents are allowed 15 minutes in the morning or afternoon to be with their children in preschool. The government could also play a major role by developing and implementing family friendly policies.

Documenting and sharing all children’s experiences with parents, not just the experiences of children in the baby room, may help working parents or those who do not wish to actively participate, feel involved. This may in turn elicit parents’ reactions and support.
7.4   Directions for future research

This study focused on EYPs’ views on parent involvement in their children’s services. This study represents a ‘snapshot’ of parent involvement. A longitudinal study, perhaps including the same services used in this study, would enable comparisons to be made of parent involvement practices over time, particularly to assess if improved/increased training and qualifications of EYPs are changing parent involvement policies and practices in services.

A major limitation of this study was that the views of full-time working parents were not considered. However, establishing parents’ views are important as Martin (2003) found confusion among parents regarding their role and the opportunities available for them to participate. Staff in this study believed that for many parents work or family commitments were a major barrier to their involvement in services so specific research is needed to address the issue of how the involvement of working parents could be facilitated. In addition, parents are not a homogenous group they have different needs, strengths, interests and availability which needs to be considered when developing or implementing parent involvement initiatives. Changing the emphasis from parent involvement in services or in the running of services to involvement ‘at home’, as highlighted by Bridge (2001), may provide the best opportunity for the involvement of working parents.

As is generally taken for granted, staff believed that parents wished to be more involved when children are very young. Research is needed to establish how parents of younger children could be more involved to accommodate their preferences regarding when and how they wish to be involved and to ensure their interest is developed and maintained throughout their children’s education.

Full-time working parents may have little time to communicate with staff other than when they are leaving or collecting children. Half of the respondents in this study stated that the average length of their conversations with parents was between three and five minutes. Research is needed on the type and level of communication that occurs at this time, to ensure that important information is shared and relationships are developed. In addition, some research has confirmed that many parents do not enter their children’s early years services at transition so research is needed to establish if this is the case and also to explore ways these hard to reach parents could be involved. A respondent in this study suggested
that the involvement of grandparents should be considered, so research is needed to establish the role they could play in their grandchildren’s early years services.

The absence of the use of modern technology to communicate with parents was obvious in this study. Innovative ways technology could be used to enhance staff-parent communication needs further investigation. Examples may include emails, text messaging, web cameras, class web pages or videos.

A majority of staff identified their need for support and confidence when involving parents. However, as it was not evident from the study what type of support they needed or why they lacked confidence. Future research could explore both these areas. Innovative ways for parents and staff to get to know each other as individuals are needed, for example, research could establish if home visits were convenient for parents and staff.

Research confirms that parents using early childhood services are highly educated and have high status jobs while the staff employed in these services have minimal qualifications and work in low status jobs (Cameron et al., 2002). Some staff in this study stated the parents did not respect them or ‘looked down on them’ which may indicate that staff felt intimidated by parents. Research is needed to establish if and how parents’ higher educational qualifications or higher status occupations may affect the power balance in parent-staff relationships or influence parent involvement. How parents are defined may also affect parent involvement and partnership. In this study the issue of parents as consumers was highlighted. This issue needs much more research.

Characteristics of individuals, both parents and staff, may influence the type and level of parent involvement practised, so research could explore particular characteristics that are associated with the promotion of meaningful involvement.

Research is also needed to investigate the views of staff as to whether they would use childcare for their own children, as a number of respondents highlighted the need to ‘keep their personal views to themselves’, ‘appear non-judgmental’, must not show the ‘I’m right you’re wrong attitude’ or stated that some parents put their careers before their children. These comments may suggest these respondents disapproved of working parents and would not work full-time if they were parents of young children. However, it undermines the concept of full-time care for very young children if staff providing that
care do not agree with it, in principle, or would not use childcare for their own children. This issue needs much greater investigation.

The views of children could also be investigated as they may provide a unique view on how they would like their parents involved. In addition, children’s behaviour was considered a major issue by respondents in this current study so research is needed to establish if, how or why their behaviour is an issue.

Research could also be undertaken to establish if there is a link between different types and levels of parent involvement and child outcome.

More research is needed on the content of training courses to involve parents. In addition, students need to be offered field experiences, where they can observe parent involvement practices, as many may have the theory but not the practical experience necessary. Epstein (2005) reported that only 7% of schools, colleges and departments of education agreed that teachers graduating from their institutions were well prepared to conduct family/community practices.

Issues related to gender were highlighted in this study. Two participants were male. In addition, relationships with a small number of fathers may have been problematic. Research is needed to show how relationships with fathers could be improved and also on ways to encourage more men to train as childcare workers.

Finally, the vital role managers play in parent involvement was evident in this study. Research is needed to establish how managers could improve parent involvement practices, encourage teamwork with and between all staff members and parents.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Crozier, G. (2000) Parents and Schools: Partners or Protagonists? Stoke on Trent, UK and Sterling, USA: Trentham Books


McMillan, D.J (2000) Parental Involvement in Early Years Settings: Parents’ and Providers’ Perceptions, Dissertation submitted as part of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Education, Queen’s University, Belfast, Northern Ireland.


Murphy, R. (2001) ‘Parental Involvement in Early Years Education and Care in the Cork Area’ Thesis presented in fulfillment of the regulations governing the award of the degree of Ph.D., National University of Ireland, Cork.


Dear Staff Member,

My name is Maria McDermott and I am a student undertaking a Masters degree in the Department of Social Sciences and Legal Studies at the Dublin Institute of Technology.

The focus of the study is staff views of parent involvement in early years services. As very little research has been undertaken in this area, I would greatly appreciate if you could complete a questionnaire, which will take approximately 20-25 minutes. Your assistance in completing the questionnaire will greatly aid my research.

Completed questionnaires will be treated in strictest confidence - only my supervisor and myself will have access to the information you provide.

I am enclosing a stamped-addressed envelope and I would appreciate if you could return the completed questionnaire by Wednesday 16th March 2005, or as soon as convenient.

If you have any queries about the research or would like to receive a copy of summary findings, please feel free to telephone me at 4024268, or my supervisor, Ms Anne Fitzpatrick at 4024203.

Thanking you in anticipation.

Yours sincerely,

Maria McDermott
APPENDIX B

Parent Involvement in Early Childhood Services

1.0 Are you: Female □ Male □ Age: 18-25 □ 26-40 □ 41-55 □ 56 + □

2.0 What is your position in this service? .....................................................

3.0 How long have you been employed: In this service? ............. In early years services? .............

4.0 Do you hold qualifications in childcare? Yes □ No □

4.1 If 'yes', please indicate:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Awarding Body</th>
<th>Year(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.0 Did your course have specific training in working with parents? Yes □ No □

(If 'Yes' please specify)

6.0 Have you received training on parent involvement since qualifying? Yes □ No □

7.0 What age are the children you mainly work with?
(Please tick appropriate box)

Under one year □ 1-2 years □ 2-3 years □ 3-4 years □ 4-5 years □

8.0 Do you have children of your own? Yes □ No □

9.0 This service is: (Please tick appropriate box)

Workplace crèche □ ADM/community crèche □
Private crèche □ Other □ (Please give details) ..........................................

10.0 Is it important to involve parents in early years services? Yes □ No □ Unsure □

If 'yes' why is it important to involve parents? (Please rank the following statements from 1-6, with 1 being the most important and 6 the least important. Please use each number only once)

| 10.1 | Parents are interested and have a right to be involved |
| 10.2 | Parent involvement is considered an indicator of a quality service |
| 10.3 | Staff are more informed when parents share their knowledge about their child |
| 10.4 | Staff like to support parents in their child-rearing function |
| 10.5 | Parents are their children's first educators |
| 10.6 | Parent involvement is crucial to effective work with children |

Is there any other reason for involving parents? (Please give details) ..........................................................
11.0 How would you like parents to be involved in early years services?
(Please rank the following statements from 1-6, with 1 being most favoured and 6 least favoured way you would like parents involved. Please use each number only once).

11.1 Parents as supporters (e.g. fundraising, contributing materials)
11.2 Parents as volunteers (e.g. helping in day to day activities, outings)
11.3 Parents as educators of their own children (e.g. supporting service ideas at home)
11.4 Parents as learners (e.g. parents learning about child development etc. from staff/guest speakers)
11.5 Parents as partners with staff in the care and education of children (e.g. two-way communication, shared decision-making)
11.6 Parents involved in managing and developing the policies of the service

Are there other ways you would like parents involved? (Please give details)

12.0 Why might parents want to be involved?
(Please rank the following statements from 1-6, with 1 being the most important and 6 the least important. Please use each number only once).

12.1 To ensure they have a say in the care and education of their child
12.2 To alleviate any anxiety about leaving their child
12.3 To know more about the service (what child is doing/learning)
12.4 To satisfy their own needs i.e. for social contact
12.5 To support staff
12.6 To monitor staff

Are there other reasons parents want to be involved? (Please give details)

13.0 Why might parents not be involved?
(Please rank the following statements from 1-8 with 1 being the most likely and 8 the least likely reason. Please use each number only once).

13.1 Work or family commitments
13.2 Lack of confidence
13.3 Own child may be disruptive if parent(s) present
13.4 They choose not to be involved
13.5 Parents past experience in education may have been negative
13.6 Lack of information about involvement opportunities
13.7 Dissatisfaction with the opportunities for parent involvement offered
13.8 Parents are unaware of the benefits from their involvement

Are there other reasons why parents are not involved? (Please give details)

14.0 Does your service have a written policy on parent involvement? Yes □ No □ Unsure □

15.0 Who decides if parents will be involved? (Please tick all that apply)

Parents □ Staff in room □ Manager □ Other □
16.0 Are there benefits to be gained from parent involvement? Yes □ No □ Don’t know □
If ‘Yes’,
How do children benefit?
..............................................................................................................................
How do parents benefit?
..............................................................................................................................
How do staff benefit?
..............................................................................................................................

17.0 Are there disadvantages to involving parents? Yes □ No □ Don’t know □
If ‘Yes’
What are the disadvantages for children?
................................................................................................................................
What are the disadvantages for parents?
................................................................................................................................
What are the disadvantages for staff?
................................................................................................................................

18.0 In your service which, if any, of the following occur? (Please tick all, or any that occur)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>18.1 Before the child starts</th>
<th>Parents are invited to visit the service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>Staff make a home visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>Parents are given written information about the service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>Parents are asked for information about their child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.5 Once the child starts</td>
<td>Parents are encouraged to stay until their child settles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>Parents are told about opportunities for their involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>Parents are told about benefits from their involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>Parents are informed that they are welcome at any time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.9 Facilities for parents</td>
<td>Adult seating is provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.10</td>
<td>Tea/coffee facilities are available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.11</td>
<td>A room is available where parents can meet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.12 Service - Home links</td>
<td>Photographs of children’s families are displayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.13</td>
<td>Photographs of staff are displayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.14</td>
<td>Key workers* are used to liaise with families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.15</td>
<td>Children may bring items from home to the service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.16</td>
<td>Names of special people in children’s lives are known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.17</td>
<td>Parents may bring books/activities, videos etc. home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.18</td>
<td>Social events are organised for staff and parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.19</td>
<td>Staff and parents use first names with each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.20</td>
<td>Parents get daily written record about their child’s day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.21</td>
<td>Information on events/activities is on notice boards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.22</td>
<td>Individual parent/staff meetings are held</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* A key worker is a member of staff who takes special responsibility for a small number of children and their families

19.0 Involvement generally entails? Mothers □ Fathers □ Grandparents □ Other □

20.0 What are the 3 most common ways communication occurs between staff and parents?
e.g. Phone calls etc

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>20.1 Parent → to staff</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20.2 Staff → to parent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
21.0 From the list below please tick the three most common topics of conversation raised by parents and by staff.

| 21.1 | Meals, rest, toileting and health issues | 3 most common topics (Parents) | 3 most common topics (Staff) |
| 21.2 | Discussing children’s interests | | |
| 21.3 | Sharing positive experiences in child’s day/life | | |
| 21.4 | Sharing negative experiences in child’s day/life | | |
| 21.5 | Sharing/seeking knowledge on child development | | |
| 21.6 | Discussing continuity between home and service | | |
| 21.7 | Social conversations | | |
| 21.8 | Giving/seeking parenting advice | | |

Are there other topics raised by parents or staff? (Please give details)

22.0 On average, how long do your conversations with parents last?
- Less than 2 minutes [ ]
- 3 - 5 minutes [ ]
- 6 - 9 minutes [ ]
- 10 + minutes [ ]

23.0 How do you rate your communications with parents?
- Excellent [ ]
- Good [ ]
- Fair [ ]
- Weak [ ]

24.0 To what extent are parents involved in the following? (Please tick all appropriate boxes)

| 24.1 | Fundraising | Regularly | Sometimes | Never |
| 24.2 | Providing materials for art and craft. | | | |
| 24.3 | Attending parties or social events | | | |
| 24.4 | Helping with day-to-day activities in service | | | |
| 25.5 | In charge of certain activities | | | |
| 24.6 | Decision-making about their own child | | | |
| 24.7 | Accessing their child’s developmental records | | | |
| 24.8 | Contributing to policy development/programme planning | | | |
| 24.9 | Sharing their talents/skills in the service (Music, art, story telling etc.) | | | |
| 24.10 | Providing feedback/suggestions/ about the service | | | |
| 24.11 | Negotiating if family values, preferences etc. differ from those of the service (e.g. diet) | | | |
| 24.12 | Serving on the management committee | | | |
| 24.13 | Attending meetings/talks e.g. child development | | | |
| 24.14 | Supporting service ideas at home | | | |

25.0 Which type of parent involvement is most preferred by staff and parents in your service?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred by Staff:</th>
<th>Preferred by Parents:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Please circle the number which best indicates your level of agreement with each of the following statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>Parents should be asked what they need from the service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>Staff should accommodate the expectations of parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>Staff should explain to parents the educational purpose of activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>The younger the child the more parents want to be involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>A wider curriculum is offered when parents share their talents/skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>Parents have a right not to be involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>The reason parents use a service influences their level of involvement e.g. working/in education/want a break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>Parent involvement puts an extra burden on stressed parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>Staff should provide linkages to other services parents may need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>Staff should encourage all parents to be involved at some level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.10</td>
<td>A variety of opportunities need to be available to involve all parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.11</td>
<td>Parents should be asked to volunteer for specific activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.12</td>
<td>Staff should organise parent/child activities to be undertaken at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.13</td>
<td>Staff should continuously review involvement practices with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.14</td>
<td>Staff should keep up-to-date with research on parent involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.15</td>
<td>The service should have a written policy on parent involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.16</td>
<td>Parents should serve on the management committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.17</td>
<td>Staff should take responsibility for initiating contact and sharing information with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.18</td>
<td>Informal communication with parents is important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.19</td>
<td>Regular dialogue ensures parents know about the aims of the service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.20</td>
<td>Staff are a resource for parents (provide information, advice etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.21</td>
<td>Parents and staff jointly share responsibility for the care of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.22</td>
<td>Parent involvement requires mutual respect, trust and understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.23</td>
<td>Staffs' views of parents influences parent involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.24</td>
<td>Parent involvement enhances parent/staff relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.25</td>
<td>Parents develop new skills and confidence from their involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.26</td>
<td>Parents need training and support for effective involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.27</td>
<td>Staff need to have specific training to work with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.28</td>
<td>Staff need support when involving parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.29</td>
<td>Staff need confidence to meet the challenges of involving parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.30</td>
<td>Working with parents is a priority for staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.31</td>
<td>Staff to-day have an expanded role involving working with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.32</td>
<td>Parents/staff find it easy to approach each other if there is a problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.33</td>
<td>Parents knowledge about their own child and staffs knowledge about children in general are equally important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.34</td>
<td>Parents should trust staff to do their job and not get involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.35</td>
<td>Parent involvement in services is unworkable and outdated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
27.0 What problem, if any, is each of the following in parent involvement?
(Please tick appropriate boxes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>27.1</th>
<th>Space is an issue when involving parents</th>
<th>Significant Problem</th>
<th>Minor Problem</th>
<th>No Problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>Costs affect involvement e.g. home visits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>Staffs' shortage of time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>Language/cultural differences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>The same parents tend to volunteer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>Cliques of parents develop discouraging other parents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>Confidentiality can be compromised</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>Staff lose some control of the programme/service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>Staff feel stressed when parents are involved</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.10</td>
<td>Parent involvement endangers role boundaries</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.11</td>
<td>Parents have difficulty accepting their child's close relationship with staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.12</td>
<td>Children's behaviour changes e.g. they 'act up'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.13</td>
<td>Staff and parents disagree e.g. disciplining children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

28.0 What skills do staff need when involving parents?
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

29.0 What attitudes do staff need when involving parents?
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

30.0 Are there changes you would like to make in the area of parent involvement?
(Please give details)
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

31.0 Do parents value your role as a childcare worker? Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know ☐
(Please explain your answer)
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

32.0 Are there any comments you would like to make in relation to issues raised in this survey?
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

Thank you for taking the time and trouble to complete this questionnaire