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SANDRA RYAN AND JOHN GALVIN

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Introduction

In recent decades the relationship between home and school has been the focus of increasing research and activity worldwide. Some of the most significant early interest in the area, however, was rooted in education reforms of the 1960s and 1970s¹ and in concerns about addressing educational disadvantage.² The search for solutions mirrored the shift in focus from disadvantage among individual children, first to families and then to the wider communities in which families reside.³

More recent government policies in Ireland and elsewhere⁴ reflect the belief that, while schools have a crucial role to play in addressing educational disadvantage, the education system must work with families and communities and with other voluntary and statutory agencies and institutions in

- 1 Great Britain, Department of Education and Science. (1967). *Children and their Primary Schools: A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)* (The Plowden Report). London: HMSO.
- 2 Government of Ireland. (1965). *Commission of Inquiry on Mental Handicap Report*. Dublin: The Stationery Office. Also Coleman, J. (1968). 'The Concept of Equality of Educational Opportunity', *Harvard Educational Review*, 38, pp. 7-22.
- 3 Kellaghan, T., Weir, S., Ó hUallacháin, S. and Morgan, M. (1995). *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*. Dublin: Department of Education: Combat Poverty Agency: Educational Research Centre, p. 6.
- 4 See Government of Ireland, Department of Education and Skills, Reports (1980, 1992, 1995); Higher Education Authority (HEA) reports (2004, 2006, 2008). Also Cairney, T. and Ruge, J. (1999). 'Developing Partnerships: The Home, School, and Community Interface', *Queensland Journal of Educational Research*, 15 (1), 17-24.

order to address the complexity of educational disadvantage.⁵ In Ireland, much of the programme activity within schools has developed through the Department of Education and Science Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme established in 1989.⁶ Significant work in other contexts has also been carried out under the auspices of the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme.⁷

Educational partnership is an important trend in the primary sector and an essential facet of effective education. However, while the research literature and government policies point to educational partnership as the best mechanism to help children succeed in school and throughout later life,⁸ this is easier said than done; moving from the rhetoric to a reality is an extremely difficult undertaking. Finding ways of bringing about successful partnerships, therefore, is an urgent challenge for educational practitioners and researchers. This chapter draws on data gathered during the course of the Family-School-Community Educational Partnership (FSCEP) Project (outlined below) to gain a better understanding of the dynamics and variables at work in developing a partnership approach to children's learning.

Despite the scope and nature of programmes and activities to date, there are relatively few schools in which genuine partnership exists. This finding has also been documented outside Ireland.⁹ Educational partnership remains an emerging concept and, as stated by Conaty, the language

5 Kellaghan et al., op. cit. (1995) and Ryan, S. (1994). *The Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme. Final Evaluation Report*. Dublin: Educational Research Centre.

6 For an overview see Ryan, S. (1994), Ryan, S. (1995). *The Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme. Summary Evaluation Report*. Conaty, C. (2002). *Including All: Home, School and Community United in Education*. Dublin: Veritas.

7 See, for example, Area Development Management. (2003). *Equality in Education: An Examination of Community-Based Youth Initiatives under the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme*. Dublin: ADM (POBAL).

8 Epstein, J.L. et al. (2002). *Schools, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*. London: Sage. HEA (2004). Henderson, A. and Berla, N. (1994). *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*. Columbia, MD: National Committee for Citizens in Education.

9 Cairney, T. (2000). 'Beyond the Classroom walls: The Rediscovery of the Family and Community as Partners in Education', *Educational Review*, 52 (2), 163-174.

surrounding it and the definitions being applied to it are not yet fixed.¹⁰ This chapter explores educational partnership from an emic perspective within definitions put forward by Pugh and De'Ath (1989) and Atkinson (1994). The definition of partnership, as outlined by Pugh and De'Ath incorporates concepts of equality, empowerment and transformation. They see partnership as 'a working relationship that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect, and the willingness to negotiate.' They state that 'this implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability.'¹¹

Block refers to partnership as being 'connected to another in a way that the power between us is roughly balanced.'¹² He also refers to 'operating in service rather than in control' and that 'partnership is the willingness to give more choice to the people we choose to serve.'¹³ For Block, the empowered person is the one who serves, the one who chooses service over self interest. Furthermore, the recipients of our service are the ones to whom we become accountable.

Atkinson describes 'a full-blooded partnership between home, school and the community in which each plays a positive role which acknowledges and involves the others.' He states that 'the good school will reflect, support and enhance the values and raison d'être of the social life in which it is situated.'¹⁴ This understanding of educational partnership provided the theoretical framework for the FSCEP study.

This study sought to gain insights into how parents in communities experiencing socio-economic and educational disadvantage make sense of

Epstein, J.L. (2010). *School, Family and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools*. Second Edition. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

10 Conaty, C., op. cit. (2002).

11 Pugh, G. and De'Ath, E. (1989). *Working Towards Partnership in the Early Years*. London: National Children's Bureau, p. 68.

12 Block, P. (1993). *Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest*. San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler Publishers Inc, p. 32.

13 Block, P., op. cit. (1993), p. 32.

14 Atkinson, D. (1994). *Radical Urban Solutions: Urban Renaissance for City Schools and Communities*. London: Cassell, p. 58.

their role within an educational partnership process. It explored the way forward for such partnerships and argued that ethnographic methodologies, employing participatory research approaches, are the most appropriate form of research to yield the necessary social understandings that will facilitate meaningful partnership to develop. Various qualitative methodologies were used within this research process, including reflective journals, participant observation and 'the observation of participation',¹⁵ as well as group and individual interviews.

The Family-School-Community Educational Partnership Project

The Family-School-Community Educational Partnership Project (FSCEP) was a four-year action research project that involved five primary schools in the mid-west region of Ireland, three (urban) in Limerick City and two (one urban and one rural) in West Clare. The schools varied in size; two were junior schools catering for children from four to eight years, two were large schools for children aged four to thirteen years and one was a small two-teacher school with twenty-five pupils, aged four to thirteen years. All five schools were part of the Department of Education Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) scheme that is 'designed to ensure that the most disadvantaged schools benefit from a comprehensive package of supports'.¹⁶

The five schools volunteered to be part of the FSCEP Project. All staff members were consulted and the final decision to participate was based

15 See Tedlock, B. (1991). 'From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: The Emergence of Narrative Ethnography', *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 47, p. 464.

16 See <http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/DEIS_action_plan_on_educational_inclusion.pdf?language=EN> accessed 7 April 2011.

on a whole-school commitment to develop partnership with families and communities. The whole-school approach was essential in this endeavour as a unified strategy conveyed clear signals to staff members, pupils, families and community members. There was evidence of much enthusiasm and participation on the part of many staff members and all principals throughout the duration of the project.

What FSCEP offered the schools was an acceleration of growth in parent-teacher collaboration and a deeper grounding of the children's education in the local community. The project set out to develop more productive ways in which schools, families and the local community could support each other in the education process of primary school children. Many different strategies and combinations of approaches were used in the hope of facilitating and involving as many parents as possible. Activity programmes focused on four curricular areas prioritised by schools at the outset of the project: literacy, numeracy, arts education and sport and were designed collaboratively by parents and teachers to meet local needs.

Social and Educational Disadvantage in Limerick City

The Irish economy performed particularly poorly during the 1980s, resulting in unemployment rates of 20 per cent and the resultant loss of skilled labour through emigration.¹⁷ Poverty and unemployment rates up to 80 per cent in particular localities (including long-term unemployment) contributed to high levels of drug abuse and drug-related crime in certain urban areas, including Limerick City.¹⁸

17 Turok, L. (2001). 'Innovation in Local Governance: The Irish Partnership Model', in *OECD, Local Partnerships for Better Governance*, pp. 135-173.

18 Haase, T. and Pratschke, J. (2005). *Deprivation and its Spatial Articulation in the Republic of Ireland: New Measure of Deprivation Based on the Census of Population, 1991, 1996 and 2002*. Dublin: Area Development Management.

The three Limerick City schools in this study serve neighbouring communities in public housing estates, built between the 1950s and 1980s. The extent of problems faced by these households is documented in a recent report on conditions among local authority tenants, and, in particular, an extremely high level of relative income poverty.¹⁹ All three schools serve communities where over one-third of those aged fifteen and over have left school early.²⁰ McCafferty and Canny also identified a particularly strong relationship between educational and social disadvantage in Limerick.²¹

While the Irish economy enjoyed unprecedented growth and success during the years leading up to 2002 in particular, Haase and Pratschke identified 'clear evidence of an increase in relative deprivation in the most disadvantaged urban areas particularly of Limerick, Cork and Waterford.'²²

More recently, this deprivation has manifested itself in the form of gang-related crime that has led to increased government investment in law enforcement, culminating with the announcement of a complete regeneration programme in two areas, one north and one south (encompassing one of the study schools) of Limerick City.²³

- 19 McCafferty, D. and Canny, A. (2005). *Public Housing in Limerick City: A Profile of Tenants and Estates*. Limerick: Limerick City Council.
- 20 McCafferty, D. and Canny, A. (2008). 'Educational Disadvantage in Limerick: The Socio-Economic and Spatial Context', *Why Not Me? Keys to Success from 10 Years Learning: Proceedings of Colloquium on Educational Disadvantage*, pp. 11-14.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Haase, T. and Pratschke, J. (2008). *New Measures of Deprivation in the Republic of Ireland: An Inter-Temporal and Spatial Analysis of Data from the Census of Population, 1991, 1996, 2002, and 2006*. Dublin: Pobal, p. 8.
- 23 Fitzgerald, J. (2007). *Addressing Issues of Social Exclusion in Moyross and Other Disadvantaged Areas of Limerick City: Report to the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion*. Dublin: Government Publications.

Methodology

A range of qualitative approaches were used in this study, including participant observation, group and individual interviews and the use of reflective journals. These are described in detail in the report of the project.²⁴ All approaches were guided by an awareness of the importance of reflexivity in the analysis of data and in the presentation of findings.

Reflexivity in Ethnographic Research

Post-structural theory has raised many questions about a researcher's ability to construct and represent the findings of an ethnographic investigation. Pillow describes reflexivity as a method qualitative researchers can and should use 'to both explore and expose the politics of representation,'²⁵ while Britzman outlines the need to establish 'ethnography authority.'²⁶ The validity of representation and the complexities of what it means to do qualitative research are fundamental issues in post-structuralists' debates on qualitative data analysis at a time when our 'epistemological foundations have been shaken by a general loss of faith in received stories about the nature of representation.'²⁷ Pillow examines how reflexivity is being defined and its role as a methodological tool. She points to the distinction

- 24 Galvin, J., Higgins, A. and Mahony, K. (2009). *Family, School, Community Educational Partnership Report*. Limerick: Curriculum Development Unit, Mary Immaculate College.
- 25 Pillow, W. (2003). 'Confession, Catharsis, or Cure? Rethinking the Uses of Reflexivity as Methodological Power in Qualitative Research', *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16 (2), p. 176.
- 26 Britzman, D. (1995). 'The Question of Belief: Writing Post-Structural Ethnography', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8 (3), p. 229.
- 27 Geertz, C. (1988). *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 135, cited in Pillow, W., op. cit. (2003).

between reflexivity and reflection drawn by Chiseri-Strater: 'to be reflective does not demand an "other", while to be reflexive demands both an other and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny.'²⁸ Such a focus requires the researcher to be critically conscious of how his/her position and interests influence all stages of the research work. As Callaway puts it '[reflexivity] becomes a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness.'²⁹ This draws attention to researcher subjectivity in the research process and acknowledges that the way knowledge is acquired and constructed is relevant to the claims made.

A Participatory Research Process

An educational partnership process holds out the possibility of developing reflexive practices with the research subjects by using a participatory approach in the generation of knowledge. As Goodley puts it, 'ethnographers are challenged to work together with participants in order to develop shared subjective understandings of a given culture, breaking down power relationships between the researchers and the 'researched' and to work critically and closely with subjectivity as a resource of the ethnographic project.'³⁰ The FSCEP project provided many excellent opportunities to work in close liaison with teachers, parents and community members. Tedlock points out:

- 28 Chiseri-Strater, E. (1996). 'Turning in upon Ourselves: Positionality, Subjectivity, and Reflexivity in Case Study and Ethnographic Research'. In P. Mortensen and G.E. Kirsch (eds). *Ethics and Responsibility in Qualitative Studies of Literacy*, p. 130.
- 29 Callaway, H. (1992). 'Ethnography and Experience: Gender Implications in Fieldwork and Texts'. In J. Okely and H. Callaway (eds). *Anthropology and Autobiography*, p. 33.
- 30 Goodley, D. (2006). 'Processes of Educational Research – Critical Analysis'. Ed.D. Lecture. University of Sheffield.

Whenever it has been adopted, a key assumption has been that by entering into a close and relatively prolonged interaction with people (one's own or other) in their everyday lives, ethnographers can better understand the beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of their subjects than they can by using any other approach.³¹

Approach to Implementation and Analysis

In the initial stages of programme implementation, a tentative approach seemed to work best. At first we met with some teachers in each school, who were particularly enthusiastic about FSCEP, and sought their advice. We explained that we wished to engage in a piece of ethnographic research that would actively involve all the partners i.e., parents, children, teachers and the local community. Their response was enthusiastic and their advice readily forthcoming. The initial meeting was followed by more formal planning sessions. In similar fashion, meetings with parents were low-key and informal and participation by all present was encouraged.

Planning and designing the activity programmes and working out the practicalities of implementation resulted in much interaction between parents, teachers and community members. The role of FSCEP staff at the meetings had a dual purpose, that of participant and also of observer. From the outset this position was made clear to all participants i.e., that our ultimate aim was a search for answers in the development of partnership. To this end many of the participants agreed to keep a reflective journal and to take part in group interviews. Davies cautions the ethnographer about 'unduly influencing the data' and advises that observation should also 'include reflexive observation.'³² As the activity programmes gathered

- 31 Tedlock, B. (2001). 'Ethnography and Ethnographic Representation'. In N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (eds). *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, p. 456.
- 32 Davies, C. (1999). *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*. London: Routledge, p. 73.

momentum, the emergence of positive relationships and mutual trust was evident in the relaxed nature of interactions.

It is important to note that all participants held positive convictions with regard to educational partnership and that FSCEP staff desired positive outcomes. Hence, Davies sounds a note of caution to the ethnographic reporter that ethnography is 'vulnerable to the critiques initially from the hermeneutic tradition ... and various poststructuralist and postmodernist perspectives.'³³ Therefore every effort was made to ensure the objectivity of findings. The findings are represented in 'multivocal' text format which allows the data and subjects to speak for themselves. This is concisely phrased by Macbeth, when he states that 'reflexivity is a deconstructive exercise for locating the intersections of author, other, text, and world, and for penetrating the representational exercise itself.'³⁴

Ethnographic data analysis is, to a large extent, an ongoing process. Kane describes analysing as 'the processing which your brain performs on what you have collected.'³⁵ From the outset FSCEP staff enjoyed the ethnographic role and purposely refreshed active listening skills, observation and interpretation skills. Responsibilities pertaining to such exercises were kept to the forefront. Ethical codes with regard to informed consent and confidentiality were discussed and put in place. As Davies admonishes; 'along with increasing reflexivity in the conduct of social research inevitably comes greater awareness of ethical questions and political considerations regarding the conduct of research.'³⁶

At the end of each week informal meetings were held to discuss practice, to evaluate progress and to share experiences. Reflexivity as a research tool proved an invaluable exercise in many instances. Just as analysis is ongoing, so also are the conclusions and findings of reflexive ethnography. We confirmed that one of the most useful tools for the ethnographer is a

33 Ibid., p. 71.

34 Macbeth, D. (2001). 'On "Reflexivity" in Qualitative Research: Two Readings and a Third', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7 (1), p. 35.

35 Kane, E. (1984). *Doing Your Research: How to Do Basic Descriptive Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities*. London: Marion Boyars, p. 151.

36 Davies, C., op. cit. (1999), p. 45.

pocket notepad for recording the numerous insights and observations on the spot. If not written down immediately there is a danger that much of the information is lost before it can be written into reports.

Comparison of Programmes

Two quite different activity programmes that were run in two separate schools were selected for a more detailed ethnographic investigation. Both were very successful from the point of view of parent-teacher interaction and both reflected the dimensions of partnership that formed the theoretical framework for the study as discussed earlier.³⁷ The main difference between the programmes was that one was predominantly 'teacher-driven' while the other was mainly 'parent-driven'.

The 'parent-driven' activity, entitled 'Our Community', was based in the larger of the two schools. It involved fourth class children (nine to ten years of age) working in close collaboration with the Community Development Project (CDP) in celebrating their tenth anniversary. The theme of the celebration focused attention on local achievements and events of previous years within the community. Each family was provided with a disposable camera and a 'walkabout' of parents, teachers and pupils was organised in order to take photographs of local scenes and developments. These pictures became the central theme of their classroom activities over the ensuing weeks. A collaborative effort by parents and teachers resulted in the creation of a three-dimensional model of the various aspects of the locality. The finished product was displayed in the CDP Centre and an 'open-day' celebration was organised for the whole community. Each participating family was awarded a certificate acknowledging their contri-

37 Pugh, G. and De'Ath, E., op. cit. (1989). Block, P., op. cit. (1993). Atkinson, D., op. cit. (1994).

bution. The story was covered by a local newspaper under the caption of 'City Parents Make Model Students'.

The second activity programme chose the medium of musical development and performance. While it was emphasised from the outset that the 'process' of the programme was paramount, nevertheless, it was hoped that the 'end product' would result in a summer show being staged in the community hall. In hindsight, however, it seems clear that the 'end product' became the main driving force. The whole school participated in these song and dance activities, which were practised weekly over a six-week period. Many parents attended these sessions and while some were willing to take part, most preferred to sit and observe. This 'performance learning', as referred to by one teacher, extended into the homes as part of the children's homework and consolidated the work done in the classroom.

Two weeks prior to staging the show a committee of parents and teachers was formed to deal with the logistics of staging a concert. Parents volunteered their skills and talents and were guided by the teachers in preparing costumes, stage backdrops and so on. Filling a traditional role, a small group of parents, on their own initiative, collected a number of 'spot prizes' to be raffled on the night and raised a considerable sum of money for the school.

Analysis

Parent-Driven Programme

The parent-driven programme, 'Our Community', required many more meetings than the 'teacher-driven' programme and involved a greater number of agencies. Getting agreement on a suitable themed activity was the first hurdle to be crossed and this required a considerable amount of time, good will and collaboration.

Participant observation at these meetings and later on in the classroom was a rewarding exercise. Unknown to themselves children were engaging in peer-tutoring and co-operative learning. The parent input proved to be a rich source of ideas and talents hitherto untapped. A plan of action was decided upon, beginning with a data gathering exercise on the locality by the children and their families. This data was cleverly incorporated into curricular activities in the classrooms and, with the help of volunteer parents, a three-dimensional model of the local community began to take shape. Children's enthusiasm was palpable and the presence of parents in the classroom was reassuring for them. One of the girls interviewed spoke of 'feeling safe' while one of the boys stated that 'it was cool to see my Mum in the classroom'. Others used words like 'good fun', 'different', 'better than schoolwork' and 'not boring' to describe their experiences. Admittedly, in some ways it was far more demanding on the teachers in terms of organisation than the traditional school day. However, for the participating teachers this was not an issue. One teacher said that 'it brought its own rewards' and another said 'I enjoyed it so much that I didn't see it as extra work at all'. The contribution of the activities to community learning and goodwill was obvious to all observers. Celebrating an 'open-day' in the community hall underlined the importance of community learning vis-à-vis school learning. As the children shared their 'world' with us, pointing out where grandparents lived and so on, so also did the adults. They were very appreciative of what was being done with their children. A father who had taken time off work joked: 'the things we do for our children, but if I don't do it for them, who will?' One grandmother commented: 'The teachers are very good. They do great work with the children ... children love school nowadays'.

Teacher-Driven Activity

In contrast the teacher-driven activity, entitled 'Music/Song/Performance', was more focussed from the beginning and required relatively less time and organisation. While some attention was paid to the process of parent-teacher interactions, nevertheless, the end product was clearly the goal.

In many respects the 'teacher-driven activity' was less democratic than the 'parent-driven activity'. From the outset parents seemed to adopt a subordinate role. Pressures on the teaching day relating to time, standards and behaviour surfaced from time to time at meetings. Interrupting class progress to consult with a teacher on some matter relating to the 'Music/Song/Performance' activity was discouraged. In addition to this, 'staggered' lunch breaks and yard supervision duty added to the difficulty of communicating with teachers. Some teachers relayed their fears regarding 'literacy and numeracy standards and upcoming school inspections' and were dubious about spending a lot of time 'on other matters'. As the 'Music/Song/Performance' activities progressed, one of the teachers stated that it 'portrayed the school in a positive light; as being progressive and dedicated', and said she 'was looking forward to staging the end-product'.

Parents were thrilled with the prospect of their children taking part in a school concert. A number of mothers volunteered their services in various ways i.e., making costumes and preparing stage backdrops, and made light of any perceived obstacles. The staffroom became a hub of activity. Undoubtedly a lot of distractions of this nature would be upsetting to the tranquillity and orderliness of a traditionally run school. It calls to mind Hargreaves' view on school cultures and structures:

It is not possible to establish productive school cultures without prior changes being effected in school structure that increase the opportunities for meaningful working relationships and collegial support between teachers.³⁸

It also brings to mind the fundamental question raised by Ryan with regard to 'our construction of what schools are intended to accomplish'³⁹ and it seems clear that this requires far greater attention at local level as well as at national level.

38 Hargreaves, cited in Conaty, op. cit. (2002), p. 175.

39 Ryan, S. (2000). 'Developing Reciprocal Support Among Families, Communities and Schools: The Irish Experience.' In J. Canavan, P. Dolan, and J. Pinkerton (eds). *Family Support: Direction From Diversity*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, pp. 171-194.

Interviews

On completion of the activity programmes a number of formal interviews were conducted with parents, teachers and pupils.⁴⁰ Six parents were interviewed (five mothers and one father), two teachers and a small group of ten-year-old children. Three group interviews were conducted with parents, as this was the desired approach of the interviewees, and an individual interview was preferred by the only male interviewee who had volunteered.

Having raised our awareness, to the best of our abilities, of the many influences that might impact on our impartiality, we designed an interview template for parents and teachers and a shorter, simpler version for the pupils. All interviews were semi-structured in design and were conducted on school premises. The tone of the interviews was informal and most of the questions were open-ended. It was hoped that this would allow for open-ended responses described by Davies as, 'in their own words and not restricted to the preconceived notions of the ethnographer'.⁴¹

In interpreting the knowledge generated by these interviews, two influencing factors must be taken into consideration. Firstly, the selection of the interviewees was influenced by the relationship that had built up over the weeks prior to the activities and by their obvious enthusiasm towards the project. Secondly, our eagerness for a successful outcome to both activity programmes and our personal convictions with regard to the benefits of educational partnership came into play. These factors undoubtedly contributed to the responses being predominantly positive rather than negative.

The group interviews, however, presented some alternative views and in that way contributed to validation of the findings. The nature of group interviews means that the interviewees interact with each other as well as

40 To facilitate a reflexive attitude for this research, we drew on the work of LeCompte, M. and Preissle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research*. London: Academic Press, Inc., pp. 125-126.

41 Davies, C., op. cit. (1999), p. 95.

the researcher and this led to some lively discussion taking place. Davies suggests that interviewing 'is better understood as a process in which interviewer and interviewee are both involved in developing understanding; that is in constructing their knowledge of the social world'.⁴² She informs us that 'critical realism rejects both the purely representational and the totally constructed models of the interview process'.⁴³ This view is endorsed by Holstein and Gubrium when they state:

Both parties to the interview are necessarily and unavoidably *active*. Each is involved in meaning-making work. Meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning nor simply transported through respondent replies: it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter.⁴⁴

Consequently the conclusions and findings of this research need to be interpreted in this light.

Findings

Three broad conclusions became apparent as we worked our way through the activity programmes. Firstly, despite the additional demands being made on them, both parents and teachers showed a great deal of goodwill and readiness to participate in the activity programmes. Admittedly there were some differences in the motivating factors which will be looked at presently. Secondly, the quality of the relationships is a crucial ingredient in effective partnerships and such relationships take time and require active cultivation. In this respect, due mainly to existing power imbalances, the schools must play a leading role. To facilitate the growth of such relationships among

42 Ibid., p. 97.

43 Ibid., p. 98.

44 Holstein, J. and Gubrium, J. (1995). *The Active Interview*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 4.

a wide range of people, many different strategies and a combination of approaches are necessary. Thirdly, the payback in terms of maximising skills, developing talents, enhancing self-esteem, and building community pride brings its own rewards and has huge long-term potential for the school and its community. It is worthwhile to look at these findings from both perspectives i.e., teacher perspective and parent perspective.

Teachers' Perspectives

Teachers' perspectives need to be understood within the broader educational context as it relates to their professional ideologies and personal priorities. Teachers' commitment and willingness to participate in the activity programmes were influenced to some degree by certain official requirements relating to 'whole-school evaluation'. In designing programmes to facilitate educational partnership some teachers were adamant that the content should be integrated into their existing curriculum so as not to present an additional burden. While most teachers accepted that keeping a reflective journal might benefit their work with children and parents, the weekly task of completing such a journal proved difficult for many. As Vlachou discovered, 'the pressures of "coping" or "managing their time" left teachers with little physical or psychological space and energy for developing the most fundamental element of teaching: reflecting upon their own practice'.⁴⁵ Our reflection on the FSCEP work leads us to agree with Cairney that there is a need to develop further understanding of 'mechanisms for creating a climate of analysis and reflection within the teaching profession that will lead to self-analysis of classroom discourse and its impact on children'.⁴⁶

It must be noted, however, that the willingness with which the participating teachers committed themselves to actively pursuing better parent-teacher relationships was heartening to observe. Many of them

45 Vlachou, A. (1997). 'Struggles for Inclusive Education: Teachers and the Changing Culture of Schooling', *British Journal of Special Education*, 21 (3), p. 166.

46 Cairney, T., op. cit. (2000), p. 172.

gave enthusiastically of their time and energy above and beyond what is normally required and consciously evolved strategies for involving other parents. The principal teachers believed that 'raising the school's profile was important' for many reasons, not least of which was ensuring future enrolment of pupils.

Parents' Perspectives

The parents were pleased to be given a forum to voice their opinions. Their only reservations with regard to being interviewed were in comments such as 'I've a terrible accent', or 'who's it for?' The male interviewee was glad to have his opinions recorded and saw it as an important aspect of FSCEP. He believed that his presence in the school was important for his children and gave them 'the right message about education'. He pointed out that 'the activity programme gave me a [legitimate] reason for being present in the school ... it is difficult for a man to be hanging around the school'. A mother spoke of 'having a better understanding of what goes on in the classroom' and said she liked 'watching her own child mixing with the others'. Another said: 'Tis great to get out of the house. I love being in the school and having a laugh with the teachers.' The social aspect of being involved in the school was important to many parents: 'you get to meet new people and make new friends'. A few parents raised the question of 'pressure' and 'guilt feelings' for those who, for various reasons, were unable to participate to any extent. This is an aspect of educational partnership that requires further attention.

Conclusion

The FSCEP activity programmes acted as a catalyst and provided the leadership whereby an inclusive ethos began to flourish and positive parent-teacher relationships were built upon. Our presence in the staffrooms

usually occasioned topics of discussion that related to parent-teacher collaboration. Unfortunately, during these conversations elements of 'deficit-model'⁴⁷ thinking were discernible in the staffrooms.

In one discussion on the theme of parents as co-educators⁴⁸ responses varied greatly but were noticeably paternalistic in tone. It became apparent that true educational partnership between families, schools and communities is still at an infancy stage. This will require the development of processes for reaching shared understanding, referred to by Vygotsky as 'intersubjectivity'.⁴⁹ It will also require 'a shared focus of attention and mutual understanding of any joint activity'.⁵⁰

Fully facilitating and legitimating parents in the education process of children will require a certain shift in thinking. Our experience within this partnership development project supports the conclusions of Cairney that: 'Teachers and parents need to understand the way each defines, values

47 Older studies of educational disadvantage focussed predominantly on the 'deficit' perspective (Kluckhohn, C. (1962). *Culture and Behaviour*. New York: Free Press; Sugarman, B.N. (1966). 'Social Class and Values as Related to Achievement and Conduct in School', *Sociological Review*, 14, pp. 287-301; Craft, M. (1970). 'Economy, Ideology and Educational Development in Ireland', *Administration*, 18 (4), pp. 363-374). According to these studies, many families who were destined for lives as clients and recipients of social services were seen as needy and deficient. This model identifies the cause of educational disadvantage as a deficit in the family or community, associated with particular patterns of parent-child interaction, neglect or abuse, a culture of poverty or ghettoisation, resulting in reduced linguistic ability. This approach focused on perceived deficiencies in the homes and seemed to place the blame for educational disadvantage on those who were experiencing it, exonerating the education system from the duty to perform any critical self-reflection. Even though the 'deficit perspective' has for long been discredited in research findings, many of the ideas on which it was based continue to exert an influence on teachers' views and expectations. See Edwards, J. (1992). *Education and Poverty*. Dublin: CMRS.

48 See Coleman, J. (1998). *Parent, Student and Teacher Collaboration: The Power of Three*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

49 Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind and Society: The Development of Higher Mental Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press.

50 Cairney, T., op. cit. (2000), p. 172.

and uses literacy and learning activities as part of cultural practices.⁵¹ This would allow adjustment in schooling to meet the needs of families as well as providing parents with opportunities to understand schooling and 'the cultural practices which ultimately empower individuals to take their place in society.'⁵²

The ethnographic research model outlined here has a major strength in supporting educators to engage with issues of disadvantage. The process serves to create what Heifetz refers to as a 'holding environment',⁵³ where the step-by-step process is guided by trusted people towards a trusted outcome. We would add to this that the participatory approach breaks down traditional power relationships between the participants and the researchers and enables participants to engage with the issues to shape that outcome. We view this as an important and emerging trend in shaping the future of educational practices and structures.

51 Ibid., p. 172.

52 Ibid., p. 172.

53 Heifetz, R. (2000). *Leadership without Easy Answers*. 2nd edition. Cambridge, MA: Belnap Press, p. 103.