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## Parents as Partners in Early Childhood Services in Ireland: an Exploratory Study

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**Parents as Partners in early  
childhood services in  
Ireland: An exploratory  
study**

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**MPhil**

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**Submitted: June 2003**

## Declaration page

I certify that this thesis which I now submit for examination for the award of MPhil 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 studies 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.

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Signature Shirley Martin Date 20/10/03  
Candidate

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## **Abstract**

The aim of the study is to explore parents' relationships with early years service providers. A further aspect of the study was to elicit the views of parents and staff on services in relation to parent-staff partnerships. True partnership requires parents and professionals to have a relationship characterised by openness and mutual respect. As the demand for childcare is growing it is becoming apparent that there is a gap in research in relation to parents and childcare in Ireland. Parents are one of the main stakeholders in childcare and it is important to understand parents' views and expectations of childcare services. The views of full-time working parents of 0-3 year olds in the Dublin area are represented in the study, as are the views of the early years staff who care for their children. The National Childcare Census (2001) was chosen as the sampling framework as it provides a geographically representative target population. There were two stages of data collection in this study, non-participant observations and self-reported questionnaires, which collected both quantitative and qualitative data. The study revealed a variety of views representing both positive and negative perceptions of partnership. In general parents and staff felt that parents, staff and children benefited from partnership. While current childcare literature and government policy emphasises the benefits of partnership, evidence in this study indicates that partnership between parents and childcare providers is not prevalent. In particular, parents do not seem to have very much information about partnership. There was also very little evidence of parents and staff sharing accountability and responsibility for services in this study with very few parents involved in management of services and few parent-staff meetings. The types of activities parents were participating in were, typically, staff directed not characterised by a sense of partnership or mutual understanding and many parents viewed staff as the experts in relation to childcare. There appeared to be limited opportunity for meaningful engagement for parents with the early years services in the study. Parents' apparent lack of time, and parent and staff attitudes were cited by staff and parents as the most significant factors in the development of partnerships. An important finding of the study was that, despite parents other commitments, many stated that they had a desire for greater participation.

# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

## 1.1 Introduction

*“The voices of parents have long gone unheard. Yet no one who has known a parent or who used childcare would suggest that parents do not care about childcare quality. In large measure, parents are silent because they have not been asked their views”. (Larner & Phillips, 1994, p44)*

The aim of the study is to explore the relationship that parents of 0-3 year olds have with early years’ service providers. A further aspect of the study is to elicit the views of parents and the staff of these services in relation to parent-staff partnerships. The study has four research questions which will examine parents’ views of partnership and their relationship with the staff of their early years’ services, as well as staff views of these same issues. The concept of partnership and an operational definition of partnership will be discussed. This chapter also presents the background and rationale for the study followed by a short description of the methodology, which comprised both qualitative and quantitative methodology. The main methods of data collection used were non-participant observations and a self-completed questionnaire from both parents and staff. Finally, the remaining chapters are briefly described in the outline of the thesis.

## 1.2 Background and rationale for the study

An increasing number of working parents<sup>1</sup> rely on paid childcare as an essential parenting and family support. The number of working mothers almost doubled in a ten-year period from 1987 to 1997 (Redmond, 2000). The 1996 Labour Force Survey indicates that 34% of mothers with the youngest child aged between 0 and 24 months were in full time employment. In the last decade there has also been a rapid expansion of early childhood reports<sup>2</sup>, policies and services in Ireland. As parents are depending more on resources outside of the family to help them in the upbringing of their children, parents need to have their voice heard and need to be involved in decision-making in the

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<sup>1</sup> 38% of parents with children aged 0 to 4 and 18% with children aged 5 to 9 avail of paid childcare (*The National Childcare Strategy, 1999*).

<sup>2</sup> Horgan (2001) claims there has been six major childcare reports since 1983 including the *Working Group on Childcare Facilities (1994)* and the *National Childcare Strategy (1999)*.

childcare arena. There is little information as to how parents express their views in their early years' services. At a national level there is no organisation to represent the views of parents of young children despite the fact there are organisations to represent views of parents of primary and secondary school children. The European Union *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children* (1996) state that parents are collaborators and participants in early years' services. As such, they have the right to give and to receive information, the right to express their views both formally and informally and be involved in any decision-making concerning their children. As the number of children spending more time in childcare services is increasing it is necessary to explore the relationships between parents and early years' professionals. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child also emphasises the important role that the State has to play in assuring that children can express their views. In this way it is particularly important for parents of children aged 0-3 to be in position to express their views and act as a voice for the child as the child is too young to articulate their own viewpoint.

The focus of this study is on the views of parents who have children aged 0-3. The rationale for the decision to limit the study to parents of children of this age has been partly explained in section 2.7, which examines the role that parents have to play as advocates for their child. Another reason for focusing on the 0-3 age group is that parents of younger children may have different expectations of their relationship with their childcare provider compared with parents of older children. The literature suggests that as children get older parents have differing expectations of childcare such as placing more of an emphasis on educational outcomes for their children. Of particular importance for parents of children in the 0-3 age group is the emotional bond that develops between the child and their caregiver or the concept of attachment.

The Irish Constitution<sup>3</sup> states that parents are the primary educators of their children and have the right to be involved in their child's education. This view is also reflected in the Commission on the Family (1998), which claims that parents are the first educators of their children and the role of the State is to support parents in this role.

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<sup>3</sup> Article 42.1 of the Irish Constitution states the "The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to

The White Paper on Early Education (1999) recognising the benefits of parental involvement for all of the stakeholders seeks to involve parents, strengthen parental voice and develop “a strong and expert interest group which will participate in the consultation partnership process” (p115). The Irish government has made a clear commitment to involving parents in all stages of their child’s education by giving parental involvement statutory underpinning in the Education Act, 1998. In addition to this, as a signatory of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) the Irish State has agreed to respect the child’s parents (Article 29 (1)) and the child’s cultural identity, language and values.

Childcare has been subject to government regulation since the Preschool Regulations (1996) were enacted as part of the Child Care Act (1991). There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that in the last decade there has been an increase in the number of trained staff in the childcare sector. As professionalism within the childcare sector is increasing there is a growing need to consult parents as to what their views are, as they are still the primary carers of their children. A number of studies involving parents and childcare providers found that staff and parents could often have conflicting views (Pugh and De’Ath (1989), Wolfendale (1993) and Hughes and MacNaughton (2000)).

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory is one of the models and theories which has informed this study. Greene (1994) suggests that the ecological systems theory offers a contemporary framework, which describes the child’s relationships within a multi-layered social context. Bronfenbrenner (1979) claims that the ecological environment is represented by a set of nested structures, each inside the next and uses the analogy of a set of Russian dolls to illustrate his theory. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory of development considers the relationships between people and the environment to be mutually shaping. The child is constantly moving between two different environments, the home and the childcare institution. The ecological model allows for the conceptualization of relationships among individuals across numerous forms of social organizations (i.e. families and childcare institutions) through multiple structural influences (i.e. socioeconomic factors, social policy). As the

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provide, according to the means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.

child is moving across these contexts it is necessary to examine the relationships that exist between each context, in the case this family and the childcare institution

Literature in relation to childcare cites partnership with parents as a major factor in the provision of quality childcare (Howe, Foot, Cheyne, Terras and Rattray (2000), Lamer and Phillips (1995), Vandell and Wolfe (2001) and Bridge (2001)). A recent OECD report found that parent's involvement as partners in their child's pre-school setting is essential for "rebuilding educational institutions as more open and democratic settings" (OECD, 2001, p 119). In the Netherlands and Portugal, for example, parents are seen as partners in the consultation process leading to the formation of national early childhood care and education policies. This is in contrast to the Irish situation where parents of young children have no platform from which to express their views. As the demand for childcare is growing it is becoming apparent that there is a gap in research in relation to parents and childcare in Ireland. Parents are one of the main stakeholders in childcare and it is necessary to understand parent's view and expectations of childcare services.

### **1.3 Description of the study**

The research focuses on the views of working parents in Dublin city whose children are attending full time day-care (at least 30 hours per week). The focus of this study is on the views of parents who have children aged 0-3. The views of early years' staff were also collected. Private, publicly supported and community provision were examined<sup>4</sup>. The sample includes both mothers and fathers as traditionally the term parents in childcare research predominantly meant mothers. The study has four research questions. The National Childcare Census (2001) was chosen as the sampling framework as it provides a geographically representative target population. The study uses a multi-method approach; there were two stages of data collection in this project, non-participant observations and self-reported questionnaires, which collected both quantitative and qualitative data. The main tool used for quantitative analysis in this study is the computer software package, Statistical Programme for Social Sciences

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<sup>4</sup> Private provision refers to provision supported totally by parents fees, publicly supported refers to provision funded partially or totally by the State such as Social Service Nurseries and community provision refers to community supported services such as those provided by the ADM.

(SPSS). A number of steps were taken to analyse the qualitative data including, firstly, data reduction to identify the important issues by summarising, coding and categorising the data. The second stage was data organisation where data was assembled around certain themes and information was categorised in more specific terms and the results are more clearly presented. The third stage is interpretation, which involves making decisions, identifying patterns and drawing conclusions concerning the data (Sarantakos, 1998).

## **1.4 Research Problem**

The study focused on four main research questions related to the parent-staff relationship and partnership in early years' services.

### **1. What are parents' views of their relationship with childcare providers?**

Parent's views were elicited concerning their relationship with their current childcare providers. Parents were also asked what changes, if any, they would like to make to that relationship.

### **2. What are staff views of their relationship with parents?**

Staff were asked their views of their relationship with parents and to assess levels of satisfaction with this relationship. Staff were also asked to put forward suggestions as to how they would like to change the parent-staff relationship.

### **3. To what extent does partnership exist between parents and staff within childcare services?**

Parents and staff were asked questions concerning levels of partnership at their early years' services. Opportunities for partnership were examined and issues relating to partnership such as communication and the decision-making process in the early years' services were considered. Also, parents and staff were asked if they considered partnership to be beneficial to parents, staff and children.

### **4. What are the factors that help or hinder partnership?**

Parents and staff were asked to identify factors they perceived as helping or hindering partnership in their early years' services and were asked to put forward suggestion for

improving partnership. Also examined were the structures put in place to afford full-time working parents the opportunity for partnership with their early years' service.

### **1.5 Operational definitions of partnership**

Partnership accord to Pugh and De'Ath (1989) is an elusive and complex practice, both in theory and practice. Smith (1970) refers to partnership with parents as a paradoxical and ambiguous notion because it can be defined and attempted in so many different ways. True partnership requires parents and professionals to have a relationship characterised by openness and mutual respect. Pugh and D'Ath (1989) in 'Working Towards Partnership in the Early Years' define partnership as;

*"A working relationship that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate. This implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision making and accountability"*

*(Pugh and D'Ath, 1989, p35-36)*

Parents and staff are to regard each other as colleagues and confidants sharing information, confidences and goals for the children. A key word is reciprocity, which underlines the spirit of partnership. According to Dale (1996) partnership is not a fixed term and can vary structurally. The degree of cooperation can vary and in some partnerships, partners work separately while in others, partners do little without consulting each other. Partnership is based on the distribution of power.

*"Each partnership has an internal power balance which will predispose the members towards a more egalitarian or more unequal relationship."* (Dale, 1996, p2)

Dale maintains that the term partnership itself does not provide an indication of the extent of cooperation and reciprocity between two or more partners and the term can be used loosely without 'telling us the extent of shared-decision making, degree of consensus' or the degree power sharing that is taking place (1996, p2). A number of theoretical frameworks exist which set out the minimum prerequisites for a partnership

relationship and illustrate the concept of partnership in more concrete terms. These models are discussed in section 3.4 of this study.

## **1.6 Outline of thesis**

Chapter Two provides a context for the study by examining historic provision of childcare in Ireland and current policy and practice regarding childcare in Ireland. In particular recent Government initiatives and legislation relating to childcare are examined. The chapter also provides an overview of family policy in Ireland, recent demographic changes in Irish family life and the use of family friendly work policies.

Chapter Three examines literature concerning history of partnership and theoretical perspectives of partnership are explored. The links between partnership and quality in childcare provision are discussed from an Irish, European and International perspective. Aspects of the parent-staff relationship relating to partnership such as establishing the relationship and communication are explored. Finally the practice of partnership is discussed by reviewing the literature on staff and parents views of partnership, barriers to partnership and the levels of partnership that currently exist.

Chapter Four provides an overview of the research methods used in the project. There are two stages of data collection in this project, non-participant observations and self-reported questionnaires. Both parents and staff have answered questionnaires for the study and this in addition to a multi-method approach will help ensure data collaboration. As well as outlining the research design of the study the sampling framework for the study is considered. Analysis of the data is discussed and the differences in quantitative and qualitative data analysis are considered.

Chapter Five presents the results of the questionnaires using qualitative analysis of the descriptive data and quantitative data analysis using SPSS. The chapter is divided into five sections. Section one examines the background information of family and staff. Section two examines the induction process at the early years' services surveyed. Staff and parent relationships at their early years' services and communication are discussed in section three. Section four examines that opportunities that exist for partnership in

the services surveyed and respondents' perceptions of factors which help or hinder partnership at their early years' services are examined in section five.

Chapter six provides an in-depth discussion of the data and a more detailed analysis of the qualitative data collected. The chapter explores three main areas of the data collected. The first is an examination of parents and staff's views of partnership and the similarities and differences that emerge. The second section explores the level of partnership in the early years' services surveyed while the final section examines the issues that need to be addressed in moving towards greater partnership.

Chapter seven presented the conclusions that can be drawn from the data collected in the study. Drawing on these conclusions a number of recommendations are made concerning partnership in early years' services in an Irish context and possible directions for future research.

# **Chapter 2**

## **Background and Context**

## 2.1 Introduction

Traditionally childcare and early education in Ireland did not receive significant attention from government policy or dialogue. Coolahan (1998) states that the main reason for this is because early childhood matters, both care and education, were predominately seen as a matter for the family and more specifically the mother.

*“Very little research on early childhood education has taken place in Ireland. It was as if the problems of little people were also regarded as little, and not meriting the serious attention of politicians and others in the real adult world.”*

(Coolahan, 1998, p7)

The emergence of childcare issues into the social domain in Ireland has made much slower progress than its European Union counterparts. However, a key development in the rapid social changes occurring in Ireland has been the increase in the number of mothers in paid employment and these changing employment patterns call for new ideas and new thinking. There has been an increase in the number of women, particularly mothers participating in the labour force, which has increased the demand for childcare services. Internationally there has been a growing interest in the role of childcare in enhancing children’s social and educational opportunities and the debate has also focused on the rights of children to equality of care and education (Expert Working Group on Childcare, 1999, p7). Since joining the European Union, childcare services in Ireland have come under examination and have been subject to some legislation from the Irish government as well as objectives and recommendations developed by the European Union and the United Nations. This chapter examines legislative changes as well as the social and economic changes and recent policy developments, which have influenced early years’ services in Ireland.

## 2.2 Historic context of early childhood care and education In Ireland

McFadden (1997, p31) claims that the history of the Irish childcare services is poorly documented. One of the earliest known examples of infant education in Ireland can be traced back to J.H. Synge. According to Douglas (1994, p62) the first pre-school was established at the start of the nineteenth century by Maria Edgeworth. Her father

published a book on early education of young children called *Practical Education* in 1798. Irish education was following the trends of other European countries and was being influenced by the theories of educational philosophers such as Froebel, Rousseau and Pestalozzi. The Mercy Sisters in Waterford started the first Montessori classes in 1920. These were focused mainly on children of school age. Maria Montessori visited Waterford seven years later, which was the first of her many visits to Ireland.

In 1940 the Civics Institute set up St Brigid's Nursery Centre at Mountjoy Square for children aged between two and five. This was the first centre of its kind in Ireland. The second purpose built daycare was opened by the Civics Institute of Ireland in 1955 and was located in Cork St. Dublin. The 1960s also saw Ireland aiming to tackle social disadvantage through the use of early years' programmes.

*"The 1960s brought with it a new focus on early education as compensatory and in 1969, the Department of Education, with support of the Van Leer Foundation, initiated the well-known Rutland St. project" (Kernan, 2000, p179).*

This inner city Dublin project was aimed at disadvantaged children. It followed the same approach as the Headstart programme in the United States which attempted to improve the life-chances of these children through pre-school education. Headstart was provided by the government to serve the disadvantaged sector with the focus being on those perceived to be at-risk of educational disadvantage and was not developed to cater for the needs of working parents.

Other developments in the 1960s included Barnardos establishing its first base in Ireland. Barnardos started a play school in Dublin in 1974 and in 1984 Barnardos Ireland was formed when it became a separate organisation from Barnardos UK (McFadden, 1997, p31). The 1960s also saw the development of a number of Irish speaking pre-schools or Naíonraí, the first of which was set up in Shannon, Co. Limerick. By 1975 there were 38 Irish speaking playgroups in the Republic of Ireland. St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland was established in 1970 and the National Children's Nursery Association was established in 1988. Such organisations provide training, advice and support in the area of early education (Kernan, 2000, p.179). The National Children's Nursery Association is a national organisation with over four

hundred members and aims to promote high standards of quality childcare through education, information and support to those involved in the childcare sector, including parents.

Due to the almost total lack of childcare provision by the State there has been a strong reliance on the voluntary sector to provide services. This gap in provision has meant that the voluntary and private sector have made a major contribution to Irish early childhood policy. The only exceptions to this were a very small number of projects such as the Rutland St. Project and preschools for Travellers, which are aimed at disadvantaged families. The Child Care Act (1991) reinforces the position of the voluntary sector in the provision of social services as it makes specific provision for the Health Boards to fund voluntary organisations (Kiely & Richardson, 1995, p30). These services do not specifically take into account the needs of working parents, as many children cannot avail of these services (often offering only sessional care) because their parents are working. This mixture of public, private and voluntary provision is referred to as the mixed economy of welfare. While there are many advantages of having a mixed-economy of welfare such as flexibility of provision there are also many problems such as uneven geographical distribution, unequal access and uneven quality. Voluntary efforts are further hampered by the fact that there is no clear policy framework within which the voluntary sector can develop. The developments in childcare and early education in Ireland have been ad-hoc and unplanned. According to Coolahan (1998, p17) the evolution of services has been in a bottom-up manner due to the efforts of private individuals and organisations in the response to the emerging needs of parents. In the last decade there have been a great number of developments in the childcare sector both nationally and internationally due to social and demographic changes, which will be outlined in the next two sections.

## **2.3 International developments**

### **2.3.1 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**

In 1992 Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it contains 54 articles, 7 of which relate specifically to childcare and early education (Kernan, 2000, p180).

*“State parties should respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents...to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognised in the present Convention.” (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 5)*

Article 18 sets out the duty of the State to support parents in their child-rearing responsibilities and in particular that children of working parents have the right to benefit from childcare services and facilities.

### **2.3.2 European Union**

The European Commission Network on Childcare was established in 1986 and after 10 years of existence published the Quality Targets in Services for Young Children. The report contains forty targets, which the Commission recommends all EU countries meet by 2006. Target 34 relates to the role of parents as collaborators and participants in the early years’ services and have their right to give and receive information. Furthermore, it recommends the development of a national policy on early education and childcare (see section 3.5.3).

*“Like other educational or social services provision where policy is framed, planned and monitored at a national/regional level to ensure all citizen’s benefit, high quality services accessible to all children can only be achieved within a national policy framework” (European Commission Network on Childcare, 1996, p10)*

Targets 16, 17 and 18 relate to educational targets and educational philosophy, which it recommends, should be developed by parents, staff and other interested groups.

The 1999 European Employment Guidelines call on Member States to support family friendly policies and provide high quality, accessible and affordable services for children and for parents. According to The Expert Working Group (1999, p6) the European Union's philosophy is that childcare responsibilities should be shared between men, women, parents, employers and society.

## 2.4 Current provision of childcare

### 2.4.1 Current provision

Since the 1990s the childcare sector in Ireland has undergone many changes such as the introduction of legislation and regulations. One of the main driving forces behind these developments has been to increase the number of childcare places to facilitate increasing female participation in the labour force. Ireland's membership of the European Union has also played a role in these changes. According to The National Childcare Strategy (1999, p12) 38% of parents with children aged 0 to 4 and 18% with children aged 5 to 9 avail of paid childcare services. According to Fine-Davis and Clarke (2002) while there is no statutory childcare policy in Ireland, the current focus of childcare policy is to "subsidise existing childcare services in the community (private providers and employers) and to only directly provide services to disadvantaged" (p49). The National Childcare Census Report (2001, p3) differentiates between two types of childcare facilities. The first type is sessional care, which refers to childcare facilities that offer a service for up to three and a half-hours per day such as a morning playgroup. Types of sessional care include drop in crèches, playgroups/pre-schools, Montessori schools, parent and toddler groups and homework clubs. The second type of childcare facility is full-day care (over 3½ hours daily), which is more likely to provide a service to meet the needs of working parents as it provides childcare for longer hours than sessional care. Types of full-time day care include crèches/day care and some pre-schools and Montessori schools. There has been continuous growth in the childcare sector and a comprehensive list of current services is outlined by Coolahan (1998, p19-21) in the Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education.

In a recent study Fine-Davis (2002) reports that the most common type of childcare provision used by working parents in Ireland is a crèche or a childcare centre (28% of sample) followed by care by grandparents (17% of sample). Respondents in the study were asked why they used childcare centres or crèches.

*"It may be seen that the reason "to stimulate the child" was mentioned by only 28.5% of the Irish sample, whereas it was mentioned by 45% of parents in the 4-country (EU) sample." (Fine-Davis and Clarke, 2002, p58)*

Fine-Davis suggests these findings imply Irish parents lack awareness of the benefits of childcare programmes, which may partially explain why Irish government policy provides a greater emphasis on the actual provision of childcare places rather than on the educational benefits to children.

#### **2.4.2 Increased labour force participation of women**

The most significant influence on the growing demand for childcare places is the increased participation of women in the labour force. Participation in the labour force of married women has traditionally been low in Ireland. The abolishment of the marriage bar on employment in 1972 saw an increase in the number of married women in full-time employment. Other factors, which have led to an increase in female participation in the labour force, include an increase in female educational attainment rises and current economic pressures such as the increase in the cost of housing. As educational attainment rises so too does the potential for financial gains from full-time employment.

*“In addition higher levels of education may have helped produce a culture where women are more disposed to remaining in the labour force, or returning as their children grow older.” (Fahey & Fitzgerald, 1997, p64)*

There have been other changes since the 1970s, which have facilitated women's participation in the labour force such as Ireland's membership of the European Union and the introduction of equality legislation (Kennedy, 1999). Married women in particular have been most affected by these changes and their participation has increased from 14% of women participating in the labour force to 50%. According to Coughlan (2000, p3) women are projected to contribute 58% of the increase in the labour force by 2011. There is a particular increase in the number of mothers who are taking up full-time employment. Richardson (1998) points out that this is a trend which appears to be specific to Ireland as throughout Europe mothers are generally tending to participate mainly in part-time work. This means that young Irish children are likely to be spending longer hours in childcare than their EU counterparts. There is a tendency for women's employment peak period of employment to be at a time when their childcare responsibility is at its highest. The increasing participation of mothers in the labour force means an increased reliance on family support structures outside of the family

such as childcare services. This again increases the burden on childcare to provide quality care for children as more children are spending longer hours in childcare settings.

#### **2.4.3 Societal views of the childcare professional**

Powell (1989) claims that parents' perceptions of early childhood staff have not been examined in as much detail as staff judgments of parents. In relation to status of early childhood professionals Katz (1995) claims that as the proportion of women in an occupation increases the status decreases and there is also evidence that the status of the 'profession is correlated with the status of the client' (p222). Male childcare staff are grossly under-represented in the childcare sector. Moss (1996) estimates that in the European Union less than 2% of childcare staff are men and anecdotal evidence suggests this is also true of Ireland. The European Quality Targets in Services for Young People (1996) proposes a target of 20% male childcare staff of men by 2006

*“Another aspect of the work of preschool and day care practitioners related to ethical conduct is the relatively low status of practitioners in the early childhood field. Parents seem far more likely to make demands on practitioners for given kinds of practice in preschools, child care centres, and family day care homes than they are to demand specific medical procedures from pediatricians, for example.” (Katz, 1995, p241)*

Ferguson (2002) states that perhaps the most significant societal attitude affecting child care professionals is the long held world-wide belief that women's work caring for children “is not ‘work’ or ‘labour’ necessitating financial compensation...instead it is considered...a function of women's socially ascribed unpaid role within the family, a labour of love” (p3). In contrast to other forms of care and education such as health care or primary and secondary schools, which are substantially or universally subsidised by the Government, responsibility for purchasing childcare remains for the most part the private responsibility of the parent. Ferguson outlines societies' general perceptions of the role of child care workers in Canada.

*“The public perception (in Canada) was one of a service to working mothers, not children and the service was described as ‘care’ not ‘education’. Those who worked in*

*child care were 'workers' or 'babysitters' substituting for mother, not 'early childhood educators'" (Ferguson, 2002, p6)*

Other issues faced by early years' workers include poor pay and working conditions and limited respect, which are particularly common among workers engaged in the female dominated sectors of 'caring labour'. A recent review of the childcare sector in Ireland also found that salaries are extremely low for childcare workers in both sessional and full-day care reflecting the low status attributed to childcare professionals (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2002). Chazan and Williams (1978) describes the inequalities that may exist between parents and child care staff and explains the difficulties in forging closer links between home and school giving examples of the problems which may arise at the extreme ends of the social spectrum.

*" Teachers may feel threatened by the more articulate and educated professional parent who has very high scholastic aspirations for his child and knows sometimes, too well, his rights as a parent." (Chazan and Williams, 1978, p97)*

At the other end of the social spectrum teachers may also be discouraged by parents' apparent apathy and lack of concern for their child's education, which may be due to their own low level of education or family problems. While this may seem oversimplified and the reference to parents knowing 'his rights as a parent' seems to have a negative connotation it does illustrate the point that any analysis of the parent and childcare worker relationship needs to take into account differences in social and education status.

## **2.5 Policy Responses to Childcare Needs**

### **2.5.1 Recent Policy Responses**

The development of good quality childcare has been on the public agenda since the late 1980s and in response to this there have been a number of national reports, legislative changes and initiatives undertaken. The major issues identified in these reports have been childcare costs, inadequacy of existing services, need for regulation

and standards, poor pay and funding, tax relief on expenditure and training of personnel. A number of groups have been established which have examined and reported on childcare issues in Ireland such as the Expert Working Group on Childcare, Commission on the Family and the National Forum for Childhood Education (1998) (Department Education and Science). According to Kernan (2000, p183) these initiatives have a number of common features:

- 1) All reports were designed to be inclusive and consultative;
- 2) All reports are family-centred and child-centred and placed the rights of the child as foremost and recognised the parent as the primary carer and educator of the child.
- 3) All reports recognised the particular needs of families experiencing poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion.

All the reports emphasise the importance of supporting families in their parenting responsibilities. A number of other important policy developments are outlined below.

The Area Development Management (ADM) - This initiative is led by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law reform and is funded by the EU. The aim of ADM is support childcare services in local partnership areas (Kernan, 2000, p181). The Pilot Childcare Initiative (1994-97) was managed by ADM. It involved the expenditure of IR£2.7m in disadvantaged areas to provide childcare. In 1998 it was extended to the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme, which has an annual budget of £3.6m.

The National Development Plan identifies childcare as a priority and provides £250m for Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme. The aim is to provide quality care and increase number places. £74m is allocated in National Development plan to implement the White Paper an Early Childhood Education. £5m is allocated for out-of-school childcare by community-based groups.

The Expert Working Group on Childcare – This was established under Partnership 2000 in order to promote equality for women and opportunities in employment. It has published The National Childcare Strategy (1999) as part of the process of developing a national framework for gender equality and promotion of childcare.

The National Children's Strategy (2000) contains objectives to guide children's policy over the next ten years. It set itself three national goals; to listen, think and act more effectively for children. The National Children's Strategy (2000, p53) recommends further action including continued investment in supply of places in the voluntary, community and private sector. Other recommendations include a framework to address issues of qualification, accreditation, and certification for the childcare sector, which was published in 2002 and funding for research into children's early developmental needs.

### **2.5.2 Irish Childcare Legislation**

The Child Care Act (1991) is the principal piece of legislation affecting all types of Child Care in Ireland. The final part of the Act (section seven) focuses on the regulation of early years' care and education. The six other sections predominately relate to child protection issues. The Preschool Regulations, enacted in 1997, focus on center based childcare and mark the first legislative control of early years' services.

*"The enforcement of these regulations with their emphasis on structural factors such as ratio and space, has had an impact on the supply of childcare and early education services particularly those in the private sector, with many services closing down as they are unable to meet the costs of renovations, and adult child ratios required by the regulations". (Kernan, 2000, p183)*

This has led to a decrease in the number of childcare places at a time when there is an urgent need for more childcare places. However it ensures that the current provision is accountable and safe. These regulations do not cover qualitative aspects of childcare quality such as educational standards or parental participation, which has been criticised by *The White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999)*. There is little mention of parents in the pre-school regulations except in relation to access to the register of information concerning their own child. The Irish Government announced a review of the Preschool Regulations in 2002.

Gormley (2000, p25) claims that in advanced industrial societies governments develop regulations in order to ensure consumers that those providing services meet certain minimum standards and adhere to rules, which promote quality and reliability.

According to Gormley (2000) the principal rationale for government regulation of childcare is the presence of information asymmetries; there is a substantial difference between the information available to producers and consumers. When parents select a childcare service they almost always lack vital information concerning their range of options. Duignan (1997, p36) used the analogy of entering a secret society to describe the process parents undergo to source information on available childcare services in Ireland. Therefore it is necessary for the government to provide adequate regulation of the childcare service to ensure a reliable and quality service.

### **2.5.3 The White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999)**

This document moves beyond quantitative issues of quality to qualitative issues. The White Paper points out that currently qualitative factors are not covered by preschool regulations. These factors include staff qualifications and the extent to which parents participate in the childcare setting. The White Paper proposes the development of a Quality in Education mark to be awarded to early education services which meet defined standards concerning staff qualifications, training, learning objectives, methodologies and curriculum.

*“At present, the absence of a national system of education standards in pre-school sector means that parents and guardians often cannot make an informed choice of pre-school. In choosing a provider with a QE mark, parents can be confident that their child will receive a quality early education” (The White paper on Early Childhood Education 1999, p54)*

The White Paper also recognises that the absence of a national association to represent parents of pre-school children inhibits the influence parents have in the policy process and this limits the quality of policy development. The value of involving parents in their children’s early education is also recognised in the White Paper and a strategy to facilitate and encourage parents’ involvement is proposed. The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education was launched in 2002 arising from a recommendation of the White Paper. This is three year project funded by the Department of Education and Science and is a joint collaboration between Dublin Institute of Technology and St. Patrick’s College Drumcondra. The main objectives of the centre include developing a quality framework for early childhood education,

enhancing early education provision including parental involvement and undertaking and commissioning research on aspects of quality early years' education.

## **2.6 Family policy in Ireland**

### **2.6.1 Historic context of family policy in Ireland**

To understand the recent developments in Child Care Policy it is necessary to place them the wider context of family policy in Ireland. The traditional relationship between the Irish State and the family can be characterised as minimal interventionist. This has been driven by the belief, on the part of the State, that the family has the absolute right to privacy, a deep-rooted principle in Irish culture (Kiely, 1999). This is enshrined in the 1937 Irish Constitution, which states,

*“The State recognises the family as the natural provider and fundamental unit group of society and as a moral institution possessing inalienable rights imprescriptable rights antecedent and superior to all positive law” (Article 41.1.1)*

The Catholic Church's principle of subsidiarity has strongly influenced the Irish Constitution and the development of Irish family policy. The Catholic Church endorsed a minimal interventionist state as this was in accordance with their own policy of non-interference in the family. The Church believed that the family should provide for itself and assistance should only be provided at a voluntary and community level. Powell (1992) claims that the implications of this doctrine were clear to policy makers in Ireland and the State did not assume responsibility for social service provision if help could be alternatively provided through other initiatives such as family assistance or voluntary associations. These principles were the driving force behind the dismantling of the 'Mother and Child Scheme' proposed by the Minister of Health, Noel Browne, in 1949. Certain groups within Irish society, particularly the Catholic Church, saw the scheme as intervening in the privacy of the family. Kiely (1999, p261) claims that another example of this is the ruling of the Supreme Court in 1994 “when it declared the Matrimonial Home Bill (1993) as unconstitutional on the grounds that it was too great an intrusion into the private decision making of the family”. This ruling suggests that privatisation of the family is still a significant part of Irish culture.

The national industrialisation policy of the 1960s brought about changes in the Irish States policy of non-involvement in the family. While industrialisation created many changes within Irish family life the State followed suit with a number of legislative changes including the removal of the marriage bar on employment (1972). These changes marked a new direction in Irish family policy away from the privatisation and the patriarchal nature of the family. Despite these changes Kiely (1999) claims that the issue of privatisation of the family was still prominent in family policy legislation during the 1980s.

*“This was particularly noticeable as the issues of sexual morality began to dominate the debate on family policy. The debate focused principally around contraception, abortion, divorce and the rights of parents over children...it was not until the 1990s that family policy emerged as a significant political issue on the agendas of the political parties. (Kiely, 1999, p262)*

Kiely (1999, p258) refers to a number of recommendations that the Constitution Review Group Final Report (1996) make in relation to changes in the Constitution for protection of the rights of children. These include recommendations on the integration of work and family roles in the area of family policy such as measures to enable fathers and mothers to share household tasks, maternity leave, childcare services, regulation of part-time employment, job sharing and career breaks. Kiely (1999) states that the only legislation actually passed that includes fathers and mothers is in the area of parental leave. This is despite the fact that in recent years there has been an increasing focus on the role of fathers in family life, particularly in the area of housework and childcare.

### **2.6.2 Demographic trends**

When compared to other European countries Ireland has a unique demographic situation. Ireland has moved from a situation where population reproduction remained well below replacement rate, as marriage rates were low to a baby boom which occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which was somewhat later than the post World War 2 ‘baby boom’ that occurred in other industrial countries. This has coincided with other changes in the Irish family. Since the 1960s Ireland has moved from pre-industrial rural to post-industrial urban society. This has seen radical social

and economic changes occur and has influenced the Irish family on a number of different levels.

*“The family has been influenced by economic modernisation of Irish society, which has seen a huge shift towards urban centres, far greater mobility, an increasing concentration on the nuclear family and a corresponding decline in the natural caring networks of the extended family and the community” (Richardson, 1995, p4)*

According to Kiely and Richardson (1995, p31) the two main demographic variables that define the family are marriage rates and marital fertility rates. Since the 1970s both of these have been declining and fertility has declined sharply since the 1980s and the baby boom. According to Fahey & Fitzgerald (1997, p39) the decline in marriage rate and the increase in non-marital births is the first phase of new family formation and signify an increase in the dependency burden for children, which is borne by the state. There has been a decline in the traditional extended family, which has led to both single parents and couples being more dependent on the state for support in their children’s upbringing.

### **3.6.3 Commission on the Family**

The Commission on the Family was set up in 1995 to examine the effects of legislation and policies on the family and to make future recommendations. The Commission received 536 submissions 36% of which were related to childcare issues with the consensus being that there is an urgent need for more childcare places. In relation to childcare and the family the Commission has made a number of recommendations. The Commission advocates the placing of supports in the workplace for families, especially families with young children. It recommends the introduction of family friendly work policies. These family friendly initiatives will be examined further in this chapter. The Commission also recommends a policy approach to build strengths in families, which is preventative, empowering and based on a community approach. The Commission puts forward principles to govern a new approach to family policy. These principles recognise the family as providing a stable unit in our society. These principles along with the recommendations give a clear picture of the direction of government policy in relation to the family.

#### **2.6.4 Family-friendly policies in the work place**

Family friendly policies are “policies that assist employees in combining family and workplace arrangements” (Coughlan, 2000, p1). These policies include ‘flexitime’ work arrangements, voluntary employment breaks and information and referral services available to employees. These policies serve the dual function of facilitating employees’ non-work needs and allowing employers to retain trained employees who may otherwise leave because of family commitments. This is a particular issue in the current Irish labour market where there is a shortage of skilled employees. Employees are placing a high priority on the availability of ‘flexitime’ arrangements. Issues influencing this have been the increase in the participation of women in the labour force and the increase in the dependant elderly population and childcare needs.

*“Achievement of an effective balance by men and women between the demands of the workplace and the home is of crucial importance to the long-term welfare and development of Irish society” (Humphreys, 2000, p12)*

Governments and employers are responding to these needs with policies encouraging equality of opportunity and female participation in the labour force. A National Framework Committee for Family-Friendly Policies was established by the Irish government in 2001 to allow employers and employees come together to identify appropriate family-friendly work arrangements (Fine-Davis and Clarke, 2002). Coughlan (2000, p3) claims that a recent UK survey found that the lack of family-friendly policies and flexible working arrangements played a major role in a mother’s decision not to return to work. Two-thirds of the women surveyed said they would prefer to work or study if they had access to good quality, affordable, convenient childcare. The majority of the mothers surveyed claimed flexible working arrangement would facilitate their return to work. According to Humphreys (2000, p19) family friendly policies are to a large extent only available to employees of state and semi-state sectors and a small numbers of companies in the private sector. These policies are still in their early stages and are constantly evolving. Since Ireland became a member of the EU there have been a large number of legislative changes, which are contributing to family friendly work environment.

### 2.6.5 Contradictions in family life

Despite the changes in cultural attitudes to the participation of women in the labour force, particularly mothers, there are a number of conflicts between work and family life. Moen and Yan Yu (2000) maintain that currently families where there are two working parents are facing the challenge of having three jobs to contend with, two at work and one at home. While it is accepted that women now work outside the home, society is still predicated on a gendered, breadwinner model. There is currently a gendered separation of spheres into paid and unpaid (domestic) work. Despite the number of dual earner families, schools, medical services and most community activities continue to be organised with reference to the breadwinner society and with domestic life principally the province of the women. Therefore women are expected to adapt their working life outside the home so that they can still sustain their role as homemaker. Moen and Yan Yu claim that in order to do this women must choose 'mommy-track' jobs (lower status, fewer prospects for advancement), moving in and out of labour force, working fewer hours than men and being less willing to travel or relocate. The dual earner family therefore faces many conflicts while trying to resolve work with homelife commitments.

*"Jobs and career paths come pre-packaged in ways that presume workers are without family responsibilities, reducing the possibility of 'good' part-time jobs for example"*  
(Moen & Yan Yu, 2000, p151)

Childcare needs to be understood within this context. Research has found that both men and women with children of pre-school age are likely to report high levels of work/life conflict and childcare arrangements are one of the main sources of this conflict in a society where the two-earner family is now the norm and not the exception. A recent study of the work-life balance in the EU found that 82% of working Irish fathers and 62% of working Irish mothers would like to have more time to spend with their families (Fine-Davis, 2002). The most significant predictors for work and family life conflict for Irish working parents were:

- partner's commuting time
- the number of hours worked per week
- the amount of help received with domestic and childcare tasks

- the extent to which ones hours created problems with childcare arrangements
- colleagues' and employers' attitude concerning childcare arrangements.

A positive finding in the study was the high degree of acceptance in the Irish workplace for arriving late or leaving early due to childcare arrangement (Fine-Davis and Clarke, 2002).

### 2.6.7 Fathers and childcare

According to Nord (1998) fathers were until recently the hidden parent in research concerning parental involvement. Nord claims her study has found that the father's involvement has a positive influence on the child's educational achievement.

*“Fathers' involvement...has a distinct and independent influence on children's achievement and behaviour over and above that of mothers. These findings show that fathers can be positive force in their children's education, and that when they do get involved, their children are likely to do better in school.”*

*(Nord, 1998, p2).*

Nord claims that currently fathers are relatively uninvolved in their child's education compared to mothers and these results show that fathers should be encouraged to be more involved. Promoting the role of fathers and increasing male involvement in childcare has been one of the priorities of the European Childcare Network, an expert childcare group established by the EU (Moss, 1996, p31). The EU has made a commitment to the involvement of fathers in childcare as Article 6 of the Council of Ministers Recommendations calls on all member states to promote and encourage the increased participation of men in the care and upbringing of children. Moss claims that the main reason that the EU is interested in promoting the involvement of men in childcare is to enable parents to reconcile employment and caring for childcare. While involving men is an important issue in achieving gender equality it also enables men to experience the emotional rewards involved in caring for children.

The *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children* proposes a target of 20% for the number of male childcare workers by the year 2006. Moss (1996, p14) puts forward three main reasons why involving men in the early years' services is of vital

importance. The first is the opportunity that it presents for practical support and encouragement for men who wish to be involved in their children's upbringing. The second reason is to contribute to the cultural climate 'which shapes expectations about men and their involvement in the care of children'. The third reason is because the childcare sector is predominately a female environment and it is of vital importance to encourage male involvement in this area. Moss estimates that less than 2% of those working in the childcare sector are male. There are a number of issues with such a traditionally female domain, such as the lack of male role models for children. Another consequence of this is that it is harder for fathers to identify themselves within the childcare sector and this may be a barrier to the involvement of fathers. Participation of fathers in early years' services is particularly relevant in an era when there is an increasing number of both mothers and fathers working full-time. It is important that when services are involving parents that there are efforts to involve both fathers and mothers equally.

There has been very little research in Ireland examining the role of fathers in the preschool setting however one Irish study does look at the role of fathers in the wider context of their general participation in childcare tasks. Kiely (1995, 147) evaluates these findings from a social constructionist perspective in an attempt to explain why there is such a low rate of participation by men in childcare and household tasks. The main findings of the survey are:

- 3.4% of fathers took total responsibility for school meetings compared to 52.7% of mothers.
- Fathers scored higher on more pleasant and less demanding tasks of childcare such as playing and outings. This corresponds with findings of similar surveys, which found that fathers participated in the more enjoyable 'cleaner' aspects of childcare.
- The two main reasons given the lack of participation by fathers in household and childcare tasks were husband too lazy/not interested and husband has a demanding job.
- Women's employment outside of the home did not indicate higher levels of participation in household tasks by fathers. However, it was an indication of increased participation by fathers in childcare tasks.

While the survey does not examine the role of the father in childcare settings it does provide data on attitudes of mothers to the participation of fathers in household and childcare tasks. Kiely claims that these findings are linked with wider social changes in relation to the role of fathers. These include the increasing participation of women in the labour force and the development of the Welfare State, which have challenged the father's traditional role as the 'breadwinner'.

## **2.7 The parents as the advocate for the child**

Recent literature and policy and in particular the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stress the importance of listening to the voice of the child and for young children their parents may be in a position to mediate this voice. This is particularly relevant to this study as the focus of the study is on parents who have children aged between 0-3 years. Katz (1995) asserts that for many parents a fundamental part of their parenting role is to be their child's strongest advocate with both the teachers and the school. This is particularly important in services where young children may not yet have the ability to fully articulate their desires and concerns and it is the responsibility of the parent as the primary carer, to interpret their child's needs and act as a voice for their child. Hayes (2002) claims that policy makers are currently giving increased support and attention to research into children's lives. Also academics and researchers are increasingly including the views of children in their research, which is providing children with an opportunity to have their voice heard. The National Children's Strategy (2000) uses Hart's Ladder of Participation (adapted by Hart from Arnstein in 1996) as a framework within which to examine children's participation. A national goal according to the National Children's Strategy is to give children a voice in matters affecting them. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child also emphasises the important role that the State has to play in assuring that children can express their views. It is particularly important for parents of young children to be in position to express their views and act as a voice for the child.

## 2.8 Summary

The childcare system in Ireland has been developed almost entirely by the efforts of the private sector and has emerged in an ad-hoc and unplanned manner. There is little public provision of childcare except in areas of extreme disadvantage where mainly sessional care is provided which does not usually facilitate employment. This has led to a situation where the Government pays either the entire cost of sessional childcare for a small number of families or in the majority of cases the family themselves pay the entire costs. While women were not an integral part of the workforce this approach may have been sufficient, as there was not such a high demand for childcare. However recent social and economic changes have increased the demand for childcare places and childcare quality. There have however been a number of changes such as the introduction of legislation in the form of the Pre-school Regulations and the publication of reports recognising issues within the childcare sector. There has also been a large number of changes that have affected the family in the last four decades such as changes in work legislation and changes in social policy. While the current legislation and family friendly policies may be there to facilitate parents participation in the labour force, these policies do not place importance on the quality of life for parents who are balancing family and work responsibilities. Current changes in the family are demanding new and innovative ways to tackle family policies and legislation. The Irish government has had very little dialogue with parents to assess their views and desires concerning their childcare needs. The policy of the Irish government has been to increase supply to assist labour market participation and has not made any real attempts to genuinely help parents with their childcare needs. There is no national organisation to represent the views of preschool parents and there has been little research done in an Irish context examining the views of parents concerning partnership with their childcare providers. This limits the influence that parents can have on childcare provision at both a policy level and at local level. This study aims to address this issue by eliciting parents' views and considering the level of partnership that currently exists between parents and childcare providers in Ireland.

# **Chapter 3**

## **Literature**

## **Review**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides an overview of the literature in the area of partnership and the relationship between parents and their childcare providers. Partnership between parents and childcare professionals is a relatively new concept and in order to examine the evolution of partnership it is necessary to consider briefly a more general history of parent and professional relations. Traditionally the concept of parents and professionals working together was referred to as parental involvement and this is what much of the literature examines. Due to the lack of research and discussion of partnership in Ireland, particularly in the area of early years' services, much of the literature reviewed examines areas with similar characteristics such as the parent-teacher relationship in primary schools and the relationships that parents of children with special needs may have with professionals. The 1960s was the first time that there was serious attention paid to involving parents in their child's education. There were two main reasons for this; the first was the growing consensus that the professional working in isolation from the family could only achieve limited success. The second was the view that parents were somewhat deficient and needed the advice and guidance of the professional to help them in their parenting role. As well as the evolution of partnership, theoretical perspectives of partnership between parents and childcare providers and typologies for partnership will be examined. The parent-staff relationship is widely agreed to be an indicator of quality and the impact of quality is considered and in particular quality from the parents' perspective. The importance of the parent-staff relationship is well established particularly from the point of view of staff but there is little research examining the point of view of parents. Finally parents and staffs views of partnership are discussed and literature concerning partnership in practice is examined.

### **3.2 History of parents and professionals working together**

Traditionally professionals working with children were viewed as the experts and the parent's participation was not highly valued. During the beginning of formal state education the only role outlined for parents was in relation to their legal duty to send their children to school.

*“As state-provided education became more and more widespread throughout this century, parents were never encouraged to linger in schools after depositing their children, usually at the school gates, and the now notorious sign ‘NO PARENTS BEYOND THIS POINT’ was a common sight” (Wolfendale, 1993, p6)*

The parents’ main function was as an information provider and even then the “views, feelings and wishes of parents are not necessarily consulted” (Dale, 1996, p8).

*“In the history of Child Care, there has been traditionally a preoccupation with the welfare of children in isolation from their parents. Where parents seemed unequal to their task, this was taken to reveal some personal pathology since parenting was viewed as no more than a practical expression of civilised humanity in adulthood.” (Gilligan, 1991, p8)*

Singer (1996) claims that traditionally, development psychologists and researchers claimed their knowledge was superior to that of parents because it was grounded in a scientific tradition ensuring parents’ and children’s needs and knowledge could easily be ignored. However, this began to change as parents’ knowledge was recognised as offering a unique and different perspective on the child. During the 1960s the relationship between professional and parents underwent some change as researchers and practitioners looked towards explicitly involving parents and Dale claims that the “transplant model” began to emerge. This model was particularly evident in the relationship that parents of children with special needs had with professionals but was also applicable to parent-professional relations in other contexts. According to this model parents were encouraged to become more actively involved as ‘co-educators’ and ‘co-teachers’. Parents were now seen as a resource to be utilised and the professional became a consultant or instructor to the parent while the professional still retains final control in decision-making. In the UK the Plowden Report in 1967 gave ‘explicit recognition to the importance of closer home-school liaison in promoting children’s educational attainments’ and outlined the minimum requirements for working effectively with parents (Bevridge, 1992, p12). This was followed ten years later by the Taylor Report which not only emphasises that parents should have an influence on their own child’s education but also that parents should form a collective voice and actively influence the development and management of the education sector.

During the 1960s there was a growing awareness that the work of professionals was limited without the involvement of the parent. A program, which had this at its core, was the U.S Head Start program, which included parental involvement as one of the corner stones of its philosophy and increased international awareness of partnership. Head Start was a 1960s U.S. government initiative program of early intervention directed at young, socially disadvantaged children and their families. Head Start encouraged parents to become more knowledgeable, more confident and more understanding of the education system.

*“In many of the projects parental involvement in a variety of forms was paramount, and while the debate has raged during the last twenty to thirty years over the longer term effectiveness of Head Start its methods and practices have been very influential”*

*(Wolfendale, 1993, p7)*

Through the process of involving parents researchers have found that parents are effective as educators and trainers both at home and in school. Parental involvement is one of the corner stones of the Head Start philosophy and is a legislative mandate in the United States which requires flexible participation of parents in all aspects of the program including policy-making and management (Lamb-Parker et al., 2001). The Rutland Street Project in Dublin was operated by the Department of Education and began in 1969. The program provided preschool for children from a socio-economically disadvantaged area and parental involvement was encouraged. According to O’Toole (2000) initial short-term benefits of the program seemed to diminish when the child entered school. However subsequent research has observed long-term benefits for the participants of the program, mainly increased rates of school completion.

Rodd (1994) claims that during the 1960s governments in Western society began to focus on the idea that “democracy should be extended beyond politics and the formal government in the lives of ordinary people” so that they are involved in decisions that ultimately affect them (p150). Rodd also claims that early years’ providers have been slow to adopt the partnership approach because they have clung to the belief that they are the childcare experts.

Also during the 1960s and 1970s, there was a growing understanding in social work and social psychiatry that children could not be understood in isolation from their families. Progress was far more likely if parents “could understand the process and continue any special work with children at home” (Lindon, 1997, p196). The playgroup movement in the 1960s, which was also present in Ireland, was a radical movement in that playgroups were set up and managed by parents, mainly mothers. This movement had an important impact on how parents were viewed in the context of early childhood services.

### **3.3 Theoretical Perspective**

#### **3.3.1 Ecological model**

One important influence in highlighting the role of parents in the childcare setting has been the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and his ecological systems theory informs this study. Greene (1994) suggests this theory offers a contemporary framework which describes the child’s relationships within a multi-layered social context.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) claims that the ecological environment is represented by a set of nested structures each inside the next and uses the analogy of a set of Russian dolls to illustrate his theory. The typology Bronfenbrenner uses to describe his ecological theory is the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystem.

*“Contemporary understanding of the place of the family within society, based on much research, is that, as a system it is ‘nested’ within other systems and organisations in society” (Wolfendale, 1993, p22)*

The microsystems are contexts or settings where the individual is involved in face-to-face interaction with others and the environment. A critical element of the microsystem is that it is experienced. Examples include child’s face-to-face interactions with important people in his/her life including parents and teachers. The mesosystem encompasses links between different elements in the microsystems where the developing person actively participates such as home and school and linkages between the microsystem and the exosystem. Greene (1994) claims that the nature of relationships between important persons in the child’s life have important implications

for the child. It is within this context that we can consider the need to examine the parent and staff relationship and the implications for the development of the child.

The exosystem is the setting in which the child is not directly participating in but can be influenced by indirectly such as the parent's workplace. An important aspect of these systems is whether or not they "support the parent of the child or other key people in the child's immediate world" (Greene, 1994, p362). She includes in this the low level of support given by the Irish government to the provision of childcare. The macrosystem refers to the ring consisting of 'cultural specific ideologies, attitudes and beliefs that shape the cultural practices in relation to the child' (Greene, 1994, p363).

Finally the chronosystem involves 'the patterning of environmental events and transitions over the life course and sociohistorical circumstances' (Santrock, 1994, p51). The chronosystem refers to the influence of time on development and the sociohistorical and political events that affect the lives of families and children such as legislative change and how childcare is viewed in society. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development allows for the conceptualisation of relationships among individuals across numerous forms of social organisations (e.g. families and childcare institutions) and through multiple structural influences (e.g. socio-economic factors and social policy). As the child is moving across these contexts it is necessary to examine the relationships that exist between each context e.g. the family and the childcare setting. Smith (1980) claims that Bronfenbrenner views parental participation as both 'a catalyst and a 'fixative' for intervention; and the target of intervention is neither parent nor child on their own but the 'parent-child system'' (p31).

The ecological systems theory has been criticized for viewing the individual child as the "pinpoint in the middle, (the) lonesome individual whom the world in its various manifestations, presses in on, influences and shapes" (Penn 1997, p124). Penn claims that in contrast to Bronfenbrenner's theory, which sees the child as surrounded by concentric circles of influence such as the family and wider society, Spanish and Italian childcare services have escaped this Anglo-American preoccupation with individualism. Malaguzzi, the Italian theorist associated with the nurseries in Reggio Emilia has, according to Penn, inspired discourse between staff, parents and children, which has been described as democratic dialogue. This allows the childcare setting to

become a place where the three central protagonists, staff, children and parents can come together and engage in a shared sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

Dahlberg et al. (1999) refer to staff and parents working together not as an opportunity for staff to 'educate' parents in 'good' practice but rather as a way of entering into a reflective and analytical relationship within which both parties can develop a deeper understanding of pedagogical work. Viewed in this context partnership with parents is a democratic proactive process rather than a means of social control or technological transfer.

### 3.3.2 Partnership

Pugh and De'Ath (1989) in 'Working Towards Partnership in the Early Years' define partnership as;

*"A working relationship that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate. This implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision making and accountability"*

*(Pugh and D'Ath, 1989, p35-36)*

MacBeth (1989) also stresses that partnership includes the "mutual information exchange" that characterises contemporary professional-parent relationships and offers continuity in children's learning, meaning that it might influence home-based learning in the direction of school-based learning. A key word is reciprocity, which underlines the spirit of partnership. There have been positive correlations found between children's learning in numeracy and literacy assessment and a reciprocal family contribution to the child's learning (Laloumi-Vidali, 1996). Research indicated the necessity for parents to maintain close links of communication with their preschool. According to Smith (1980) participation by parents in their child's preschool is crucial for two reasons;

*"Parents' 'style' (particularly the mother's) is the key to the child's learning style'; and the mother's aspirations and self-confidence are the key to the child's sense of confidence and competence alike." (Smith, 1980, p18).*

There are many benefits for parents, children and staff if parents participate in their child's early years setting such as continuity of familiar relationships and continuity of

experience in the preschool curriculum. According to Lamb-Parker (2001) evidence from a number of studies concerning pre-schools has found that partnership between parents and staff increases cognitive development and academic achievements, a finding that first emerged in the 1960s.

*“...there is widespread agreement amongst educators that parental involvement is crucial to children’s learning and development. At all stages of school, but particularly at the preschool stage, the critical role of parenting is seen as a driving force in children’s education success” (Bridge, 2001, p7)*

The development of a partnership depends on communication between staff and parents and staff becoming acquainted with the family, thus allowing them to understand the child more fully (Vernon and Smith, 1994). A recent OECD report found that parents’ involvement as partners in their child’s pre-school setting is essential for “rebuilding educational institutions as more open and democratic settings” (OECD, 2001, p 119). In the Netherlands and Portugal parents are seen as partners in the consultation process leading to the formation of national early childhood care and education policies. This is in contrast to the Irish situation where parents of young children have no platform from which to express their views. The notion of a home and a school partnership recognises that parents and teachers have complimentary skills, knowledge and experiences to contribute to the child’s learning. Wolfendale (1983) describes the central characteristics of partnership as follows:

- parents are active and central in decision making and implementation
- parents are perceived as having equal strengths and equivalent expertise
- parents are able to contribute to as well as receive services
- parents share responsibility thus they and professionals are mutually responsible.

Wolfendale (1993, p8) also provides a rationale for partnership with parents which takes the form of a number of points.

- All parents care about the welfare and well being of their children. Teachers and others need to find ways to encourage parents who appear to be indifferent into a partnership.

- Parents want to do what they believe is best for their child. Teachers and other professionals need to capitalise on this latent good will by inviting parents to participate.
- Parents are the primary educators of their children and are the expert on their child. Teachers and other professionals can make better use of the parent's skills than they have done to date.
- Parents and teachers skills, perspectives and insights are different and when these are brought together they can complement each other.
- Parental involvement should not only be information sharing but should also include decision-making.
- All parents have the right to be involved and to contribute.

### 3.3.3 Quality

Quality has become a key concern in the area of childcare provision. There are a number of stakeholders who have an interest in the quality of day-care programs. These stakeholders include childcare practitioners, academics, government and parents. Parents and professionals may have divergent views regarding quality and childcare. According to Larner and Phillips (1995) parents are concerned with preventing harm and maximising benefits and tend to define quality in relation to the needs of their own children. Parents want to ensure that their child is in a safe and pleasant environment, which nurtures their development. In contrast professionals may focus on concepts of quality that are concrete, objective and quantifiable such as child-staff ratios so they can be applied across a wide variety of programs. Larner and Phillips (1996, p51) cite a US study which explored how parents measured quality.

*“The parents most often explained their choice in terms of quality features including the number of adults and children; provider warmth, training or style; programme characteristics like curriculum or cultural content; and the setting's safety and equipment for children” (Larner & Phillips, 1996, p50)*

Lamb-Parker et al. (2001 p 36) claim that the long term benefits of early childhood intervention on children's achievements at school have been established and partnership with parents plays a central “mediating role in realizing these beneficial outcomes for

children". There is also limited evidence suggesting that high quality care can have a positive effect on parental employment.

*"Quality of care may influence employment in several ways: parents may be reluctant to leave their child in a low quality, unsafe environment or with adults who do not provide a stimulating or warm environment for their child."*  
(Vandell and Wolfe, 2001, p21)

O'Flaherty (1995, p10) claims that ongoing research indicates that there are long-term benefits for children who partake in quality childcare programmes. This is particularly evident among children from disadvantaged backgrounds. O'Flaherty cites a Malaysian study concerning disadvantaged children who were attending pre-school programme which found that that quality childcare had helped the children gain cognitive, socio-emotional and language skills. According to O'Flaherty (1995) high quality childcare appears to positively affect cognitive growth particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged children.

### **3.4 Models of partnership**

#### **3.4.1 Definitions of partnership**

*"Lack of consensus in the field about the operational meaning of partnership and similar labels allows for enormous variation in the way similar or identical labels are put into operation."* (Powell, 1989, p19)

Powell (1989) claims that the concept of partnership is used to describe the nature of the relationship between parents and early years' staff and is used interchangeably or in parallel with other labels such as 'parent involvement' and 'parent-teacher collaboration'. Powell claims that there is no consensus in the field as to the precise definition of 'partnership' creating the potential for enormous variation in the way this and similar labels are put into operation. However Powell does state that broadly partnership can be taken to be seen as a collaboration between parents and staff based on mutual respect and 'a desire to empower parents with information and roles that strengthen control of the environment" (Powell, 1989, p20). This is very similar to

Pugh and De'Ath's definition of partnership implying that there is some consensus as to a broad definition of partnership.

Dale (1996) describes a number of exploratory frameworks or 'models' of partnership to facilitate the distinction between different types of parent-professional relationships. She does however caution that there is a danger when using these models that the relationship becomes oversimplified and the complexity of 'real-life' is lost. Dale (1996) claims that during the 1980s there was widespread discussion and approval of the concept of partnership between parents and professionals and three distinct models or conceptual frameworks of partnerships have emerged.

*Parent as consumer*- this was developed by Cunningham and Davis in 1985 and is one of the first conceptual frameworks of partnership and the first to credit parents with having expertise distinct from that of the professionals' expertise. The concept of consultation with parents reflects a contemporary view that parents are consumers.

*"Because the parent would not be able to share in resource power and allocation with the professional, the professional's influence would become more one of exchange, negotiation and bargaining." (Dale, 1996, p13)*

The parent is seen as having the right to 'opt out' of the service, weakening the traditional role of the professional. However the power of the consumer is reduced in situations where resources are limited. This may be the situation in the Irish childcare market where there is a shortage of childcare places and high childcare costs may be prohibitive to parents who are looking for new childcare arrangements. According to Dahlberg (1999) the increasing pressure on parents to pay for childcare services has resulted in early childhood institutions becoming synonymous with consumerism and quality. Parents who are pressurised by a lack of time and choice, especially working parents are increasingly relying on experts to tell them what is good quality childcare. According to Dahlberg (1999) these experts frequently offer parents a reassurance that they are making the right childcare choice rather than offering parents an understanding of the choice they are making.

*“This theme of consumer, or service user rights has continued against a social background of greater awareness of the responsibility and accountability of anyone who runs a service.” (Lindon, 1996, p168)*

As parents are regarded as consumers the preschool must strive to satisfy the customer/client and provide opportunities for the parent to comment on their level of satisfaction with the service. Accountability issues in child care are increasingly ‘being couched in the terminology of the market place, with parents cast in the role of consumers who can ‘shop around’ for the service of their choice’ (Bevridge, 1992, p12). This has led to some concern among childcare experts, particularly the worry that the consumerism of parental participation will undermine progress made concerning education partnerships with pupils and parents (Bevridge, 1992). Wolfendale (1993, p121) claims that an issue of concern with focusing on consumerism is that “no one has any overriding interest in maintaining a sense of equity”. The focus of the service is not to provide just childcare and family support but to provide a consumer service, which can be assessed in monetary terms. According to Bevridge (1992, p13) partnership in the UK is explicitly linked to parents rights specifically within The Parent Charter. The Parents’ Charter was developed in 1991 by the UK Government and aims to regulate home school relations. She criticises it for being overly concerned with parents rights rather than parents’ responsibilities, such as their right to information and the right to choose which school their child attends and the right to adequate education for their child. Bevridge claims that the underlying emphasis of the charter views parents as consumers of a service rather than as partners with the service, again taking away from the accountability of services. These views are also expressed by Vincent (1996) who claims that the charter allocates parents to the role of consumer which ‘sits uneasily with their more traditional role as supporter/learners” (p56). Siraj-Blatchford (1996) cites research which found that parental satisfaction was high both in high and low quality centres. She claims that it is difficult for parents to acknowledge that their child care arrangements are not satisfactory and therefore it is unrealistic to expect parents to be critical and have active views illustrating a fundamental flaw of the consumer approach.

*The empowerment model-* this model, which, combines the rights of the parent as a consumer and recognises the family as a system and social network was put forward by

Appleton and Minchom in 1991. This model acknowledges the diversity between parents and recognises “these differences will affect a parent’s ability to take up a position as a partner” (Dale, 1994, p14). An enabling relationship between parents and professionals is advocated. Central to this model is the ability of parents to feel that they are in control of the situation. Dale claims that if equal partnership is to exist there needs to be some form of ‘citizen empowerment’ such as an increase in the legal rights of parents to act as partners. This is particularly relevant in an Irish context as parents have a constitutional right to have input in to their child's education yet there is no specific reference to the rights of parents of preschool children such as the right to access or the right to information (see section 3.5.2).

*The negotiating model*- this model, which has been developed by Dale (1996), draws on the two previous models but focuses on negotiation as the key to partnership. It rests on the premise that parents and professionals have separate and highly valuable contributions to make. Dale (1996) describes it as a working relationship where “partners use joint decision making and resolve differences of opinion ...to reach some kind of shared perspective” (p 14). The premise is that while parents and professionals have separate and potentially high contributions to make, they come to joint encounters with different perspectives because they represent different social roles and have multiple perspectives of the same situation. Decision-making is dependent upon each partner negotiating their perspective and participating in a two-way dialogue.

### **3.4.2 Frameworks for Partnership**

Frameworks representing partnership are useful tools in the analysis of the realities of the parent-staff relationship. These frameworks or typologies, two of which will be discussed in this section, illustrate the dynamic nature of partnership. To achieve a partnership all stakeholders must participate in decision-making and power-sharing processes. According to Vincent (1996) it is only through the process of participation that the informed consent of all stakeholders can be achieved. One of the earliest and most influential frameworks for participation was developed by Arnstein in 1969 and represents eight levels of citizen participation. According to Vincent (1996) the ladder progresses through stages of involvement which allow the participants to ‘voice their opinions but retain executive powers for decision-making’ (p10). Arnstein outlines some of the limitations of the typology such as the fact that in the ‘real world’

the eight levels of the typology would be less clearly defined and it may be difficult to draw distinctions between them. Listed in figure 3.4.1 are the eight rungs of the ladder as presented by Arnstein (1969) with corresponding examples to highlight levels of partnership that parents may engage with early years staff have been developed by the researcher for this study.

### Ladder of Citizen Participation

Citizen control	Parents identify and conceive ideas and work with staff as their ultimate partners.
Delegated power	Negotiation leads to parents playing a dominant role in decision-making. Parents both initiate and direct projects.
Partnership	Power is renegotiated as a result of discussion between parents and staff. Parents are involved, consulted and informed.
Placation	Parents begin to share some degree of influence though tokenism may be apparent at this level.
Consultation	Parent's opinions are invited but no assurance is offered as to whether or not these opinions are being listened to.
Informing	Parents are informed of their rights and responsibilities but the information exchange is one-way, from staff to parent.
Therapy	The staff allow their professional status to disempower the parent thus preventing any meaningful involvement.
Manipulation	This is lowest level of participation and represents situations where parents are given inaccurate or incorrect information and their views are not taken into account.

Figure 3.4.

Arnstein's model was not developed specifically to examine the relationship that parents have with their childcare provider but as is illustrated in figure 3.4.1 it can be very useful in assessing this relationship. Pugh and De'Ath (1989) have developed a specific framework for preschool workers to allow them to examine the relationship that they have with parents. This framework represents a five-fold model of parental involvement with partnership being the highest level. Although they state that this does not suggest that partnership is a linear progression nonetheless the framework is hierarchical.

#### ***1. Non-participation***

Parents are using the service purely as consumers and do not have any involvement in the way the service functions. There are two types of non-participation.

- a. Active non-participant- parents do not participate by choice, and/or because they view childcare as a means of buying a professionals time which does not require parental input.
- b. Passive non-participant- parents want to participate but might not be able due to reasons such as lack confidence, having other children or feels that the child won't settle.

## ***2. Support***

Parents provide external, practical support from outside the centre. The types of support that they provide include moral support and promoting the services philosophy, material supports when asked, fundraising, attending open evenings and social events, continuing activities that are suggested by the service at home.

## ***3. Participation.***

Broad term in which parents get involved at the broad sense, parents are physically involved in or contributing to work under supervision of the staff. Pugh and De'Ath divide participation into two categories.

- Parents as helpers such as helping run a particular activity within the centre such for example a toy library or going on outings with staff and children.
- Parent as learners such as attending classes and workshops concerning childcare or learning other subjects through adult education.

## ***4. Partnership***

Parents and staff relationship is characterised by 'a share sense of purpose, mutual respect, and the willingness to negotiate' (Pugh and De'Ath, 1989, p36). This involves a higher degree of involvement implying sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision making and accountability. Parents may be involved in activities such as planning the curriculum, program planning, sharing in decision making and involvement in reviewing and monitoring of their child. Pugh and De'Ath outline different types of partnerships which parents may be involved in such as partnership between individual parents and the professional, partnership between parents in general and a particular centre and partnership between parents and policy makers in the community. Partnership implies collaboration between parents and professionals.

## **5. Control**

Parents are in a position to both determine and implement decisions within the centre and are responsible and accountable for control. Pugh and De'Ath list areas where this may be possible such as choosing staff, sitting on board of management and selecting the children for the centre.

These two frameworks provide a hierarchy of partnership in two different contexts. Arnstein's model was established in the context of citizen participation, which the researcher has modified with examples relating to early years settings while Pugh and De'Ath's framework was specifically designed with reference to the early years setting. While there may be some differences in the terminology used in the models the principles are similar. They both represent a framework within which levels of partnership between the parent and professional can be understood with examples of partnership ranging from non-participation or manipulation to control or citizen control.

## **3.5 Quality and partnership in the early years**

### **3.5.1 Overview of quality**

*"The growing importance of quality in the field of early childhood institutions can be understood in relation to the modernist search for order and certainty grounded in objectivity and quantification" Dahlberg et al. (1999, p89)*

The link between quality and partnership is an important part of the rationale for this study as illustrated in section 3.2.2/3. The issue of quality emerged during the 1950s when it became increasingly central to economic and political life. An early economic definition of quality from this period stated that the aim of quality control was to reduce variation as the quantity of provision was increasing. As consumerism increased production of goods quality discourse served a policing and control function to make production systems accountable. Since the 1980s quality has moved to the top of the political agenda as increasing globalization has called for increased quantification and standardisation. In this way quality is a concept associated with modernity.

Dahlberg et al. (1999, p2) claim that quality can be summed up as “a desire for a clean and orderly world, devoid of messiness and complexity”. The US has had a major influence on the introduction of quality discourse into the early childhood institution in two ways. The first reason is the US ideology of private responsibility for children, which meant a “reliance on free market solution, high levels of demand and large economic inequalities between families”. Increasing pressure on parents to pay for childcare services has resulted in early childhood institutions becoming synonymous with consumerism and therefore quality. The second influence was the US developmental psychologist’s movement.

US developmental psychology has played a leading role in introducing quality discourses into the early childhood institutions (Vernon, 1994, p16). Developmental psychology has been responsible for creating the concept of the scientific child with universal stages of development. Developmental theories of childhood begin to function as if they were models of reality and the child is no longer seen as a complex socially constructed being but is instead reduced to developmental stages.

*“Both the discourses of child development and quality adopt a decontextualised approach or, at best attempt to bring ‘context’ in as an explanatory viable, divorcing the child and the institution from concrete experience, everyday life, the complexities of culture and the importance of situation” (Dahlberg et al., 1999, p10)*

Both of these fields try to reduce complexities and introduce classifications so that experiences are measurable and standardised. A contrast emerges between the complexity of everyday life in the early childhood institution and simplification offered by the discourse of quality. Definitions of quality have been provided using guidelines and frameworks. These guidelines produce a universal child-rearing model and have become fundamental to the development and assessment of early childhood services. Parents who are pressurised by time and choice, especially working parents are increasing relying on experts to tell them what is good quality childcare. These experts offer parents a reassurance that they are making the right childcare choice rather than offering parents an understanding of the choice they are making.

Dahlberg et al (1999, p95) argue that the discourse of quality “is essentially about the quest for an absolute standard of products, objective and generalizable, defined in terms of criteria”. This was applied to early childhood institutions through research, standards, measures and guidelines on good practice. The questions surrounding quality in childcare institutions are of a technical and managerial nature i.e. cost effectiveness, child-staff ratio and desirable outcome (Dahlberg et al. 1999, p.2).

*“The language of quality is also the language of the early childhood institution as producer of pre-specified outcomes and the child as an empty vessel, to be prepared to learn, for school, and to be helped on his or her journey of development” (Dahlberg et al., 1999, p87)*

According to Dahlberg et al (1999, p5) quality is in “the eye of the beholder” as it is a constructed concept based on values and beliefs and it is not an objective and universal reality. There are an increasing number of writers who are questioning the traditional processes of defining quality and acknowledge that it is a subjective and relative concept, which does not have universal outcomes and indicators. Quality is not a neutral concept as it is a socially constructed concept with a very particular meaning and this needs to be acknowledged when using forms of quality assessments in the childcare institutions.

### **3.5.2 Irish perspective on quality**

*“Overall, the evidence strongly suggests that the involvement of parents improves children’s performance and motivation, leads to higher teacher expectations and increases parental confidence and aspirations.” (French, 2000, p60)*

Both childcare professionals and statutory bodies in Ireland have acknowledged partnership as a crucial element of quality childcare. French (2000, p60) points out that in Ireland parental participation is not only an issue for good practice but it is enshrined in the Irish constitution and was given statutory underpinning in the Education Act, 1998.

*“Article 42.1 of the Constitution enshrines the role of the family as the “natural and primary educator of the child”. The reference in the article to the right and duty of parents to provide for their child’s education confers on them the right to active participation in the child’s education”. (French, 2000, p60)*

*“To ensure that the education system is accountable to students and their parent...and is conducted if the spirit of partnership between schools, patrons, students, parents, teachers and other school staff...” (Education Act 1998)*

The principal piece of legislation relating to childcare and quality in Ireland are the Pre-school regulations (1997), which are part of the Childcare Act (1991). The Pre-School Regulations oblige providers of centre-based pre-school services to meet minimum standards of quality. These standards refer to structural issue such as child/staff ratio, safety in relation to premises, equipment, and fire safety and space requirements for each child. In relation to parents there is very little of mention of them in the pre-school regulations except in regard to the right of parents to access the register of information concerning their own child (Pre-school Regulations, 1996, p14). The Pre-School Regulations have been criticised by *The White paper on Early Childhood Education (1999, p54)* the lack of regulation of qualitative standards claiming that quantitative factors only tell “half the story”.

### **3.5.3 European perspective**

The *Quality Targets in Services for Young People (1996)* apply to all European countries including Ireland (see section 2.6.3). Section VIII of the Quality Targets concerns targets in relation to parents and the community. There are three targets in this section, the first of which targets deals with parents.

*“Target 34: Parents are collaborators and participants in early years’ services. As such they have the right to give and to receive information and the right to express their views both formally and informally. The decision making processes of the services should be fully participative, involving parents, all staff, and where possible, children.” (European Commission Network on Children, 1996, p29)*

Parents are stakeholders in childcare and are therefore entitled to a number of rights. Therefore parents have the right to give and receive information. Parents have right to express their views and be involved in any decision-making concerning their children. The European Commission Network on Children (1996, p29) gives a number of examples of good practice in relation to parents. In the Netherlands, for example, there is a national association for parents using childcare called BoinK. This organisation is funded by the Department of Welfare and represents parents at both a national and local level.

The recent OECD thematic reviews examining early childhood education and care (ECEC) in OECD countries gives examples of quality in relation to parents in a variety of cultural settings. In Sweden ECEC is viewed as ‘a complement to the home’ (p54) and activities in childcare settings take the child’s living conditions into account. Recently in Sweden there has been a move away from measuring quality through regulations and guidelines to create uniform quality. In the last 15 years in accordance with decentralisation of the government and increased local autonomy there has been a move towards citizen participation.

*“A different way of defining quality takes as its starting point the parents using the ECEC-system, in the role as citizens, clients or “customers”. In measuring quality of services, issues that could be focused on cover efficient administration and distribution of places, access, opening hours or parental freedom to choose among different ECEC-alternatives.” (OECD, 1999, p37)*

According to the report information on parental needs and preferences has been collected throughout Sweden using parents’ surveys and used to inform politicians and administrators in the development of services. Consumer surveys have also been used to measure parent’s satisfaction of services ‘relying on subjective quality ratings based on parental norms or preferences of what might be important aspects of ECEC-programs’ (OECD, 1999, p37). One of the recurring aspects found in high quality programs is a mutually trusting relationship between the parent and the childcare personnel.

*“Swedish research has found high quality...to be closely linked to parental feelings of trust, involvement, and understanding of the norms, values and working methods of the personnel in the ECEC-settings” (OECD, 1999, p37)*

Parents may have different perspective on what constitutes quality. Quality to parents may be flexible opening hours, affordable fees and particular interests of staff whereas other stakeholders might judge quality on “what constitutes an optimal learning environment for children’s development and learning” and defined goals and standards (OECD, 1999, p38). In Sweden the *National Curriculum (1998)* states that parental views and preferences should be taken into account when planning and carrying out activities and parents should be involved in accessing these activities.

In Finland parents are considered valued stakeholders in childcare and contribute to childcare quality in a number of different ways including designing surveys to evaluate the quality of pre-schools.

*“Some day-care centres have parents’ councils to discuss or decide the objectives and principles of the day-care centre’s activities and financial management within the framework set by the municipal budget.” (OECD, 2000, p54)*

There is a policy of using care and education agreements in joint consultation between staff and parents in early years’ services. The idea for this care agreement emerged from a 1996 consumer survey, which assessed quality in childcare centres. These agreements increase the dialogue between parents and staff in relation to educational objectives and give the parents an increased opportunity to influence decisions made concerning their child. Therefore the position parent’s rights in relation to childcare is based on a consumer model of provision. There are also elements of partnership in the parent and staff relationship as joint decision-making and sharing information are essential aspects of the care agreements.

#### **3.5.4 Quality from the Parents Perspective**

According to O’Flaherty (1995, p19) quality from the parents perspective is the extent to which childcare services meet “parents’ needs and fulfil their expectations” for example, hours of opening or the possible role the parents have influencing the content

of their child's programme. According to Howe et al. (2000, p14) "there is little doubt that the impact of quality at the point of delivery is influenced by further 'contextual' factors and these factors also need to be considered." Howe claims that the role of parents is one such factor, which influences quality as parents are the primary educators of children so it is necessary for pre-schools to work with parents. Research has shown that parents have different views of quality to other stakeholders in the childcare sector such as that cited in the Swedish OECD Thematic Report (1999). Hennesy and Delaney (1999) collected the views of 183 parents of 2-4 year olds as part of their Irish study using the Early Childhood Environment Enrichment Scale (ECERS). ECERS is an instrument to assess global quality using a range of statements, which can be used in a variety of early childhood settings. Hennesy and Delaney assessed whether or not the items in the ECERS corresponded with parent's own views of quality childcare provision. They found that almost all items in the ECERS were endorsed by parents 'as being a moderate priority in their choice of daycare' (p22). Hennesy and Delaney suggest that the priorities expressed by parents relating to quality childcare may be based on a different conceptual organisation to that of the childcare professional. Siraj-Blatchford, (1996) cites research claiming that parents' major concerns were the child's most basic needs, food, rest and air. According to Evans (1996, p16) parents are concerned with four main factors in relation quality in the childcare setting.

1. Is the place safe and pleasant?
2. Does it fit the family need?
3. What will the child experience in terms of cultural support?
4. Will the programme prepare my child for school?

Evans (1996, p17) claims that parents seek care arrangements they trust and the majority of parents of older children place importance on the childcare workers ability to teach their children to read and write.

There is limited evidence suggesting that high quality care can have a positive effect on parental employment. Vandell and Wolfe (2001, p21) claim that research has demonstrated that higher quality childcare increases employment, stability of employment and hours of employment.

*"Quality of care may influence employment in several ways: parents may be reluctant to leave their child in a low quality, unsafe environment or with adults who do not*

*provide a stimulating or warm environment for their child.” (Vandell and Wolfe, 2001, p21)*

This can particularly be a problem for lower-income families as they may have a more limited choice of childcare arrangements that they can afford. This is particularly evident among low-income mothers. Parent who were satisfied with the quality of their childcare arrangements were less likely to miss time from work and are likely to more productive employees if they are satisfied with their care arrangements.

The benefits of quality childcare to children have been well documented and research studies have found that parental participation in childcare programmes can improve the quality of the programme itself. Tijus et al. (1997) conducted a study of the interactions between parent’s staff and children in four intercultural day-centres for disadvantaged families in France. The results were very positive and showed those parents and staff participating together created an environment rich in ‘cognitive interactions’.

*“The main contribution made by parents to the cognitive interaction comes from their being closer to the child’s activities in the pre-school. This is not just in the parent’s relationship with his/her child, with the necessity of having joint references, but especially in his/her relationship with the other children” (Tijus et al, 1997, p8)*

This study found that parents’ participation in their child’s daily activities in preschool had a positive effect on the quality of care their child received and also on their child’s cognitive development. There is no universal definition of quality practice in relation to parents and childcare. However a general consensus has emerged among the majority of stakeholders, that anecdotal evidence suggests parental participation contributes to the overall quality of a childcare programme. Parents are not a homogenous group and their perceptions of what constitutes quality can vary widely but common concerns among parents emerge such as safety and care. As already mentioned one of the recurring aspects found in high quality programs according to the literature is a mutually trusting relationship between the parent and the childcare personnel. Partnership with parents has been identified as an important element in providing a quality pre-school setting and Howe et al. (2000) claim that quality in pre-school

provision is dependent on “creating a sense of ‘partnership’ between parents and providers” (p14).

### **3.6 The staff and parent relationship in early years' services**

#### **3.6.1 Establishing the parent-staff relationship**

According to Hyder et al. (1997) key principles of partnership include acknowledging the role that parents can play in their child's education and giving adequate attention to parents and children during the settling-in period. Another important aspect of partnership is ‘recognising parental and family expertise and taking account of the learning experiences that a child brings home ensuring collaboration between children, parents and staff’ (Hyder et al., 1997, p3). This settling-in period is an important time for establishing relationships with parents and children.

*“... (it) is a time during which parents are open to information, impressions and possible guidance about how to deal with this first transition from home to an educational setting... may be a crucial time during which teachers can act to support this process for both the child and the home adult.” (Dali, 1999, p64).*

Dali also places emphasis on developing trust at this time to ease the transition and an important way of doing this is to provide information during the induction process on new routines, policies and activities at the centre. This may allay concerns the parent has about the child settling in. Parents view their role in the centre as a source of security and support which helps the child bridge the gap between home and the preschool setting allowing continuity. Powell (1989) claims that while his research suggests that the parent stays with the child to help him/her adjust to the preschool setting a British study found 47% of mothers believed that it was best for the child if the parents did not stay and left immediately. Powell claims that this indicates there is a lack of information for parents and staff as how to handle the child's introduction to the centre.

Marsh (1997) claims that research has shown that one of the ways a centre can maintain a positive relationship with the parent is through a key worker system. The

key worker system is based on the premise that one worker has overall responsibility for a child and their family within the centre thus allowing continuity and stability of the caregiver and parent relationship. In a larger childcare centre where the child may be meeting several workers a day it may be confusing for the parent as to whom they should speak to and direct and problems or questions.

*“Establishing at the outset a single worker as the major link between the home and the nursery context for both the parent and the child is a significant way of helping to establish a fruitful two-way communication system, to the benefit of all involved”*  
(Marsh, 1997, p105)

The key worker system provides a ‘focus for discussion at times of significant developmental change in the child’s life’ and is an essential element of a high quality service (Marsh, 1997, p97).

### **3.6.2 Communication**

Two-way communication between parents and staff is a crucial element of a positive working relationship and is also important for the child's relationship with peers and adults (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Powell, 1989; Ghazvini and Readdick, 1994; Hughes and MacNaughton, 2002). Despite the overwhelming evidence supporting the importance of good parent-staff communication ‘early childhood staff often find communicating with parents stressful and problematic’ (Hughes and MacNaughton, 2002, p14). An important aspect of communication between staff and parents is the ‘local politics of knowledge’ or deciding whose knowledge tells the truth about the child’s experiences.

*“Early childhood staff claim to be professionals on the basis that they use systematic and theory-based models to create ‘the truth’ about the child. Parents claim that their anecdotal knowledge of their specific child is the ‘truth’ because they witnessed the actions and events on which that knowledge is based.”*  
(Hughes and MacNaughton, 2002, p18).

Parents and staff come from different perspective and Hughes and MacNaughton (2002) claim that in order to overcome these obstacles is it important for parents and staff to

shift away from non-negotiable facts and move towards negotiable knowledge. Staff need to give parents a voice without feeling that they have relinquished their professional identity and allow time for sufficient face to face interaction between staff and parents. Staff and parents need to negotiate a shared meaning about the child and set goals together. This is similar to the concepts and ideas presented by Dale (1996) in her negotiating model of the parent-professional relationship. Smith and Hubbard (1988) found that staff ratings of reciprocity and positive relationships related positively to child adjustment outcomes. They found that when staff and parents communicated more with each other, there appeared to be fewer negative interactions between the child and their peers.

Powell (1989) found in his research that the highest frequency of communication between parents and childcare providers occurs at 'transition time'. This is when the parents is dropping off the child or collecting the child from the centre, 66% of parents reported that conversations occur at this time, however 30% reported that they do not enter the centre when leaving their child in for the day. The most frequently discussed topic reported in the study was child-peer relations and child-caregiver relations. When respondents were asked about satisfaction levels with communication 77% of parents and 70% of caregivers were not satisfied with 'existing level of discussion about the child's activities at the centre' (Powell, 1989, p62). Powell puts forward possible reasons for this level of satisfaction including the fact that the main communication occurs at pick up time in the evenings when individuals may be preoccupied with other matters. Also staff on duty at this time may not have been with the child all day and may have limited information concerning the child and also the information exchange appears to be a one-way process, from staff to parent.

The term 'parent engagement' has recently been used to encapsulate all types of communication between staff and parents. According to Elliot (2002) her assessment of parent engagement in services in Australia found that it is often restricted to staff organised functions leaving little opportunity for parents to evaluate programmes or develop their own individual insights, giving parents little influence over programme goals or philosophy.

*“Yet, individual families and early childhood service staff each possess valuable information about the young children attending services and it is important that this information is shared to ensure the best interests of all children can be served through joint decision making.” (Elliot, 2002, p2)*

The result of this is that families are unable to review and evaluate the service effectively and unsuitable goals or program objectives may be provided for the children. According to Elliot research indicates parental participation in program planning is a factor in determining the quality of the service. In her study she found that parents wanted a specific form of engagement with the service. In particular they wanted more information evenings to help them understand their children better and their child's development. They felt that it was up to staff to share the knowledge and insights they have concerning the children. Parents also wanted to take part in the child's daily experiences or have adequate information on the child's daily activities.

*“Communication was raised repeatedly by parents as an issue of distress and or annoyance because parents saw it as a lost opportunity to vicariously share their children's day due to a lack of information being shared with them.” (Elliot, 2002, p5)*

Parents criticised written information such as newsletters for being too general and not allowing parents to understand the educational significance of the educational activities that their child is engaging in. Parents were frustrated by what they perceived to be a lack of information about services and felt that information was a one way process and in particular parents wanted to ‘make it a loop’ of information exchange. Parents felt strongly about the lack of interconnectedness between children's homes and their early years setting. Elliot describes how her research indicated that parents wanted their voices to be heard and for staff to share their knowledge with parents. Penn (2000) in a study of five UK nurseries found that with the exception of one middle class mother, parents knew very little of the daily activities at the preschool and were very timid in advancing their views to the preschool staff

*“Apart from knowing when and how to drop off and pick up their children, parents knew very little about what went on in the nursery” (Penn, p50, 2000)*

Parents did appear to be concerned that the happiness and security of their children was ensured. A strong desire for socialisation was higher on parents agenda rather than on the staff agenda. Penn claimed that parent lack of information leads to situation where parents' opportunities for participation were limited.

Whalley (2001) describes methods used in the Penn Green Nursery to communicate effectively with parents and promote a two-way exchange of information. A programme for working with parents was developed. The main client group of the nursery were parents who were dependant on welfare payments. A code of ethics was developed to ensure that parents were treated not as 'victims' but as 'partners'. Parents were encouraged to video or keep a diary of the activities that they engaged in with their child at home and then to share this with the nursery staff. An outcome of this was a nursery curriculum which was richer and more relevant as it acknowledged and utilised what the child was learning at home.

*"We begin to know much more about what excited and interested the children and could then plan support and extend their interested in the nursery to great effect."*

*(Whalley, 2001, p18).*

One third of all parents had videotaped their child's activities at home. Video vignettes of the child in the nursery were also made by staff and formed the basis for information sharing with parents at evening meetings. Parents who were involved in the programs reported changes in the ways they responded to their child and increased understanding of the learning potential that exists in everyday life for their child. An important aspect of the program at Penn Green is the active recruitment of fathers for participation in the nursery activities. Whalley (2001) found that when staff positively encouraged fathers to participate during the induction period 87% of fathers turned up. Following discussions with parents it emerged that mothers had initially assumed that their partners would not like to participate and fathers had presumed that their partners did not want them there.

Katz and Chard (1996) emphasis the importance of documentation in the preschool setting as a way for parent to 'become intimately and deeply aware of their children's experiences in the school' (p2). This type of two-way communication is

encouraged by the *White Paper on Early Education* (1999) as a way of enhancing quality in preschool settings. It cites two main reasons why parents and staff should engage in regular meaningful dialogue. The first is that it allows parents to make staff aware of any specific needs, qualities and characteristics their child may have and parents are in a unique position to identify these characteristics. Secondly it allows staff to make parents aware of contributions parents can make to their child's learning.

### **3.6.3 Listening to parents**

There has been very little research conducted in Ireland concerning parents' views of partnership and the relationship with their childcare providers. Kernan and Hayes (1999) surveyed the views of Irish parents of four year olds and teachers as part of the IEA primary project, a large cross-national study of preprimary education. The views of 113 teachers and 382 parents were collected in the study. The findings of the study indicated that there was a low to moderate convergence between the views of parents and the views of teachers concerning the important areas of development for 4-year-olds in the study. The literature suggests that convergence of parent and staff attitudes, aims and objectives for early learning is better for the child's development. Collaboration and partnership between parents and teachers is an important method of bridging the philosophical gap between home and the childcare setting.

Another relevant study, which looks at parents more general views of childcare provision, is *The Border County Childcare Network* (2000) survey. This is a study of 3000 individual parents of children attending a range of pre-school services across the six border counties with a response rate of approximately 35%. Only 13.4% of those surveyed had children attended full time childcare facilities while 84.6% of children were attending a pre-school sessional service (i.e. one which operates for up to 3.5 hours per day). Parents were asked to rank in order of importance the reasons why they were sending their child to pre-school. Socialising with other children and adults was chosen by approximately 40% as their primary reason. The second highest ranking was to prepare their children for school, which 33.4% of parents choose as their primary reason. The survey also asked if attending preschool benefited the parents themselves and 97.25% felt they did benefit. The reasons for this were diverse and included the opportunity to meet new people, particularly for families that are new to the area. The

pre-school offers a forum for parents who have children of the same age to meet and creates a social outlet for parents. Parents claimed that pre-school had heightened their awareness of their own child's development and also gave them ideas for play and learning activities they could participate in with their child at home. The parents who were availing of full-time day care reported that access to childcare services had facilitated their employment. It was not only those who were availing of full-time day care that cited this as a benefit of availing of childcare services as a large number of those using sessional childcare services had taken up part-time employment while their child was attending the childcare service. Parents in the survey expressed concern over the lack of government funding to provide affordable childcare services and pay the childcare workers accordingly for the valuable services they provide.

According to a study done by Galinsky (1992) parents define the relationship between the child and the childcare provider as the most important aspect of childcare as do professionals themselves. Galinsky found when childcare centres were more sensitive and responsive to parents, parents were more satisfied with the centre and believed that children were benefiting from the childcare. In contrast, Galinsky found that in centres where the ethos of workers was to form a more detached relationship with children parents were less satisfied and missed the children more. These feelings became even more intense when the centres were perceived by the parents to be "chaotic".

### **3.7 The needs of children aged 0-3 years**

The focus of this study is on the views of parents who have children aged 0-3. The rationale for the decision to limit the study to parents of children of this age has been partly explained in section 2.7 which examines the role that parents have to play as advocates for their child. Of particular importance for parents of children in the 0-3 age group is the emotional bond that develops between the child and their caregiver or the concept of attachment. There are a variety of theories which offer competing explanations for the concept of attachment (Cole and Cole, 1996). According to Cole and Cole (1996) Erickson states that attachment is the establishment of a trusting relationship between the parent and child. Freud explains attachment as having its roots

in the reduction of biological drives such as hunger and Bowlby claimed that attachment reduces fear by establishing a secure base from which the child can explore their surroundings. Bowlby undertook a review of the mental health problems of children separated from their families and living in institutions in the 1950s. These observations led Bowlby to theorise attachment as developing in four phases during the first two years of life, which leads to an equilibrium between the mother and child. The attachment serves as an internal working model 'that the children use as a standard to guide their interactions not only with care givers but with other people as well' (Cole and Cole, 1996, p241). Bowlby argued that even a brief separation from the mother in the first five years had long lasting effects. Holmes (1993) suggests that separation anxiety is not only confined to the child but can also manifest itself in the caregiver and illustrates this with examples of mothers leaving their child with a minder and then fretting about the child and missing him/her. Feminists have argued that any generalisations from Bowlby's findings, which were based upon studies of children who had experienced almost no maternal care, are unwarranted and can be damaging.

*"There is abundant evidence, they (feminists) claim that, when a mother entrusts her child for part of the day to the care of a trusted person- whether a grandmother or ....a respected baby minder – no harm is done" (Holmes, 1993, p45).*

On the contrary, according to Holmes, there is evidence to suggest that exclusive care by the mother can lead to less security for the child and in reality the child has a hierarchy of attachment figures, of whom the mother is usually the most important. However Holmes suggests that the feminist critique of Bowlby may have failed to appreciate that Bowlby was an advocate for the vital importance of the role that the mother play in their child's emotional development.

*"...the implications of his(Bowlby's) studies that good daycare facilities should be available for mother who ...work, funded so that children can have individual and continuous relationships with care workers, should be seen as a step towards the liberation of women, increasing their range of choices and valuation by society" (Holmes, 1993, p48).*

If this is the case then Bowlby's theory of attachment can be seen as a theoretical foundation for providing good quality childcare which emphasises positive and continuous interactions between parents and childcare providers.

### **3.8 Partnership in practice**

#### **3.8.1 Parents and staff views of partnership**

A number of studies of parents and childcare providers have found that parents and staff can have conflicting views of parental participation and the role they each have to play in the childcare setting.

*“Where there is no clearly defined policy on what both parent and staff are expecting of themselves and each other, it was common to hear workers complain that parents never stayed with their children, whereas parents in the same nursery felt that their help was neither needed nor wanted”. (Pugh and D’Ath, 1989, 42)*

Many of these differences were resolved when parents' and teachers' expectations were made clear to each party through a simple contract. Confusion over what was expected of parents, of what “roles they should play and of what the staff should either ask or expect them to do, was one of the main difficulties encountered” (Pugh and De’Ath, 1989, p41). Howe et al. (2001) found that staff were sometimes negative about parents' participation. The study found that the staff were unenthusiastic about parents' involvement in administration activities such as accounting and half of the staff alluded to the unprofessionalism of parents commenting on how they sometimes failed to turn up or did not make any contribution when they were there. Wolfendale (1993, p11) draws attention to the fact that many childcare workers may be wary of parents becoming involved in their child's education. She outlines three reasons that she claims are legitimate concerns for childcare workers.

- They may feel their professionalism is undermined by the parents' presence in the classroom.
- Parent's views may not be well informed and this may lead to a clash between parent and childcare worker.

- Parents who chose to be active may be a self-selecting group, who are not representative of the views of all parents.

Pugh and De'Ath (1989) also found that even in the most open of preschool centres staff found it difficult to move away from the imbalance of power between staff and parents. Their study found that 80% of parents and 91% of staff reported parents were encouraged to stay during initial periods of settling-in. However Pugh and De'Ath (1989) found that when workers became more open and shared skills, this “enhanced rather than reduced their own and parent’s perceptions of their professional role” (p58).

Foot et al. (2001, p13) found in a recent Scottish survey that parents had two main motives for participation.

- (a.) desire to monitor and obtain feedback about child’s progress and development
- (b.) desire to find out more about what goes on in preschools and have an input into their child’s activities.

The parents’ desire for greater communication has already been discussed in the previous section and there is strong evidence that parents would like much more information concerning their child's daily activities in the preschool.

### **3.8.2 Levels of partnership**

A US study cited by Powell (1989) collected data from one sixth of all childcare centres in all 50 States and found that in private non-government funded centres 67% indicated that parents were not participating compared to non-profit centres where 36% indicated that parents were not participating. Bridge (2001) cites a UK survey by Osborne and Milbank (1987), which found that the amount and type of parental involvement varies between types of preschool service. In voluntary preschools half of the parents were involved in organising activities in the school while in local authority preschools one in eight of the parents were involved in ‘fundraising activities’.

*“If parents are instrumental in their children’s learning, then why are the numbers who are involved in preschools so low? And among those parents who are involved, why are they more often engaged in ancillary and managerial roles rather than those directly connected with children’s learning?” (Bridge, 2001, p8)*

Foot et al. (2001, p49) found that when parents were asked if they would like to help in principle, 60% of the local authority (State supported) and 47% of the private preschool parents said that they would. The greatest active level of participation was among parents attending playgroups. The study found that direct parental involvement is rare in private nurseries and for the most part confined to activities outside of normal nursery times such as parent evenings and continuing activities at home with the child. Less than half of the parents in private nurseries participated directly with the child. A recent Irish study by the Area Development Management Ltd. (2002) of 2607 childcare facilities found similar results. The study found that parents using community playgroups were substantially more likely to play a part in the daily activities of the facility compared to parents using private childcare. The study also found that there was a significant difference in levels of parental participation in sessional compared to full-day care facilities. The levels of parental involvement were much lower in full-day care facilities. For example in sessional day care 70.3% (1,427) of parents participated in outings compared to 42.5% in full-day care facilities. The report claims that a likely explanation for the differences may be that parents using full-day care facilities are doing so to avail of employment and may not have the same time resources available to them. Bridge (2001) also claims that a likely explanation for low levels of parental participation in preschools is that parents have many other demands on their time and it is unlikely that parents are not interested in their child's education.

### **3.8.3 Barriers associated with partnership**

It is important to examine why levels of participation vary and what are the barriers to parental participation. Certain factors that have been found to help or hinder parental participation in Head Start programs have been poor parent teacher communications, differences in languages between school and home, effectiveness of the parent to become involved and expectations of the role of parent (Bridge, 2001). It was also found that even after parents had put their names down to be involved there were still a number of barriers to participation. These included meetings being conducted in language that was often jargon-ridden or the meetings were at times that coincided with children's bedtimes and went on late into the evening. Lamb-Parker et al. (2001) found that more hours of employment and greater income have a negative effect on the level of parental participation. One fifth of mothers reported working and lack of energy as barriers. Other barriers included change in family composition such

as divorce or having a baby. The most common barrier that the Lamb-Parker et al. (2001) study found was having a schedule, which conflicted with preschool activities. Interestingly mothers who were involved in the preschool throughout the year reported lower levels of depression and reported being in more control of their lives but the study does not elaborate whether or not this is a causal relationship.

Pugh and De'Ath's (1989) three year study of the notion of partnership between professionals and parents in preschool settings identified ten factors which help or hinder parental involvement. Pugh and De'Ath claim that during the course of their research they met no parent who was not interested in their child's progress even though many factors prevented them from being involved in the centre. Factors identified by Pugh and De'Ath as either helping or hindering partnership are outlined below.

#### *1. Type, function and overall philosophy of the centre*

The overall aim of the centre has an important influence on partnership with parents. Differences emerge between centres, which have different aims such as the aim to complement, supplement or substitute parents care.

#### *2. Establishing a policy on working with parents*

The Pugh and De'Ath (1989, p41) study found that centres were more likely to be working towards partnership if they had "an explicit commitment in the form of a policy document on parental involvement". The main difficulty encountered in centres which did not have such a document was in relation to confusion over expected roles of parents and staff.

#### *3. Management*

Pugh and De'Ath (1989) found in their study that with the exception of only playgroups and some community centres very few parents were involved at management level of their childcare setting yet there was a general consensus among all parents that they would like to see parents participating at management level.

#### *4. Funding*

Lack of financial resources for working with parents can be a barrier to partnership.

### *5. Location and premises for parental activities.*

Pugh and De'Ath found that the most important aspect of location and premises in helping or hindering parental participation was not the age or the state of the surroundings but whether or not parent felt welcome there. Pugh and D'Ath also found that another important factor in encouraging partnership was that parents had a space they identified as their own.

### *6. Time*

According to Pugh and De'Ath it can take a considerable amount of time to develop an open working relationship between parents and staff and it is important to consider lack of time as an issue for both parents and staff.

### *7. Methods and strategies to facilitate parents and professionals working together.*

Pugh and D'Ath suggest that there are many ways in which parents and staff can work together as partners. The three key factors they found crucial to encouraging involvement were flexibility in responding to changing needs of families, importance of a choice of activities and thirdly opportunities for participants to move from observer to participant or partner. The strategies they identify include written communication, personal contacts between parents and staff (individual meeting), opportunities to participate in child's learning and ways of involving working parents who can't participate during the day.

### *8. Changing professional roles, developing new skills and looking at attitudes of staff*

Pugh and De'Ath found that if partnership is to exist between parents and staff there is a need for staff to define and clarify roles so that expectations were clear to both parties. Important strategies include staff training in working with parents, staff attitude to involving parents and staff actually wanting to work with parents.

### *9. Training, support and supervision*

To facilitate partnership and support parents and staff in their respective roles, training and constructive supervision needs to be provided.

### *10. Parents attitudes, expectations and role*

One of the main barriers to participation that Pugh and De'Ath found was whether or not the parents were working. Pugh and De'Ath identified a number of factors which affected parents' attitude towards extent and type of participation they wished for including parents needing to feel their help was wanted.

Pugh and De'Ath present ten factors which may help or hinder partnership. These factors focus on aspects of the parent-staff relationship and factors outside of the relationship such as time and function of the early years' centre. The variety of factors presented illustrate the complexities of developing staff parent partnerships and also indicate the types of obstacles which need to be overcome in the process of developing new types of partnership.

#### **3.8.4 Need for new forms of partnership**

Increasingly as parents are less available for traditional forms of parental participation such as serving as classroom volunteers there is "a need to experiment with alternative strategies" (Powell, 1989, p11). These new strategies can include increases personal exchanges between parents and staff, which could represent a second level through which programs and families can exert influence on one another. Improved staffing and physical arrangements at pick up and drop off times can also contribute to improved parent-staff communication and relations. According to Powell (1989) Epstein's research on pre-schools found that requesting parents' help with children's work at home had "a more dramatic positive link to parents reactions to the school and on parent evaluations of the teacher than parent assistance at the school or general school-to-home communication", (p115). This gave some parents confidence and made them feel that their help is needed which could be central to participation with parents who are unable to attend the preschool during regular opening times. Although Epstein's research was completed in 1985 the findings may be just as relevant today in highlighting the benefits of asking for parents to help at home which leads to a continuity of activities between the early years setting and the home. Bridge (2001) also puts forward the notion that due to the number of demands on parents current models of parental participation, which see parents and children working together in preschool settings, are outdated and unworkable.

*“There is a need to derive new models of parental involvement in preschools that focus on children’s learning and that take account of parents, in particular mothers’, lives both inside and outside the home.” (Bridge, 2001, p9)*

One such new approach was used in Bridge’s study of Bell Preschool, a private preschool setting. In Bell Preschool the relationships between parents and staff are built around cooperation and staff aim to fit into what parents wanted rather than parents trying to fit into what the staff had offered. Bell Preschool uses the High Scope Curriculum to guide its learning activities. In relation to parents the High-Scope curriculum states that ‘parental involvement should be dynamic to accommodate the needs a changing group of parents’ (Bridge, 2001, p10). Parents were encouraged to help their children design action plans at home concerning the preschool curriculum. Observations by staff and the joint planning between the parents and children concluded that there had been an increased and improved parental involvement in children’s learning at Bell Preschool. The results included children successfully completing more of their planned activities, and activities being continued in the home as well as the play school so that important links between learning at the preschool and in the home were established. Another important result was the reduced feminine influence at Bell Preschool as fathers were increasingly involved in the children’s activities in the preschool.

*“On account of planning by parents and children, the nature of parental involvement at Bell Preschool changed. Parental involvement no longer existed entirely through a staff directed curriculum, but also through a child-and parent-directed curriculum. The curriculum partially moved from being located inside the preschool to outside and into children’s real lives.” (Bridge, 2001, p14)*

Planning by parents also allowed children acknowledge the value of their family life and the learning that occurs in the home. Parents were not asked to take on any additional roles but were still involved in their children’s preschool and their children’s learning processes despite not being physically present in the classroom. Bridge (2001, p20) claims that partnership with parents is most beneficial when it creates and facilitates links between the classroom and the child’s home life which is similar to the

idea for parent engagement presented by Elliot and can be grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (2002).

### **3.9 Summary**

There is much evidence to support the importance of parent's participation in their child's preschool setting. There are benefits for all stakeholders such as continuity in the curriculum and the development of joint references between home and the preschool setting. Despite the over whelming support for partnership with parents there is also evidence to suggest that it is more of an 'ideal' rather than a 'reality'. While there are some examples of partnership, overall there is little empirical evidence to suggest that partnerships between parents and childcare providers or parental involvement are widespread phenomena. The barriers to partnership with parents and the various explanations given for low levels of partnership point to the complexities of developing such a relationship between parents and childcare staff. Communication is an important aspect of partnership and of the parent-staff relationship yet evidence suggests that there are low levels of satisfaction with levels of communication from both parents and staff. The importance of negotiation for parents and staff to reach a shared-meaning has been established as a strategy for effective two-way communication and is something, which may merit further exploration. There is little research examining partnership in an Irish context and also very little research based on the views of Irish parents. It has already been established that parents have no platform to express their views and this has been acknowledged by the White Paper on Early Education as having a negative impact on childcare policy. It is particularly important to assess the needs and desires of working parents who have less time to devote to developing partnerships with childcare providers, even though they may use childcare more extensively than parents using sessional care. Both internationally and in an Irish context there has been very little research examining the views working parents and their relationship with their childcare providers.

# **Chapter 4**

## **Methodology**

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research methods used in the project. There are two stages of data collection in this project, non-participant observations and self-reported questionnaires. Both parents and staff have answered questionnaires for the study and this in addition to a multi-method approach helped ensure data collaboration. As well as outlining the research design of the study the sampling framework for the study is considered. The National Childcare Census (2001) was chosen as the sampling framework as it provided a geographically representative target population. Using the census a sample of parents using full-time childcare for children aged 0-3 from the Dublin area was chosen. Analysis of the data is discussed and the differences in quantitative and qualitative data analysis are considered. The main tool used for quantitative analysis used in this study is the computer software package, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and the main statistical tests used in SPSS are outlined. Finally the limitations of the methodology used as well as possible implications for the findings are discussed.

## 4.2 Ethical considerations

This study complies with the research ethical guidelines of the Sociological Association of Ireland (2002) and the ethical guidelines set out by the Dublin Institute of Technology. The guidelines state that the researcher should safeguard the interests of the research participants and recognise any conflicting concerns, which may arise. It is the responsibility of the researcher to explain to the participants in terms meaningful to the participant all aspects of the research project. Research participants should have their anonymity and privacy respected and personal information should be kept confidential. Any guarantee of anonymity or confidentiality should be strictly adhered to. In certain cases, as is the situation in the project, access to a research setting is gained through a 'gatekeeper'. In this study the staff of the early years' service are the 'gatekeepers'.

*"In such cases, members should adhere to the principle of obtaining informed consent directly from the research participants to whom access is required, while at the*

*same time taking account of the gatekeepers interest.”*  
*(Sociological Association of Ireland, 2002, p4)*

According to Greig et al. (1999) gatekeepers can be extremely helpful and good communication with them was a prerequisite to a successful study. An important aspect of this study was gaining the trust of participants and guaranteeing confidentiality. It was particularly important that parents understand that any information they give will not be shared with their early years' service. Each questionnaire had a stamped addressed envelope attached so the participant could send it directly to the researcher and avoid contact with their early years' service.

### **4.3 Methodology**

According to Sarantakos (1998) two major methodologies have emerged in the social sciences, quantitative methodology and qualitative methodology, each containing unique theoretical and methodological principles. Quantitative research views reality as objective, simple, positive and consisting of only one truth.

*“Quantitative research is, as the term suggests, concerned with the collection and analysis of data in numeric form” (Blaxter, 1996, p60)*

Qualitative research offers an alternative to quantitative research and may be considered less distinct or explicit than quantitative research (Sarantakos, 1998). Qualitative research is largely the non-numeric collection of data, which focuses on exploring in more detail a smaller number of examples and aims to achieve 'depth' rather than 'breadth' (Blaxter, 1996, p 60). The aim of the research is to understand the participants and not just to measure them. According to Sarantakos it is a holistic approach which aims to understand the whole phenomenon under study 'as a complex system that is more than the sum of its parts' (1998, p47). This study relies primarily on qualitative methodologies but there are also quantitative elements included in the study. According to Sarantakos (1998) quantitative elements are often considered as a complement to and supplement qualitative research and this is true of how quantitative elements are used in this study.

## 4.4 Design of research

### 4.4.1 Introduction

This study consisted of a two-stage research process. The first stage was non-participant observations and the second stage is a self-administered questionnaire. However, a number of other research methods were also considered for this study, in particular the case study method. Case studies are a qualitative methodology and are ideal when holistic in-depth investigation is required. Case studies allow the researcher to concentrate on a specific incident or situation and ‘attempt to identify, the various interactive processes at work’ which may be hidden in large-scale surveys (Bell, 1993, p8).

*“The successful study will provide the reader with a three-dimensional picture and will illustrate relationships, micropolitical issues and patterns of influences in a particular context.” (Bell, 1993, p9)*

Maykut and Morehouse (1994) describe the case study results as frequently being presented as a rich narrative. The issue of generalisation is a frequent criticism of case studies. Obviously the sample for a case study is small and findings may not be representative. This was one of the reasons that a case study approach was not chosen for this study. In particular the issue of the lack of research concerning partnership in an Irish context was considered and the implications that a larger sample would have on validation of the results. Instead non-participant observations were used for the preliminary data collection and self-answered postal questionnaires were the method of data collection used in this study.

### 4.4.2 Non-participant observations

The term ‘observation’ is usually used to refer to a method of data generation that involves the researcher immersing themselves ‘in a research setting and systematically observing dimensions of that setting’ such as relationships, interaction and events as they occur (Mason, 1996, p61). The use of observation in the social sciences has a long tradition especially as a technique used by psychologists and

educational researchers (Punch, 1998). Goffman is an early proponent of observational techniques.

*“Goffman, who described his method as ‘unsystematic naturalistic observation’ in order to study how people interact, form relationships, accomplish meaning in their lives...” (Punch, 1998, p184)*

Goffmans’ notion of ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ illustrates how people present themselves differently in front of other people and in a public setting (Hall & Hall, 1996, p225). Thus Goffman relied on unstructured and naturalistic methods while observing in order to discover the true nature of human relationships. Baszoner and Dodier (1997) state that observational methods help to ground phenomena observed in the field and from this phenomena deduce empirical data.

*“This is undoubtedly what Durkheim really meant by his well-known injunction to ‘treat social facts as social things’ meaning not so much that sociology should be conducted along the same lines as the natural sciences but as a way of distinguishing it from philosophy and the introspection that takes place upstream of an empirical approach.”*  
*(Baszanger & Dodier, 1997, p9)*

The methodology of observation allows for the in-depth study of process, relationships among people and events, patterns and the immediate social context in which these events occur.

#### **4.4.3 Relevance of observation to this project**

The first stage of the research to be undertaken in this project was non-participant observation in a range of early childhood service venues. The information collected during the observations was used to influence the content and direction of the second stage of data collection, the non-participant questionnaires. Non-participant observation is particularly appropriate for exploratory studies. Jorgenson (1989, p13) outlines six minimal conditions that make non-participant observation most appropriate for data collection.

1. The main concern of the research problem is the meaning of human interactions.

2. The phenomenon being investigated occurs in an everyday life situation.
3. The researcher can gain access to this setting.
4. The phenomenon is limited in size and in location so that it can easily be observed.
5. The study questions are appropriate material for a further case study.
6. The research problems can be addressed by qualitative data such as that obtained from observation.

The research that is proposed in this study meets with these six minimal conditions. It is an exploratory study, which intends to collect data on the parents' views, ideas, concerns, desires and needs in the area of early childhood services. The study will be limited in size as it is restricted to parents of children between zero and three who avail of full-time childcare. The study is restricted in location, as it will be confined to a small number of childcare settings where full-time services are provided. Jorgenson (1989) also states that observation is a process of inquiry, which is open-ended and constantly is in need of redefinition. This is most appropriate for this study, as the rationale for using observation at this stage of the data collection is to reveal some of the characteristics of the relationship between parents and service providers. It will also be useful in identifying issues to be explored during the questionnaire stage of data collection.

In non-participant observation the role of the researcher is that of a detached observer. This is a qualitative unstructured approach to research thus the researcher does not use pre-determined categories and classifications, but makes observations in a natural open-ended manner (Punch, 2000). The behavior is observed in a stream of naturally happening events without any interference from the observer. Punch (1998) uses the analogy of a 'funnel' when describing observational data collection where focus and structure emerge during fieldwork. The research becomes progressively more focused as the research continues and the scope eventually becomes more clarified. According to Punch (2000) this kind of unstructured data collection can focus on a pattern of behavior in a more holistic manner than a structured observation technique. Hayes (1993) advises that in order to do this we must establish ourselves as unobtrusively as possible so that the human interactions we are observing will take place in a natural way. The researcher also needs to objectively observe, record, interpret and react to (or ignore) what is happening during the observation.

*"We must adjust our natural tendency to select particular aspects and reject others."  
(Hayes, 1993, p40)*

It is necessary to begin the observation with an open mind and allow the observational data emerge during the analysis rather than being imposed from the start. Mason (1996, p68) rejects the notion that it is possible to produce 'a full and neutral account of a setting or a set of interactions' based upon observation. The researcher needs to be aware of their selectivity and perspective and must have at least some sense of what they are looking for in the setting. This type of self-assessment needs to be continued throughout the research process.

#### **4.4.4 Initial data collection; findings from observations**

Observations were carried out as part of the pilot data collection for the project and the results were used to inform further data collection and to direct the focus of the questionnaire. The researcher visited three early years' services in a three-month period, all located in Dublin city. The first service was a work place nursery, the second service was located in a third level college and the third service visited was a community service located in a designated disadvantaged area. Each service was visited twice, once during morning-drop off times and once during evening-pick up times.

Non-participant observation dictates that the researcher has no involvement with the research participants and the researcher did not speak to the parents or children throughout the observations. The researcher was not introduced to parents or children at any time during the observations but did speak with staff, which was essential as the staff were gatekeepers to the research setting. This was not at the researcher's request but was at the discretion of the staff. It appeared that many of the research participants were familiar with and had already experienced non-participant observation in their early years' service, as they did not seem to mind the researcher's presence. A number of general issues emerged during the observations. On average the parents spent between two and ten minutes in the service during the morning drop off times and slightly longer during the evening pick up time. There was a slightly larger majority of mothers than fathers collecting and dropping off their child. This was more pronounced in the community service. Parents appeared to be particularly rushed during the

morning. There did not appear to be very much time for communication between parents and staff in the morning and the parents spent the majority of time settling the child before they left. There appeared to be more communication between staff and parents in the evenings. Topics of conversation mostly focused on the child and in particular eating and sleeping patterns as well as potty training. Some parents were friendlier and appeared to have a less formal relationship with staff than other parents and talked about more personal issues. In the workplace nursery parents seemed to spend more time talking to each other than in the other services. This may be due to the fact that they may already know each other from work.

As well as conversations other types of communication observed included notice boards and signs on the doors informing parents of supplies needed such as nappies etc. were observed. One service did keep a written journal for one child, which was also used by parents when the child was not at the service. The reason for this was because the child had special needs. Only one service had a parent room and the researcher observed that parents were using it on both visits to the service. The main use appeared to be for feeding their children. The general issues that emerged for further exploration were;

- What type of activities would parents like to participate in?
- Do staff welcome parents in to the early years' service?
- How comfortable do parents feel spending time at the early years' service?
- Do parents make use of the parents' room?
- Are staff and parents happy with the current levels of communication that exist?
- Are there differences between the levels of partnership across service type?
- Do parents have time for partnership?
- Are staff qualifications important to parents?
- How is the early years' service meeting the needs of working parents?
- Do staff and parents want a partnership?

The issues arising from the observations contributed to the direction of the study. The information gathered in the observations was used to format the questions in the questionnaires and to direct the focus of the questionnaire. The observations were used

in conjunction with the original research questions and the whole process was informed by the relevant literature in constructing the questionnaire.

#### **4.4.5 Questionnaire**

The questionnaire is the main method of data collection used in this study. According to Sarantakos (1998) surveys or questionnaires are the most frequently used method of data collection in the social sciences. One of the main benefits of the questionnaire method is that the data is collected with limited interference in the respondent's life. Other strengths of the questionnaire method include the fact that it offers a stable consistent way of measuring data without variation and offers a wider geographical coverage than other methods.

The self-answering questionnaire method of data collection, which is used in this study, can enhance the reliability and validity of the study in a number of ways. It offers anonymity to the respondents and provides a uniform and consistent method for data collection. It can produce quick results and the questionnaire can be answered at respondents convenience. It offers less opportunity for bias which may occur in other methods of data collection due to the presence of researcher when the data is being collected. This method also allows the researcher to approach the respondents more easily than other methods of data collection stable (Sarantakos, 1998).

Limitations of the questionnaire method include partial response rate due to lack of supervision and no possibility of the researcher prompting the respondent or clarifying information for the respondent. Also the language of the questionnaire may not be appropriate and accessible for all respondents.

In this study a self-completion style questionnaire was used to collect data from both parents and staff. The structure of the questionnaire focused on relatively straightforward objective information, which was readily amenable to quantitative analysis. Also included in questionnaire were opinion type questions and open ended allowing respondents to expand in their own words. According to Sarantakos (1998) all questionnaires should contain three main elements; a cover letter, instructions and the main body. The cover letter should address the main objectives and social significance of the study, information about the researcher, assurances of confidentiality and

anonymity and information relating to requirement for completion such as maximum time. The cover letter has been recognised as one of the main factors influencing the response rate of a survey. In this study instructions were given in the cover letter briefly and throughout the questionnaire (See Appendix A).

There were a number of different types of questions contained in the main body of the questionnaire. The structure of the questionnaire in this study was similar to that of the mixed format as described by Sarantakos (1998). The questions appear in a pattern logically related to the project with each section shifting from the general to the specific. The types of questions included in this study include factual questions, opinion questions and open-ended questions. The opinion questions include ladder scales where respondents are asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with a statement from strongly agree to disagree. Open ended questions were also used and according to May (2001) these types of questions give respondents more freedom to answer questions in a way that suits their interpretations. They may offer information in areas, which have not been predicted by the researcher. Each questionnaire contained a stamped addressed envelope so the respondent could return it anonymously and directly to the researcher. Prior to sending out the questionnaires a pilot survey was conducted.

#### **4.4.6 Pilot study**

The pilot questionnaire has been informed by the literature review and by the data collected from the observations. After completing the observations it was decided by the researcher to survey staff as well as parents to compare the similarities and the differences in their views concerning partnership. Of particular importance in the design of the questionnaire was a Scottish study of partnership in early years' settings conducted by Howe et al. (2001).

A sample of five parents and five staff from two different early years' services, a private and a community supported service, completed the pilot survey. The purpose of the pilot survey was to determine whether or not the questionnaire would be easily accessible for all parents and to identify ambiguities and overlap in questions. Results from the pilot survey revealed that some of the questions needed to be reworded so that respondents could understand them as intended and more space was required for certain

questions. Some members of the pilot group were concerned about the amount of detail respondents were expected to give and felt this was a disincentive to answering the survey. In general however the feedback from the parents who completed the survey was positive. As a result of the feedback changes made to the questionnaire included shortening of questionnaire, less open ended questions, removal of all questions not directly related to the parent-staff relationship or partnership and in general more clarity in the presentation of the questions (See Appendices D and E for finished questionnaires).

#### **4. 5 Sampling framework**

The sampling framework used in this study was the National Childcare Census. This lists the population of early years' services in Ireland and contains data on the number of childcare places available in each of the Dublin Regional Authority Areas. The Census contains the names and address of those facilities which responded and the type of care that they provided. This information was used as a means of contacting childcare institutions. There are however some limitations of using this as a sampling framework such as it may already be out of date as the information was collected in 2000 and some of the services included had already closed. However despite these concerns the census did provides a comprehensive list of early years' services in Ireland.

The target population for the survey was full time working parents, in the Dublin area, who have children, aged 0-3 and were using full time day care. This is what Descombe (1998) refers to as purposive sampling where the focus is on people who can illuminate the research question. To gain access to these parents it was decided to contact the early years' services using the information in the National Childcare Census. This allowed the researcher to also gain access to the staff of the same services. The staff are the gatekeepers of the early years' service and it was at their discretion that parents were contacted. A random sample of services, which provided full time services and was geographically representative, was picked. As the population was not very large all the names of the services were written on pieces of paper as described by Hinkle (1998).

*“We could record on slips of paper all the names of the population members, place the slips in a container, and mix the slips very well...and the names drawn would represent the simple random sample.” (Hinkle, 1998, p157)*

The Census divided Dublin into four separate areas and listed below are the number of full time childcare places and the number of those on the waiting list in each area. Using this information the researcher chose a sample from each area that was geographically representative. The sample also included private and community supported services but did not include publicly supported services. The researcher acquired the list of publicly supported services and a sample of these services was also included.

## **4.6 Data collection**

### **4.6.1 Initial contacts with the early years’ services**

Using the information from the National Childcare Census services in each of the four areas were contacted.

#### **South County Dublin**

There are 119 childcare facilities in this area according to the National Childcare Census, 65 sessional and 34 full daycare services. This represents approximately 15% of the total number of places in Dublin so therefore 15% of the sample for this study were also from this area. The service providers contacted were for the most part interested in completing the confidential postal survey however two declined to be involved.

#### **Dublin City Borough Area**

The number of early years’ service in this area is 302, which represents approximately 50% of the total childcare places in Dublin. There were 174 sessional facilities and 100 full day care childcare facilities. The target for this area was 34 services. Using random sampling techniques 38 services were contacted and 35 agreed to take part in the survey.

### **Dublin Fingal**

The number of childcare facilities in the area is 161 which represents approximately 15% of the total number of childcare places in Dublin. Of these 139 responded to the childcare census and 103 of these were sessional and 36 full-time childcare facilities. The target for this area was 10 (15%). Twelve services were contacted and 11 agreed to take part.

### **Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown**

The number of childcare facilities in this was 122 which represents approximately 20% of the total number of childcare places in Dublin. Of these 37 provide full time day care facilities. The target in this study for this area was 13 (20%) and 13 out of 14 services contacted by the researcher agreed to take part in this study.

#### **4.6.2 Sending out surveys and additional contacts with early years' services**

The surveys were sent to all services in January 2002. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of February all the services which had not returned questionnaires were contacted by telephone in order to establish whether or not they had received questionnaires and remind to return them as soon as possible. A follow up letter was sent to all services at the end of February to thank those who had returned the survey and to remind those who had not to return the questionnaire.

#### **4.6.3 Response rate**

The total number of questionnaires originally sent was 446.

In total 79 parents returned questionnaires. Of these 7 were fathers and 72 were mothers.

The original sample was 294 parents representing a response rate of 32%.

In total 48 Staff responded from 34 different crèches. Original sample was 152 staff from 80 services so the response rate was 32% of staff originally sampled.

Total response rate was 127 (79 parents and 48 staff), which is 32% of the original sample. The average rate of return for self-completing questionnaires is usually about 30 per cent and rarely higher than 40 per cent (McNeill, 1990).

## **4.7 Analysis of data**

### **4.7.1 Introduction**

The information collected contains both qualitative and quantitative data. In qualitative analysis data undergoes three steps before analysis (Sarantakos, 1998). The first step is data reduction. This helps identify the important issues, which have arisen and is done through summarising, coding and categorising the data. The second stage is data organisation where data is assembled around certain themes and information is categorised in more specific terms and the results are more clearly presented. The third stage is interpretation, which involves making decisions, identifying patterns and drawing conclusions concerning the data. The analysis of the quantitative data was completed on a computer using statistical analysis software called SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

### **4.7.2 Type of data**

Quantitative analysis of data requires that data be categorised according to scale of measurement. There are three main types of measurements of scales, which are applicable to the data collected in this project nominal, ordinal and interval. The distinction between the three different scales determines which types of statistical tests can be used for each scale.

1. Nominal- this is the simplest lowest form of data and is qualitative in nature. In order for data to be nominal categories must be mutually exclusive, distinct and uni-dimensional such as gender or occupation.
2. Ordinal- the data is categorized into groups and ranked in a continuum ranging according to magnitude. i.e. lowest to highest such as a position in a race. This is essentially a quantitative measurement and numbers have a mathematical meaning.
3. Interval scales are scales in which the number represents the magnitude of the difference. Foster (1998) uses the example of Celsius temperature to illustrate the interval scale where the difference between 10 and 20 is the same as the difference between 20 and 30. The Likert Scale is a common interval scale used in research.

The final scale of measurement is the ratio scale, which is not being used in this project.

The type of scale determines the type of statistical test, which is appropriate for the data. Parametric statistical tests can be used for interval or ratio scales of measurement. For ordinal data non-parametric tests should be used. The majority of tests to be used for the data analysis in this project were non-parametric tests and are outlined in Appendix F.

#### **4.8 Methodological limitations of current research.**

There are a number of limitations with the methods used in this study. The sampling method has a number of disadvantages. In particular staff decide which parents at their service complete the questionnaire which results in the gatekeeper effect. Staff bias may dictate that only the parents they perceive, as being likely to answer the questionnaire in a positive manner will receive it. This was most apparent during the initial contacts with the early years' services in the sample. Eleven of the services contacted did not want to take part in the study. The majority of these services claimed that the parents would not be interested in taking part in the study, however this decision was reached without any prior consultation with the parents. Another limitation is the fact that the researcher has no personal contact with parents and is therefore unable to clarify information or probe parents for further information. Also self-report measures may not capture the dynamic nature of the staff-parent relationship or parents' participation in the early years' service. It is hoped that surveying both parents and staff will help to overcome some of these limitations, as it will allow data comparison and clarification.

#### **4.9 Summary**

This study adheres to the Ethical Guidelines of the Sociological Association of Ireland and research participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. The research design for this study consists of a two-stage research process and contained elements of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The first stage was non-

participant observation, which involved the researcher becoming a detached observer in the research setting. Non-participant observations were carried out in three different early years' services and the issues arising for the observations informed the direction of the study. The main issues which emerged from the observations included; assessing if participants were satisfied with current levels of communication; assessing if participants actually wanted partnership; assessing if parents feel welcome in their early years' setting; asking parents if they have enough time for partnership with their early years' service and finally comparing and contrasting information from staff and parents. The information gathered in the non-participant observations and the issues that emerged together with relevant themes from the literature review were used to format the questionnaire. The questionnaire was a self-completion style questionnaire containing three question types, factual questions, opinion questions and open-ended questions. A pilot study was used to assess the feasibility of questionnaire. The sampling framework for the questionnaire was the National Childcare Census (2001). Using this a random sample was chosen which was geographically representative of full-time services in the Dublin area. This included a mix of private, community supported and publicly supported services early years' services. The initial contacts with these services was positive and the majority agreed to participate in the study. The final response rate for the study was 32%. There are two types of data analysis employed in the study. The first is for the analysis of the qualitative data, which is summarising, coding and categorising by the researcher. The quantitative data is analysed using the computer software program SPSS.

# **Chapter 5**

# **Presentation of**

# **Results**

## 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter the results of the parent and staff questionnaires are presented using qualitative analysis of descriptive data and quantitative analysis using SPSS. The chapter is divided into six sections each focusing on a different aspect of the relationship between parents and childcare providers. The first section presents background information provided by parents and staff concerning their early years' services. The next section contains information on the induction process for parents and children to their early years' service and illustrates how the relationship between parents and their childcare provider was initially established. This is followed by a more in-depth examination of parent and staff relations focusing on issues such as satisfaction with the relationship and communication. Section five of this chapter explores the opportunities that exist for partnership and respondents perceptions of partnership. Section six explores the role of early years' services in facilitating the role of working parents. Finally there is an exploration of parent and staff views of factors which help or hinder partnership. The response rate from the original sample of 446 questionnaires was relatively low at 32%, however according to McNeil this is average for a self-return postal questionnaire (see section 4.6.3). The majority of both the parent (79.8%) and staff (75%) respondents are from private early years services (see sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.3)

An interesting aspect of the data is that on analysis there are some differences between qualitative and quantitative answers in the study. In general more positive responses were given to quantitative questions where respondents were asked to tick the answer and not required to give any details. It appeared that the initial response of parents and staff was to give an overwhelmingly positive response to the questions in the survey. However the qualitative questions revealed that parents and staff were less happy with aspects of the relationship than they had indicated in their quantitative answers. For example in relation to satisfaction with the current level of information they received the vast majority of parents indicated they were satisfied. However their qualitative comments revealed the majority wanted to receive more information and this was one of the main aspects of the parent staff relationship that they would like to improve. Quantitative data suggests that parents and staff were highly satisfied with

their relationship yet the qualitative data suggest there are many areas of the relationship they would like to change.

## **5.2 Background information on families and staff**

### **5.2.1 Information about the child and parent**

Parents were asked questions concerning their children and the early years' service. The majority of parents (54) were using their early years' service for less than 2 years and 29 (39.2%) of parents were using the service for less than one year. For the majority of parents (49%) the child using the crèche was their first born child. Almost one third (31.6%) were the second child in the family and 10.1% were the third child. Eleven parents who responded had children aged less than 1 year. Twenty-four of the parents had children aged between 1-2 years and 34 parents had children aged between 2-3 years. Ten parents had children aged between 3 and 3 ½ years old. Parents were also asked about their gender and seventy-two of the respondents were mothers and seven of the respondents were fathers. Finally parents were asked if they were parenting alone and 18(22.8%) parents stated they were lone parents and 61 (77.2%) said that they were not.

There were three categories of early years' services from which parents responded and the frequencies were as follows.

Private provision 63 (79.8%)

Community supported provisions 3 (3.8%)

Publicly funded provision 13 (16.5%)

The majority of parents were using private services, which was broadly representative of the initial sample of early years' services contacted.

### **5.2.3 Information about staff**

48 staff responded from 34 different crèches. There were three categories of services from which they responded and the frequencies were as follows.

Private provision 36 (75%)

Community supported provisions 4 (8.3%)

Publicly funded provision 8 (16.7%).

The researcher requested that staff working with children aged 0-3 years complete the staff questionnaire. Those who responded were divided into three categories. The majority (68.8%) of respondents were managers, while non-managerial staff accounted for 27.1% and owners for 4.2%. The average length of time staff respondents have worked in childcare was 3.94 years. The median was 3 years and the mode was 3 years.

### *Staff Qualifications*

In relation to childcare qualifications 43 (89.6%) staff who responded had a childcare qualification and 5 (10.4%) did not. There were five types of qualification listed by staff in the questionnaire, which included Certificate, Diploma, Degree and the National Council of Vocational Awards (NCVA)<sup>5</sup>. The most frequently mentioned type of qualification was a diploma which was held by 19 (39.6%) staff respondents, 13 (27%) had a Certificate, 8 (16.7%) had a National Council of Vocational Awards qualification and 4 (8.3%) had degrees.

### *Types of training for working with parents*

The majority of staff (63%) had not undergone any training for working with parents and 37% stated that they had specific training. Staff were asked to describe the type of training that they had undertaken. Nine respondents from private early years' service gave some description of the parent training that they received. Seven of these mentioned communication in relation to parent training and two of these mentioned management as part of their specific training for working with parents. Another staff respondent cited a customer care course. One respondent mentioned doing parent training as part of an IPPA course, which included parents needs. This was the only staff member to mention the specific needs of parents.

Three staff from the community and public sector described the types of parent training they underwent. None of these directly mentioned communication. One mentioned they had received specific training in working with parents as part of Early Start training with the Department of Education and as part of this parental involvement was covered. This was the only staff member to mention parental involvement as part of their training

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<sup>5</sup> The National Council of Vocational Awards (NCVA) were responsible for monitoring national standards in vocational training and were replaced by FETAC in 2002. The respondents in the survey had completed level 1 and level 2 childcare courses offered by the NCVA over one and two year periods.

in working with parents. Finally a staff member from a community early years' service mentioned training in the Parents Plus programme.

#### **5.2.4 Significant relationships emerging in background information of families and staff**

Using the background information provided by staff and parents a number of crosstabulations were carried out to test the nature of relationships between variables.

The Spearman's rho test was used to provide an ordinal measure of association between two ordinal variables. According to Sarantakos (1998) Spearman's Rho ranks the order of the pairs of one variable to allow some degree of predication about the rank order of the other variable. In this study a significant relationship was found between type of early years' service used and whether or not the parent respondent was parenting alone. Using the non-parametric test, Spearman's rho reveals that there is a significant relationship the p value was 0.034,  $p < .05$ , which is significant. See Appendix G, Table 5.2.1.

In relation to staff information a number of non-parametric tests were also carried out to establish the existence of relationships between variables. Pearson's chi-square is used through-out the study to compare empirical frequencies for nominal values. According to Sarantakos (1998) chi-square tests provide information on whether two variables are related to each other and 'whether the value considered to be typical and generally expected' (p405).

Pearson's chi-square revealed a significant relationship between service type and type of qualification gained. None of the respondents working in the private sector reported having a degree. N was 44, the value of the statistic was 16.770 and the p value was 0.010, which is significant so therefore there is a positive relationship between crèche type and qualification type. See Appendix G, table 5.2.2.

There was a significant relationship found between type of early year service worked in and length of employment. N was 48, the value of the statistic 39.637 and P value was 0.009, (see appendix table G, 5.2.3). Using Pearsons Chi-square there was no correlation found between position in the early years' service and whether or not staff

members had a qualification. N was 44, the value of the statistic was 3.137 and P value was 0.208 which shows there is no correlation. (See Appendix 7 table 5.2.4). There was also no relationship between position in the early years' service and type of qualification gained; N was 48, the value of the statistic was 6.796 and the P value was 0.340. (See Appendix 7 table 5.2.5).

There was no correlation found between type of early years' service and whether or not staff had a qualification when using Spearman's rho. P value was 0.184, which is not significant. (See Appendix 7 table 5.2.6).

There was no correlation found between type of early years' service and whether or not staff had specific training in working with parents. N was 18, the Pearson chi-square statistic value was 1.607; the difference was 2 and the asymp. Sig. (2-sided) value was 0.587.

### **5.3 Starting at the early years' service**

#### **5.3.1 Introduction**

To investigate how the relationship between the parent and childcare provider was initially established parents and staff were asked questions regarding the introduction of parents and children to the early year service. Respondents were asked to give a descriptive account of the introduction process and were also presented with a number of statements relating to starting at early years' service and asked which statements best reflected their views.

#### **5.3.2 Parents description of being introduced to their early years' service.**

Many of the parents (28) described how they and their child were gradually introduced to the early years' service by spending a couple of hours there before the child started full time. A number said that the parents were encouraged to stay while others were encouraged to phone regularly or call back whenever they wanted.

*"We were brought in and we met everybody. The daily routine of our child was discussed and we left and came back after two hours, we did this for three days."*

*Parent, 52.2 Private*

*“The introduction was excellent, we spent a morning together getting accustomed to the area. I left for an hour and then returned to pick him up” Parent, 8.1 Private.*

Others described being shown around the service by staff and being introduced to other staff and children. Variations included allowing the child attend for mornings for two weeks free of charge until the child had settled which the parent seemed to greatly appreciate. Three parents stated that knowing other parents using the service meant they did not require a long introductory period to the service. While the majority of responses were positive one parent did have a negative experience of starting at the service.

*“The crèche just wanted you to leave the child with them and asked you to leave. My child did not settle well so we reduced the time to mornings for few weeks then increased it. However I was lucky I was on maternity and was able to do this” Parent, 18.1 Private*

Not allowing parents to stay presented problems for this parent who was clearly not happy with the settling in period. In relation to written material being provided only four of the parents mentioned receiving it as part of the introduction process. Respondents were given a number of statements and asked to indicate which best reflected their views. A summary of parents views are presented in Table 5.1.

**Table 5.1. Parents views of starting at their early years’ service**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree
I felt comfortable spending time at the service when my child was settling in.	39 (49.4%)	31 (39.2%)	9 (11.4%)	0
My child is happy to attend	50 (63.3%)	28 (35.4%)	1 (1.3%)	0
There is adequate provision for under threes	35 (44.3%)	35 (44.3%)	8 (10.1%)	1 (1.3%)
I believe the provision offers value for money	31 (39.2%)	31 (39.2%)	10 (12.7%)	7 (8.9%)
I receive enough information regarding my child’s progress	41 (51.9%)	28 (35.4%)	3 (3.8%)	7 (8.9%)

Parent results. N= 79

### **5.3.3 Staff description of introductions to the early years' service.**

Staff were asked to give a descriptive account of the induction period for the parent and child to the early years' service and indicate their views on the issue.

Twenty-four of the staff stated that parents are shown around or given some sort of a tour of the early years' setting. Thirty-three mentioned a settling in or an integration period during which the child was left for short periods of time. In relation to whether or not parent were encouraged to stay at this time some staff members said that parents were welcome to stay as long as they liked.

*"The parents are advised to come in and stay with the child for as many visits as required to provide the child with the security and awareness of the crèche, its layout, the staff and to see other parents coming/going reassuring them that they will be collected when left by parents." Staff, Private 19.6*

Two staff said parents were encouraged to stay only on the first day and not encouraged to stay during subsequent visits. One staff member stated that it was preferred if parents did not stay while the child was settling-in. While a number mentioned that parents were introduced to staff at this time only one staff member mentioned that during the induction period parents were encouraged to get to know other parents, children and staff in the early years' service.

*"They encourage parents to settle the child and to get to know the staff and other children and parents" Staff, Private 31.5*

One staff mentioned giving parents written material as part of the induction process. No staff respondent from the private early years' services mentioned an open day while two from the community sector mentioned them as part of the introduction. One respondent from a public service stated that a home visit by staff was part of the introduction process for parents and children to the crèche.

Staff were asked to indicate their views on three statements all related to starting at the early years' service and the results are summarised in table 5.2.

**Table 5.2. Staff views of starting at their early years' service**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree
Parents are encouraged to spend time at the service when their child is settling in	28 (58.3%)	12 (25%)	5 (10.4%)	3 (6.3%)
Mothers and fathers are made feel welcome	39 (81.3%)	8 (16.7%)	1 (2.1%)	0
There is adequate provision for under threes	35 (72.9%)	10 (20.8%)	3 (6.3%)	0

*Staff results. N = 48*

### **5.3.4 Comparing staff and parent views on starting at the early years' service**

In order to compare and contrast the staff and parents responses to statements which best reflected their views of starting at the early years' service Mann-Whitney tests were carried out on their individual responses. According to Sarantakos (1998) this test is suitable this test is suitable 'for answering questions about whether or not two samples have the same distribution' (p417). It is a non-parametric test and requires two-independent samples which is appropriate for the comparison of parent and staff views in this study (see Appendix F).

In relation to mothers and fathers feeling welcome at the early years' service a difference in the scores of the two independent samples was found and the P value was 0.013. The mean for the parents was higher which means that more parents than staff agreed with this statement.

There was also a significant difference in scores in relation to the question on adequate provision for under threes. P value was .003. The mean for the parents was higher therefore more parents than staff agreed with this statement that there was adequate provision for under-threes.

## 5.4 Parent-staff relationships in early years' services

### 5.4.1 Introduction

Various aspects of the parent staff relationship were examined including communication between staff and parents and their views of their relationship with each other.

### 5.4.2 Satisfaction with the parent staff relationship

Parents and staff were asked if they were satisfied with the parent staff relationship. The majority of parents 74 (93.7%) were satisfied with the relationship that they have with staff and 5 (6.3%) parents claimed that they were not satisfied. The majority of staff 46 (95.8%) responded that they were satisfied with the relationship they have with parents and 2 (4.2%) said that they were not satisfied with the relationship.

### 5.4.3 Staff and parent relations at the early years' service

Respondents were given a number of statements in relation to the parent-staff relationship and asked to tick which statements best reflected their views. Tables 5.3 and 5.4 respectively summarise the parents and staff views of the parent-staff relationship.

Table 5.3 Parents views of parent and staff relations

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree
Staff accept the values that I have as a parent	36 (45.6%)	34 (43%)	9 (11.4%)	0
I trust staff to make good decisions concerning my children	40 (50.6%)	36 (45.6%)	3 (3.85%)	0
Staff are easy to approach if there is a problem	41 (51.9%)	35 (44.3%)	2 (2.5%)	1 (1.3%)
Staff training is very important	60 (75.9%)	17 (21.5%)	2 (2.54%)	0
Staff are readily available to parents before each session starts	36 (45.6%)	27 (34.2%)	10 (12.7%)	6 (7.6%)
Staff are readily available to parents at the end of each session	34 (43%)	31 (39.2%)	9 (11.4%)	5 (6.3%)
Communication between staff and parents shows respect and trust	51 (64.6%)	26 (32.9%)	2 (2.5%)	0
I generally meet the same staff	42 (53.2%)	34 (43%)	1 (1.3%)	2 (2.5%)

N=79

The majority of parents responded positively and either strongly agreed or agreed with the statements as presented. Parents felt very strongly about the importance of staff

training with strong agreement from 76% of parents and there was also a strong agreement among parents that communication between staff and parents shows respect and trust. Statements where there was some disagreement were the availability of staff at the end and start of each session and also meeting the same staff on each visit to the crèche.

**Table 5.4 Staffs views of parent and staff relations**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree
Staff training is important	42 (87.5%)	4 (8.3%)	2 (4.2%)	0
Staff find it easy to approach parents if there is a problem	30 (62.5%)	12 (25%)	2 (4.2%)	4 (8.3%)
Communication between staff and parents shows respect and trust	45 (93.8%)	2 (4.2%)	1 (2.1%)	0
Staff are readily available to parents before each session starts	32 (66.7%)	11 (22.9%)	3 (6.3%)	2 (4.2)
Staff are readily available to parents at the end of each session	27 (56.3%)	17 (35.4%)	1 (2.1%)	3 (6.3%)
Parents find it easy to approach staff if there is a problem	34 (70.8%)	11 (22.9%)	2 (4.2%)	1 (2.1%)

N= 48

Similar to the parent responses, the majority of staff responded positively and either strongly agreed or agreed with the statements as presented. Again the only statements where there was some disagreement was the availability of staff at the start and end of each session (5). Another statement with which a number (4) of the respondents disagreed with staff finding it easy to approach parent if there is a problem. One respondent disagreed with the statement that parents find it easy to approach staff if there is a problem.

#### **5.4.4 Communication between staff and parents**

This section looks at how staff and parents communicate with each other including topics of conversation and when the main contacts occur.

All respondents were asked whether or not parents were welcome at the early years' service at anytime. Seventy-six (96.2%) parents said yes that parents were welcome at anytime and 3 (3.8%) disagreed with this view. A slightly smaller majority of staff 43 (89.6%) said that parents were welcome at the early years' service at any time and 5 (10.4%) said parents were not welcome at any time.

### ***Parents description of main contacts with staff***

The majority of the parents (45) said that the main contact with staff occurred when they left their child into the service or collected them from the service. Variations included main contact occurring with staff at organised staff and parent meetings and telephone calls during the day (see Table 5.5). In relation to phone calls many parents said that the early years' service only phoned when the child was unwell or there was some sort of problem and it was not a regular form of contact. Five parents mentioned how they felt that they could not spend time if they wished in the early years' service as they felt rushed or hurried out of the service.

In relation to topics of conversation at this time there was a great deal of homogeneity among parent responses with the majority reporting that topics of conversation were very focused on the child with issues relating to health, appetite development and sleeping patterns. A number of parents felt that the contacts with staff were lacking in two-way communication and they felt it was the responsibility of the parent to initiate conversation and ask questions about the child. A number of parents also seemed unhappy that these conversations were rushed due to lack of time and therefore the topics they that were covered were limited. One parent in particular stated that the only topic covered was whether or not the child misbehaved during the day.

### ***Staff description of main contacts with parents***

The majority of staff said that the main contact occurs with parents during the morning drop off times and the evening collection times. Four respondents described the main contacts occurring at times that were specifically set aside for parents such as a half-hour in the morning to facilitate parents concerns. One respondent described how a parent group meets once a month and another stated that parents occasionally stay for a day in the nursery. All of these respondents were from public and community services. In relation to the topics of conversation at this time the majority of the staff stated that they spoke about the child and the child's well being as well as general conversation such as the weather. This was very similar to the parent responses. A small number of staff said that the topics of conversation depended on how well the staff knew the parents. Staff also stated that parents asked them questions about the child's behaviour and development and staff often gave advice to parents. The response from the

community and public provision varied slightly in that staff stated that the main topics of conversation often centred around personal problems that the parents were having such as family breakdown.

#### 5.4.5 Information distribution at early years' services

Information on how parents and staff exchange information is summarized in table 5.5.

**Table 5.5 Types of Communication according to parents**

	Yes	No
News letter	29 (36.7%)	50 (63.3%)
Conversations at beginning and end of day	71 (89.9%)	8 (10.1%)
E-mail	1 (1.3%)	78 (98.7%)
Notice board	37 (46.8%)	42 (53.2%)
Telephone call	29 (36.7%)	50 (63.3%)
Written notes	45 (57%)	34 (43%)
Individual parent-staff meetings	15 (19%)	64 (81%)
Group parent meetings	7 (8.9%)	72 (91.1%)

N=79

The most frequently mentioned method of communication according to parents is the conversations at the beginning and the end of the day. This was followed by written notes (57%) and notice boards (46.8%). Over one-third mentioned telephone calls as a form of communication and individual parent-staff meetings were mentioned by 19% of respondents. One parent called for more communication between staff and parents and another said they would like to have 'take-home reports' from the service. One parent stated she would like a web-camera so that she could "log on to review the care at any time over the Internet".

**Table 5.6 Types of Communication according to staff**

	Yes	No
News letter	19(39.9%)	29 (60.45%)
Conversations at beginning and end of day	39 (81.3%)	9 (18.8%)
E-mail	0	48 (100%)
Notice board	29 (60.4%)	19 (39.6%)
Telephone call	32 (66.7%)	16 (33.3%)
Written notes	24 (50%)	24 (50%)
Individual parent-staff meetings	14 (29.2%)	34 (70.8%)
Group parent meetings	7 (14.6%)	45 (93.8%)

N=48

The main method of communication according to staff was conversations at beginning and end of day followed by telephone calls. Notice boards also appeared to be

frequently used with 29 (60%) staff citing it as a method of communication, this is higher than the frequency mentioned by parents.

#### ***Frequency of parent staff meetings***

In both sets of respondents over 60% said that there were no parent-staff meetings at their early years' service. According to 55(69.6%) parents their early years' service never held parent-staff meetings, 10 (12.7%) attended meetings twice a year and 8 (10.1%) attended meetings yearly. According to staff 29 (60.4%) never had parent meetings, 8 (16.7%) held yearly meetings and 5 (10.4%) held meetings twice a year.

#### ***Access to developmental records***

Forty-seven (59.5%) parents said that they have access to their child's developmental records and 32 (40.5%) said that they do not.

Forty-three (89.6%) staff stated that parents have access to their child's developmental records and 5 (10.4%) said that they do not.

### **5.4.6 Conflict between staff and parent views**

#### ***Parents perceptions of dealing with conflict***

A number of parents (22) stated that conflict has never arisen with staff at their early years' service. The majority (60%) of parents referred to discussions with staff and reaching a compromise in situations of conflict. Many referred to involving the manager or another third party in these discussions. Some parents felt that staff are very approachable and discussions lead to a joint agreement between staff and parents with the child's best interests at heart.

*"We usually discuss events that arise and find a joint approach that is best for the child" Parent, Private, 2.3*

A small number of parent's (10) were not happy with situations of conflict that had occurred in the past.

*"I have had conflict and basically I came out the worst, they were not open to listening to my view and it was very much the crèche were right" Parent, Private 19.1*

A small number of parents stated that if conflict occurs it is usually the staff whose views win out at the end and parents felt they are not listened to. One parent felt that parent had no choice except to concede to staff if they wanted to continue using that particular early years' service. However some parents (5) also felt that staff were too willing to concede to their requests to appease them even if it was not in the best interests of the child.

*"If a compromise is not reached the staff will agree to do whatever you request even if I do think it is only for peace sake and not because it is in the best interest of the child."*

*Parent, Private, 22.3.*

While some parents were not happy with their early years' service strategies for dealing with conflict the majority felt that staff were flexible and listened to parent's views.

#### ***Staff perceptions of dealing with conflict***

A small number (7) of respondents claimed that conflict never occurs with parents. Those who did describe strategies for dealing with conflict used terms such as compromise and respecting others views. Conflict was dealt with in a variety of ways including referring to the nursery policy handbook, discussing the conflict with a supervisor or the manager. A number of respondents mentioned holding a meeting to resolve the conflict.

*"I try to discuss my point and listen and I feel that parents should have the final say on the care of their child even if I disagree with it myself." Staff Private, 63.5.*

*"Parents views are always respected and acted upon unless totally in conflict with policies and procedures" Staff, Private, 40.5.*

Many staff stressed the importance of listening to parents and discussing the issues but a small minority felt that the parent's views did not always represent the best policy for the service. However the majority of staff respondents agreed that the parent's views came first unless they went against the policies and practice of the early years' service.

#### **5.4.7 The key worker system**

Fifty-two (65.8%) parents said that there was a key worker system at their early years' service and 27 (34.2%) said there was not. Twenty-five (52.1%) staff reported there was a key worker system at the early years' service they worked at while 23(47.9%) reported there was not a key worker system in operation.

Respondents who reported not having a key worker system were then asked if they would like one. Nineteen parents said they would like one and 14 said that they would not like one. Seven staff members were in favour of key-workers and 16 were not.

#### **5.4.8 Parents suggestions for change to the parent-staff relationship.**

A proportion of parents (12) said they were satisfied with the relationship and would not like it to change. Other parents did identify aspects of the relationship that they would like to change. The issue most frequently mentioned was the need for greater communication between parents and staff. Parents would like more regular feedback from staff and an increase in the number of parent-staff meetings. Another suggestion was more time to talk to staff at the beginning and end of each session.

*"I would like further information on a daily basis about activities. Information is vague. This would ensure continuity between crèche and home for parent/child"*

*Parent, Private 8.1*

*"I would like to feel I can ask questions regarding the girls when either I drop them or collect them" Parent, Private, 18.1.*

As well as having more time to talk to staff, parents also wanted to be able to talk to staff in privacy and one parent wanted a more honest relationship with staff. One parent felt that more information from staff would promote continuity of relationships between the early years' service and home and also parents should be provided with daily written accounts of the their child's activities. Other suggestions included meeting staff outside of the early years' service to facilitate discussion about the child with more privacy.

*"It would be nice to see them outside the crèche without David and be able to concentrate on his development occasionally" Parent, Private 22.3*

Parents also felt strongly about the issue of staff turnover and many said they would like to see less staff changes as this disrupts the relationship. Also some felt that there was not enough of an introduction to new staff members and it was difficult for parents to get to know them.

*“More contact with new members of staff and less loveable contact in front of parents”*

*Parent, Community, 81.1.*

This particular parent was uncomfortable with the contact the staff and child had when the parents were present and this is an aspect of the relationship they would like to change. However the most frequently mentioned aspect of the relationship that parents would like to change was in relation to enhanced communication between staff and parents.

#### **5.4.9 Staff suggestions for change to the parent staff relationship.**

A number of staff (8) are totally satisfied and would not like to change any aspect of the relationship. One staff respondent referred to the relationship with parents as a partnership. Similar to parent’s views on how they would like to change the relationship, communication was mentioned by a number of staff. Staff wanted more time to talk to parents, more meetings and structured contacts. Also staff wanted parents to ask more questions concerning their child and to seek more feedback from staff. Three staff respondents mentioned that a parent’s room would improve relations with parents.

*“I would like parents to ask questions about their child’s development. The only way the child is doing any work in the crèche is if they bring home any” Parent, Private, 6.5*

A minority of staff (9) are unsatisfied with the relationship and particularly the respect they receive from parents.

*“The attitude of parents. We explain our policy but some do not listen and verbally abuse us” Staff, Private, 19.5.*

*“Generally I feel a lot of parents don’t look at childcare workers as professionals and educated. They often look on it as a babysitting service. Good communication would solve that” Staff, Private, 8.5*

While some staff would like to spend more time with parents one felt that “if you had to talk to each parent each day it would be very time consuming”. Staff wanted to change the relationship in a variety of ways, the main ones being increased communication between staff and parents and more respect for the childcare professional’s role.

#### **5.4.10 Staff views on parents’ perception of their role as childcare workers**

Staff were asked whether or not parents value their role as childcare worker. Thirty-nine (81.3%) of staff said that parents did value their role as childcare worker, 3 (6.3%) said parents did not value their role and 6 (12.5%) felt that while some parents did value their role other parents did not.

Staff who felt that parents did value their role as childcare workers gave reasons such as parents asking their opinions on matters of child development and thanking them at the end of each day. Staff also felt that parents trusting them to look after their children showed that parents valued the role of the childcare worker. Other staff stated that they get praise and even gifts from parents on a regular basis as a show of appreciation.

*“They value your advice and the majority would put into practice advice we give them on their child” Staff, Public, 80.6.*

*“Parents do genuinely believe that our day is stressful and tiring and we feel greatly appreciated” Staff, Private, 40.5.*

A number of staff felt that while some parents did value their role as childcare worker other parents did not.

*“This is yes and no, as sometimes we are just some one who they pay to mind their children and what we do for them is not considered and sometimes they would tell you something nice and it makes it worthwhile” Staff, Private, 18.5 .*

*“Sometimes, some parents don’t understand the stress we are under we are always polite but some parents just take us for granted by leaving the child in when he is sick or collecting after we have closed” Staff, Private, 6.5.*

Some staff members felt that parents underestimated the role that childcare workers play in a child's development.

*“Parents should be more understanding towards staff and realise that their child is with them more than 8 hours a day and we know a lot to do with the way they grow.” Staff, Private, 18.5.*

*“Again parents don’t appreciate crèche staff as important and staff have a huge effect on children’s happiness and care. Parents need to realise this, we have formal training and a lot of patience and love for children. Treat us with respect we deserve it.” Staff, Private 56.5.*

Some staff felt that not all parents understood how stressful their job was and undervalue the role of childcare worker. A small number of staff felt that parents did not value the role of childcare worker.

*“They feel superior to staff, this is not just my opinion I have discussed it with others” Staff, Private, 56.4.*

*“I think it is a very under-rated job, we are after all teaching the next generation. I would like if the pay was better and not to be undermined.” Staff, Private, 6.5.*

Staff felt that parents viewed their role as childcare worker as an inferior position and did not give staff the respect they felt that they deserved.

### ***Parents views on valuing the role of staff***

A number of parents commented on how much they valued the role of staff as childcare workers. Ten parents expressed gratitude to staff for the role they play as childcare workers and one mother commented that she would be ‘lost without them’.

*"I have always felt very welcome and my views are accepted, we can talk to all staff members at any time. Children love the staff." Parent, Private, 40.1.*

*"As a first time mother I have found the staff to be very helpful and have given me great advice. My child got into a good routine since starting in crèche in regards to eating and sleeping" Parent, Private, 20.1.*

*"I am using the crèche for 3 years and I'm so grateful to all the staff as they helped me to raise my children and the good thing is that all the staff enjoyed doing it. Thank you." Parent, Public, 80.1.*

Nine parents commented that staff did not receive enough pay and appreciation for the work that they did and the government should be giving more assistance to well run services.

*"I think the training of staff is most important and trusting staff is important too." Parent, Private, 55.1.*

*"I believe that the carers are not valued for the contribution to working families. They can not be over paid/ appreciated for the work/role they undertake." Parent, Private, 48.1.*

Also in relation to wages of childcare staff one parents expressed concern because she felt that due to poor wages there was a of lack of staff at the service her child attended particularly in the baby room where one person was caring for six babies

#### **5.4.11 Comparing and contrasting respondents views of the parent-staff relationship**

In relation to parent data a significant relationship was found between service type and how often staff-parent meetings were organised using Spearmans rho. P value was 0.019. The P value for staff respondents was 0.02. When the parent and the staff data were combined there was a correlation between early years' service type and how often parent staff meetings were organised. The p vale was also 0.002. (See Appendix G,

table 5.4.1). Using nonparametric test there was no correlation found. See next paragraph and Appendix G, section 5.4.2.

When parent and staff data was combined, differences were found in relation to parents having access to developmental records. A significance difference was found and the P value was 0.000 using Mann-Whitney U tests. There was a difference between staff and parent responses in relation to the question of ways of making suggestions to staff. The P value was .038. There was no difference in the responses of staff and parents in relation to satisfaction with the relationship and the P value was 0.606. See Appendix G section 5.4.3.

## **5.5 Opportunities for partnership**

### **5.5.1 Introduction**

Parents and staffs views of partnership were examined as well as opportunities that exist for partnership within the early years' services.

### **5.5.2 Parent and staff views on parental participation**

Parents and staff were asked if in their opinion parents should participate in early years' services. The majority of parents believed that they should 66 (83.5%) participate and 13 (16.5%) said that they should not participate. The staff response was similar with 39 (81.3%) saying yes they should participate and 9 (18.8%) saying no. When parents and staff were asked if they were clear about the opportunities that exist for parental participation 28 (35.4%) parents said that they were and 51 (64.6%) said that they were not. A much greater number of staff, 39 (81.3%), said that they were clear about the opportunities that existed for partnership and 9 (18.8%) were not. Staff were also asked if they thought that parents were clear about the opportunities that exist for parental participation and 39 (81.3%) said that they were while 9 (18.8%) said they were not.

Parents and staff were asked to identify the person they perceived as responsible for deciding whether or not parental participation at their early years' service.

**Table 5.7 Person responsible for deciding if parents participate according to parents**

	Frequency	Percentage
Early years service owner	36	45.6
Early years service manager	24	30.4
Room supervisor	5	6.3
Other	1	1.3
Do not know	13	16.5

**Table 5.8 Person responsible for deciding if parents participate according to staff**

<b>Person who decides if parents participate</b>	Frequency	Percentage
Early years service owner	26	54.2
Early years service manager	17	35.4
Room supervisor	2	4.2
Other	3	6.3
Do not know	0	0

The majority of parents and staff identified the crèche owner as the person responsible for deciding if parents participated. This category obviously only applied to private provision. In relation to publicly supported service and community provision the majority identified the manager as the person responsible. One staff member and one parent identified the parent as the person responsible for deciding on parental participation.

Respondents were asked who in their opinion benefited from parental participation.

**Table 5.9 Parents' views of who benefits from parental participation**

	Yes	No
Children benefit	57 (72.2%)	22 (27.8%)
Parents benefit	67 (84.8%)	12 (15.2%)
Staff benefit	56 (70.9%)	23 (29.1%)

Parents identified parents as the stakeholder who would most benefit from parental participation. Over a quarter of parents felt that children do not benefit from parental participation and a similar percentage feel that staff do not benefit from parental participation.

**Table 5.10 Staffs' views of who benefits from parental participation**

	Yes	No
Children benefit	39 (81.3%)	9 (18.8%)
Parents benefit	42 (87.5%)	6 (12.5%)
Staff benefit	37 (77.1%)	11 (22.9%)

Staff also identified parents as the stakeholders who would benefit slightly more from parental participation, then children and then staff. More staff than parents felt that staff would benefit from parental participation and more staff felt that children would benefit from parental involvement.

***Parents views on partnerships.***

Parents' comments on partnership reflected both positive and negative perceptions. Some parents viewed partnership as positive with benefits for all stakeholders.

*"I think it is very important for all parents to participate in the crèche activities. Training to communicate with parents should be a big part of the childcare curriculum." Parents, Private, 42.2.*

*"I strongly feel we should have more interactions with the children, not only for 2 minutes in the morning and at the evening. Reading this questionnaire has brought up some ideas and I will start to see if I am allowed to interact more in the crèche and participate more in activities." Parent, Private, 31.1.*

Some parents claimed that they had not given partnership serious consideration and it is something they are willing to explore. Other parents viewed partnership as something positive but were unclear as to the benefits of partnership. Also parents viewed the presence of parents in the early years' service as something which could be problematic particularly for children.

*"If they would like to be involved maybe, but it is nice for the children to get stimulation from other people. I am not sure if all children would benefit if parents got fully involved in the crèche. Some children may not enjoy it as much as others if their parents were there." Parent Private, 40.1*

*“In my experience it is better if the crèche is totally responsible for the children, parents’ involvement brings special requests for their children with not much regard the other children in the crèche.” Parent, Private, 30.4.*

One parent commented that while partnership was essential it was over-rated. Some did view partnership as something positive to be used within limits while other parents were negative about the concept of partnership with their early years’ service.

*“I would be inclined to believe that the vast majority of parents given more ‘free’ time would spend it with their children outside the controlled environment of the crèche rather than becoming actively involved in crèche activities.” Parent, Private 33.3.*

One mother viewed partnership with her early years’ service as a way for her to voice her opinion on her child's care.

*“As a new parent I feel strongly about parents voices being heard concerning childcare, it is hard enough to go to work and leave a baby without having to worry about their development in the ‘crèche system’. The early years are so vitally important for their intellectual and social development.” Parent, Private, 16.1.*

This parent stresses the importance of parents being able to express their views and opinions. The parents’ comments as expresses in this survey reflect diverse views of partnership.

### ***Staffs’ views on partnership***

A number of staff commented on their perceptions of partnership with parents. A staff member from a community service claimed that they are aware of the benefits of partnership with parents and strive to include the parents as much as possible. Also a staff member of a publicly supported service stated that working with parents is a ‘crucial part and my work and its essential to work as a team, for the child to develop and enjoy our service’. Five staff commented that partnership with parents is an area, which requires more research and debate.

*"I feel a lot more thought must go into the parent staff area. It is not straightforward and needs compromise. No other job puts staff so much on the front line as it would if parents walked in and out. For some kids it is great, for others it is disruptive. At school the children understand better so I think it works well there." Parent, Private,*

39.6.

A small number of staff (8) expressed negative views of partnership with parents stating that children, staff and parents did not want to spend any extra time in their early years' service.

### **5.5.3 Parent and staff views on written policies**

Thirteen (16.5%) parents reported that there was a written policy on parental partnership and 66 (83.5%) said there was not a written policy on parental partnership at their early years service. Thirty-two parents said that they would like a written policy on partnership and 32 parents said that they would not. Contents of the written policy, according to respondents included information on meetings, parent's obligation such as what to bring into the early years' setting for the child and parents being welcome to call at any time. There appeared to be some differences in opinion among parents as to the value of a written policy. While one parent stated that all early services should be obliged to have one, another parent stated that they were unclear as to the benefits of having a written policy at all.

Thirteen (27.1%) of the staff said there was a written policy on partnership with parents at their early years service and 35 (72.9%) said there was not. Nineteen of the staff who did not have a written policy said that they would like one and 26 said they would not. The written policies included information on the illness policy for children, parental contracts, having an open door policy for parents and giving parents a 'do's and don't list to avoid misunderstanding'. Finally one staff member stated that she was not sure what the written policy entailed.

### **5.5.4 Type of activities parents participate in at their early years' service**

Parents and staff were asked to identify the types of activities that parents participated in at their early years' services. A wide range of activities was listed and respondents were given four possible answers as illustrated in the table.

**Table 5.11 Activities that parents participate in according to parents**

	<b>Have participated</b>	<b>Would like to</b>	<b>Not interested</b>	<b>No opportunity</b>
Helped with field trips	12 (15.2%)	26 (32.9%)	15 (19%)	26 (32.9%)
Assisted in fund raising	3 (3.8%)	16 (20.3%)	23 (29.1%)	37 (46.8%)
Observed class room activities	27 (34.2%)	19 (24.1%)	11 (13.9%)	22 (27.8%)
Shared meal/snack	14 (17.7%)	16 (20.3%)	20 (25.3%)	29 (36.7%)
Attended party or social event	44 (55.7%)	14 (17.7%)	8 (10.1%)	13 (16.5%)
Helped with class room activity	11 (13.9%)	23 (29.1%)	16 (20.3%)	29 (36.7%)
Served on parent council/board.	4 (5.1%)	11 (13.9%)	25 (31.6%)	39 (49.4%)
Carried out activity i.e. story telling	9 (11.4%)	15 (19%)	21 (26.6%)	34 (43%)
Planned their child's individual needs	31 (39.2%)	25 (31.6%)	6 (7.6%)	17 (21.5%)
Contributed to curriculum	6 (7.6%)	24 (30.4%)	17 (21.5%)	32 (40.5%)
Organised books or toy club	2 (2.5%)	14 (17.7%)	27 (34.2%)	36 (45.6%)
Served on management committee	2 (2.5%)	8 (10.1%)	29 (36.7%)	40 (50.6%)
Parental expertise is used at the crèche (music or art)	3 (3.8%)	11 (13.9%)	22 (27.8%)	43 (54.4%)

The most common activities that parents participated in according to parents were attending a party or social event, planning their own child's individual needs and observing class room activities. The least common activities parents participated in were serving on management committees, serving on a parent council, using parental expertise and assisting in fundraising. Parents were also given the option of choosing activities they would like to participate in. The most frequently mentioned activity that parents mentioned that they would like to participate in was helping with a field trip. The second most frequently mentioned activity that they would like to participate in was planning their child's individual needs and the third was contributing to the crèche curriculum.

Parents were asked also what activities they would not be interested in participating in and the most frequently mentioned were serving on a management committee, organising a book or toy club and serving on parents council or board. Only 6 (7.6%) parents stated they would not be interested in planning for their child's individual needs.

Parents were also asked if they had the opportunity to participate in the activities mentioned and the area that they had least opportunity to participate in was using parental expertise, followed by serving on the management committee and serving on a the parent council.

**Table 5.12 Activities that parents participate in according to staff**

	<b>Have participated</b>	<b>Would like to</b>	<b>Not interested</b>	<b>No opportunity</b>
Helped with field trips	34 (70.8%)	2 (4.2%)	1 (2.1%)	11 (22.9%)
Assisted in fund raising	9 (18.8%)	2 (4.2%)	2 (4.2%)	34 (70.8%)
Observed class room activities	23 (47.9%)	1 (2.1%)	7 (14.6%)	17 (35.4%)
Shared meal/snaek	11 (22.9%)	4 (8.3%)	7 (14.6%)	26 (54.2)
Attended party or social event	36 (75%)	1 (2.1%)	4 (8.3%)	7 (14.6%)
Helped with class room activity	17 (35.4%)	3 (6.3%)	6 (12.5%)	22 (45.8%)
Served on parent council/board.	5 (10.4%)	0	6 (12.5%)	37 (77.1%)
Carried out activity i.e. story telling	7 (14.6%)	0	8 (16.7%)	33 (68.8%)
Planed their child's individual needs	28 (58.3%)	3 (6.3%)	1 (2.1%)	16 (33.3%)
Contributed to curriculum	9 (18.8%)	2 (4.2%)	6 (12.5%)	31 (64.6%)
Organised books or toy club	5 (10.4%)	2 (4.2%)	5 (10.4%)	36 (75%)
Served on management committee	3 (6.3%)	0	6 (12.5%)	39 (81.3%)
Parental expertise is used	6 (12.5%)	5 (10.4%)	6 (12.5%)	31 (64.5%)

The table shows the frequency and in the brackets the percentage of respondents ticking each box.

According to staff the most frequent activity that parent participate in is attending a party or social event, followed by helping with a field trip and planning their child's individual needs. The least common activities that parents participate in are serving on management committees, serving on parent's councils and program planning. Overall the staff response rate in the 'parents would like to participate' category was very low with the highest response being 5 (10.4%) stating that parents would like to use parental expertise at their early years' service. Three of the activities mentioned, serving on a parent council, carrying out an activity and serving on management committee were not ticked by any of the staff respondents as activities that parents would like to participate in. Serving on a management committee, serving on the parents' council, organising book/toy clubs and carrying out activities such as story telling are the activities that parents have least opportunity to participate in according to staff.

### **5.5.5 Views on parent space in early years' settings**

Five (6.3%) parents said that there was a parent room in the service and 74 (93.7%) said there was none. The parents were then asked if they make use of the facility and 4 of the 5 parents who had a parents room were making use of the facility. Those that answered no were asked if they would like a parent room and 26 of the 73 said that they would. One parent commented that they did not see how useful a parents' room was for the children and considered it a waste of resources.

Staff were also asked about a dedicated space for parents and six (12.5%) staff reported that there was a parent room at the service while 42 (87.5%) said that there was no parent room at the service. Four of the staff from services which had a dedicated parents space felt that parents were making use of this space. Twenty-two staff respondents claimed that they would like a parents room or dedicated parents space in their service while 28 said that they would not like a parent room.

## **5.6 The role of early years' services in facilitating the role of working parents**

### **5.6.1 Parent's views of how their early years' service helps facilitate their role as a working parent**

Parents identified a number of ways in which their early years' service was helpful to them as working parents. Providing food and drink to their child was identified by seven parents as helpful. Giving parent's 'peace of mind' while at work and trusting staff to care for their children was mentioned by fifteen parents.

*"I trust them to look after my child, they all genuinely seem to love kids. They have the best interests of the child at heart" Parent, Private, 33.4.*

Other helpful factors mentioned were flexible hours and staff staying late if the parent gets delayed at work or in traffic. Early opening times and late closing times were cited as being helpful to parents work schedules. One parent mentioned that staff taking the child from the parents at the door of the service was very helpful. Communication was referred to by eight parents as helpful such as contacting parents at work if there was a

problem and providing parents with regular updates on their child's development. Parents finding staff easy to approach and giving parents a chance to talk was also mentioned as helpful.

*"They are great at keeping records and developmental stages, they video record the children in the crèche which allows me to see exactly what she does some days"*

*Parent, Public, 80.1.*

Regular updates and more innovative communication such as the video allow parents to share experiences the child has at their early years' service. Other things that parents viewed as helpful were providing their child with a stimulating environment. Also mentioned were services providing after-school care, which were helpful if the parents had older children. One parent stated that the illness policy of the service was flexible and resulted in the parents having to take less time off work, which was helpful.

*"Ensure my daughter is well cared for and stimulated in a loving environment by staff who take a personal interest in her development"* Parent, Private, 20.1.

*"They are like second mothers to my child"* Parent, Private, 85.1.

Staff expertise and being able to seek advice from staff was mentioned as helpful to working parents. One parent felt that having qualified staff at the service meant that staff are able "to deal with any problem without having to consult the parent every time". Other issues mentioned were the availability of outdoor play and bringing children to the park and other outings.

In relation to how their early years' service could be more helpful to working parents the majority of respondents mentioned they would like longer opening hours. Parents claimed that due to traffic problems there was a need for the services to open earlier and close later. More specifically one parent who was using a community service found it inconvenient that the service closed for one day a month and the parent was forced to make alternative arrangement. A specific issue mentioned by parents from a community early years' service was that the service did not allow children attend for the day if they were arrived late.

*"If you are one minute late you can not leave the child in. It is unfair on the child and on the parent as I can't go to work that day." Parent, Community, 77.1.*

Also mentioned by three parents was the fact that their services do not facilitate part-time working hours and the parents have to pay full-time rates regardless of how many hours a week the child spends in the service. Two parents claimed that this is the only reason they do not work part-time.

*"Cost is very prohibitive, need all of my salary for two kids. No option to work part-time as not available at our crèche. This is the only thing preventing me from working part-time." Parent, Private, 9.1.*

The high costs were also mentioned by a number of parents as a factor, which was unhelpful to them as working parents. Communication was referred to and some parents complained that staff did not take enough time to speak to parents or discuss issues in private.

*"It doesn't provide sufficient opportunities for me to discuss my child in private. It has put pressure on me to make my child fit into its timetable. i.e. potty training." Parent, Private, 2.3.*

*"When I leave my child and collect her I do feel that I am being rushed so that staff can get to work and get home" Parent, Private, 31.1.*

The illness policy was mentioned by five parents as something, which is unhelpful. In particular parents mentioned the difficulties of having to take time off work to look after children when they were ill or on medicine. Another issues mentioned by parents were services not accepting children under-two years of age.

### **5.6.2 Staff views of how their early years' setting helps facilitate the role of working parents**

The main way staff perceived their early years' service as facilitating the role of working parents was providing flexible closing and opening hours and occasionally

staying late if a parent got delayed. This was mentioned by fourteen staff respondents. Providing children with meals was mentioned by eight staff, particularly breakfast as staff viewed parents as being very rushed in the mornings. Also mentioned was allowing parents to call at any time and providing a welcoming atmosphere for parents. Giving advice to parents was referred to by two staff as helpful to working parents.

*“Open to parents calling in for a visit during the day. Help regulate sleep times of child if parents want more time with them in the evening or vice versa” Staff, Private, 63.5.*

*“High quality service, respect, flexibility, child-centred approach, needs based, trust, advice, supportive environment” Staff, Community, 76.5.*

Providing educational and developmental stimulation was cited by five staff respondents as helpful to working parents. After-school services were mentioned by three staff members as helpful and one staff, from the community sector, mentioned providing ‘accessible, affordable good quality childcare’ to working parents.

In relation to how their early years’ service was unhelpful for working parents, staff referred to topics such as the service’s illness policy. Also staff mentioned that some services closing on bank holidays and taking extra time off at Christmas was inconvenient, as was lack of parking facilities outside of the service. Also one respondent from a community service claimed that having a half-day on Friday was problematic for working parents.

## 5.7 Factors which help or hinder partnership

Parents and staff were asked to outline factors which in their opinion helped or hindered partnership between parents and early years' services. A range of factors were identified by both parents and staff.

### 5.7.1 Parents views of factors, which help or hinder partnership

Parents were given a set of statements relating to factors which help or hinder partnership and asked to indicate the statements which best reflected their views. The statements are listed in Table 5.12 below.

Table 5.13 Factors which have a positive effect on partnership according to parents

	Most positive effect	Positive effect	Average effect	No effect
There is a written policy for working parents	11 (13.9%)	10 (12.7%)	11 (13.9%)	35 (44.3%)
Space in the crèche for parental activity	8 (10.1%)	4 (5.1%)	14 (17.7%)	41 (51.9%)
Staff have training in working with parents	5 (6.3%)	7 (8.98%)	20 (25.3%)	35 (44.3%)
Staff are interested in working with parents	17 (21.5%)	23 (29.1%)	13 (16.5%)	14 (17.7%)
Parents have a positive attitude towards partnership	25 (31.6%)	23 (29.1%)	10 (12.7%)	9 (11.4%)

*N= 67 total missing data is 12*

The factor most frequently mentioned as positive by parents was parent's own attitude towards partnership with 25 parents identifying this as having the most positive effect on partnership. Staff interest in working with parents was also identified as having a positive effect on partnership. It was identified as the most positive factor by 17 parents and as having a positive effect by 23 parents. The factor which the majority of parents identified as having no effect was space in early years' service for parental activities followed by staff having training in working with parents and a written policy on working with parents.

Parents were also asked to outline specific factors, which in their opinion helped or hindered partnership. The factors identified by parents themselves were group into six main categories by the researcher as follows; communication, staff attitude, parent

attitude, types of activities available, early years' environment and time. The researcher, using the data and the available literature concerning factors, which help or hinder partnership, decided these categories.

#### **a. Communication**

Communication between staff and parent is an important factor and was mentioned by twenty parents as a factor which helped partnership. Parents stressed the importance of daily conversation as a means of encouraging partnership. A number of parents also cited the importance of staff members who were willing to listen to parents and allowed them participate. Good open communication with staff and a good parent staff relationship were mentioned by parents as important factors in encouraging partnership. Parents also placed a high priority on being asked their opinions and mentioned the importance of being asked their views and being able to put forward suggestions. Ten parents mentioned that sending parents questionnaires or suggestion sheets would help facilitate partnership. As well as parents being asked their opinion respondents also mentioned that it is important that parents were informed of 'what help was needed' and the opportunities that exist for partnership.

*"Good open two-way communication, an environment that is conducive to parents making suggestions" Parent, Private, 8.1.*

Parents also suggested more parent and staff meetings; more organised contacts and regular updates as factors which would encourage partnership. One parent suggested that a notice board would be a good way of informing parents of upcoming activities and would encourage greater participation.

Parents identified a number of barriers to partnership associated with communication. These included lack of information on participation and types of activities available to parents.

*"Somebody not speaking to you everyday about your child, bad atmosphere"*  
*Parent, Private, 16.1.*

Another factor identified by parents was ‘the closed door attitude’ of some early years’ services and parents not feeling welcome at all times. Also parents being rushed out the door at the start or end of each session was identified as a barrier to partnership.

*“Not being included, no formal meetings being set up, being rushed out the door”*

*Parent, Private, 33.1.*

Central to partnership and communication according to parents is being able to express your views and opinions to staff.

#### **b. Staff attitude**

Parents mentioned a positive staff and management attitude towards partnership as a factor, which helped partnerships develop. A significant number of parents seem to place the onus on staff to encourage partnership and invite parents to be involved.

*“Management’s attitude to parents. Are they amicable to partnership?”*

*Parent, Private, 9.1.*

*“Parents inclusion in crèche, staff willing to listen and let us be involved”*

*Parent, Private, 12.1.*

Parents cited a friendly open relationship with staff as an important factor in encouraging partnership. A positive attitude from staff towards partnership with parents and staff who are genuinely interested in working with parents was also mentioned by five parents.

*“Friendly staff who that make you feel welcome and want to see you involved in the activities of the crèche.” Parent, Public, 80.3.*

One parent mentioned that partnership needs to have benefits for staff not just for the parent and child. Twenty-two parents stated that a negative staff attitude hindered partnership in various ways such as management and staff not promoting partnership and staff being defensive towards the introduction of partnership.

*“Unfriendly staff who think you should leave your child at the door not be involved in their daily activities” Parent, Public, 80.3.*

Staff not welcoming parents and allowing them spend time in their early years’ service was also mentioned as a factor.

**c. Parent attitude**

Parents cited their own attitude as a factor, which helped develop partnerships. Parents themselves need to actively seek out information as to what events are happening in their early years’ service and be willing to participate.

*“Once the opportunity to participate is presented, I think most parents would participate given the chance” Parent, Private, 33.2.*

One parent mentioned “getting on with other parents in the early years’ service” and developing friendships with them as an important factor. The fact that other parents participated was an encouragement to parents. One parent felt very strongly about partnership between staff and parents and stated it should be compulsory. A number of parents in the study felt their help was not needed in their early years’ service and this was the main barrier to partnership. A small number of parents said that they simply lacked interest in partnership.

*“I pay for my child to be cared for by staff therefore I do not want to participate”  
Parent, Private, 30.3.*

A number of parents perceive staff as the childcare experts and believe that parents lack the knowledge and expertise for participating in the early years’ service. Parents also thought that it was good for children to interact with other adults. A small number of parents perceived parents’ presence in the classroom as a hindrance for staff and children.

*“You hand over your child and they take over, it may upset your child if parents are coming and going” Parent, 30.4 Private.*

*“You need to be careful involving parents because all parents won’t be able to be involved, so it can upset kids whose parents do not participate. In my experience it is better if the crèche are usually responsible for the children” Parent, Private, 25.2.*

One mother stated it was difficult for her to have an interest in partnership with the early years’ service when staff were not taking an interest in partnership.

#### **d. Types of activities available**

The types of activities available for parents at the early years’ service was frequently mentioned by parents as factors which encouraged partnership. Staff-organised events such as birthday parties, Christmas events and other special occasions were mentioned by parents as helpful and gave parents the opportunity to participate. Also mentioned were family days and field trips as events, which encouraged partnership. Observing classroom activities was also cited as a factor, which encouraged partnership.

*“Observing class room activities, helps the way that you, the child and the teacher work together” Parent, Public, 80.2.*

Activities that actively encourage partnership such as parent’s nights and meetings were frequently mentioned by parents.

#### **e. Early years’ environment**

A policy on partnership with parents within the early years’ service was mentioned by two parents as an important factor for developing partnership. Also mentioned by a small number of parents was space in the early years’ service for parental activities. An open door policy and actively encouraging partnerships were also mentioned as factors, which helped partnership, develop. Parents not being welcome in the early years’ service and not feeling comfortable spending time there were seen as hindering partnership.

*“Feeling that parents should not enter the door and being pushed out”  
Parent, Private 29.1*

Also mentioned was a rigid structure in the early years' service, which was perceived by one parent as a hindrance to partnership. Other elements of the early years' environment which were seen as a hindrance to partnership included a bad atmosphere between parents and staff, lack of encouragement from staff, a high staff turnover and lack of staff.

#### **f. Time**

There was as a strong response from parents in relation to the demands of working and having time to participate in their child's early years' setting. It was identified by all fathers (7) and the majority of mothers in the study. A number of parents expressed very strong views in relation to time as a barrier to partnership with their early years' service.

*"It is not that I am not interested but because you work yourself full-time you don't have time" Parent, Private, 40.1.*

*"As a single mother working full time I do not have time to be involved but I would love to help in any way that could" Parent, Private 20.1*

*"Parents are too busy working, maybe under-stress, consider working a full day, commuting and then picking up a child" Parent, Private 56.1*

Parents time is very much restricted because of work commitments and many complained of long working hours. As well as work, parents identified other time-consuming commitments such as other children and commuting to and from work. Meetings with the early years' service in the evenings necessitated parents having to get babysitter, which was seen as an inconvenience. A number of parents also claimed that staff did not seem to have time to develop partnerships with parents.

#### **5.6.2 Staff views of factors which help or hinder partnership**

Staff were asked to rate statements according to the extent they perceived them as having a positive effect on partnership.

**Table 5.14 Factors which have a positive effect on partnership according to staff**

	Most positive effect	Positive effect	Average effect	No effect
There is a written policy for working parents	13 (27.1%)	1 (2.1%)	4 (8.3%)	26 (54.2)
Space in the crèche for parental activity	1 (2.1%)	6 (12.5%)	6 (12.5%)	30 (62.5%)
Staff have training in working with parents	6 (12.5%)	11 (22.9%)	13 (27.1%)	13 (27.1%)
Staff are interested in working with parents	11 (22.9%)	13 (27.1%)	12 (25%)	7 (14.6%)
Parents have a positive attitude towards partnership	13 (27.1)	12 (25%)	8 (16.7%)	10 (20.8%)

The factor most frequently mentioned by staff as having a positive effect on partnership was parents having a positive attitude towards partnership. Thirteen staff mentioned it as having the most positive effect and 12 felt it had a positive effect. Written policy was also highly rated by staff as a factor, which encourages partnership with 13 ticking it as having the most positive effect on partnership. The least important factor mentioned was space in the early years' service for parental activity, which was identified by 30 staff as having no effect.

Factors identified by staff, which helped or hindered partnership, were put into categories, by the researcher and were similar to those identified by parents.

#### **a. Communication**

As with the parent results, a number of staff (16) identified factors associated with communication, which they perceived as helping partnerships. Factors identified included an open and honest relationship between staff and parents and regular staff and parents meetings. Regular contact between staff and parents and an open door policy at the early years' service were also seen as important.

*“To talk honestly to staff about their kids, if there is a problem with their child communication is important” Staff, Private, 18.5*

*“Good communication. Access to information, motivated well-educated staff who are willing to give information and be given information. Parents meetings and a welcoming atmosphere in the crèche” Staff, Private, 8.6.*

An exchange of information between staff and parents was seen as important. Staff suggested notice boards and newsletters as methods of communication, which contributed to partnership. Also mentioned was the importance of discussions, listening to parent’s opinions and allowing them to express themselves freely. Staff felt that lack of communication hindered the development of partnership and led to a ‘bad atmosphere’. For partnership to take place it was seen as important for staff and parent to agree on issues and cooperate with each other.

#### **b. Time**

Staff perceived parents as having very little free time for participation in the early years’ service. Lack of time was mentioned as a factor, which hindered partnership, by twenty-four staff. They felt that as parents were working they did not have time for partnership with their early years’ service.

*“The fact that they are all full time workers and they do not have time”  
Staff, Private, 3.1.*

Parents’ long working hours were mentioned frequently by staff and parents rushing to and from work and therefore not spending time in their early years’ service. Staff viewed parents other commitments such as other children and work as very time consuming and three staff respondents claimed that parents were under-stress and could not commit to a partnership with the early years’ service. Unlike the parent respondents, who claimed that lack of time on the part of staff was a factor which hindered partnership, none of the staff respondents mentioned this as a factor.

#### **c. Early years’ environment**

Staff identified factors, in the early year environment such as an open door policy and a welcoming atmosphere, which encouraged partnership with parents. In relation to factors hindering partnership lack of space and lack of a policy on partnership were identified. Guaranteeing the confidentiality of all clients when giving parents more

open access to the service was also identified as a possible barrier. Another possibly negative factor was the effects on children of having parents in the early years' service, which was viewed by some staff as unsettling for the children. A number of staff saw this as having negative consequences.

*"Children don't listen to staff when parents are there, they always act up on parents"*  
*Staff, Private, 56.5.*

Another staff respondent mentioned that she felt parents had limited access to the early years' setting and this limited their opportunities for participation.

#### **d. Staff attitude**

Staff identified a number of factors in relation to staff attitude, which would promote partnership. These included staff having a positive attitude towards partnership and activity encouraging partnership with parents.

*"Warm welcome, non-judgmental attitude of the staff. Staff's willingness to be flexible about the needs of each child"* Staff, Public, 73.6

Staff having an understanding of childcare practices and training was cited as a factor, which encouraged partnership. While encouragement from staff was cited by a number of staff, more specifically, encouragement from management at the early years' service was also mentioned. Factors associated with staff attitude were also listed as hindering partnership such as staff having a negative attitude towards partnership and being unaccommodating towards partnership with parents. Also mentioned was the fact that some staff may be hostile because they see partnership with parents as an infringement on their professionalism as childcare experts. Another respondent mentioned that untrained staff might lack the confidence to pursue a partnership with parents.

*"I feel when staff have low confidence and lack motivation as well as education they are not as willing to share information. Fear that they will be asked something they don't know."* Staff, Private, 8.6.

One respondent also mentioned that staff hindered partnership when they did not ask parents for their help or invite them to participate.

#### **e. Parent Attitude**

Staff also cited factors in relation to parent's attitude which helped partnership. These included parent's willingness to participate and also feel that their help was needed and appreciated. Staff mentioned parents having a positive attitude towards partnership with their early years' service as a factor which encouraged partnership. Factors which were seen to hinder partnership included parents not being interested enough to participate and parents giving their child preferential treatment when they participated. A number of staff felt that parents would only be interested in working with their own child and not for the benefit of the other children and staff.

#### **f. Activities available in the early years' service**

Staff also identified factors associated with the types of activities available in the early years' service. Opportunities needed to be presented to allow parents participate.

*"There are a few times a year when parents can be involved with what is going on e.g. Teddy bear picnics, Santa at Christmas, Halloween etc." Staff, Community, 72.5.*

Staff mention helping with activities and observing activities are helpful for partnership and specific activities mentioned includes field trips and parents coming to visit their children during the day.

### **5.6.3 Comparing staff and parent views of factors, which help or hinder partnership**

When both staff and parents results are combined the most positive factor identified was parent's own attitude to parental involvement. The least positive factor was space in the crèche for activities. Parent and staff results were combined and non-parametric Mann Whitney tests were used to examine if there was a difference between their views (see Appendix G, Table 5.14). There was a significant difference between parent and staff scores found in relation to staff training having a positive difference on parental involvement. P value was 0.008.

## 5.8 Summary

The data collected in this study represents a variety of perceptions of partnership from both parents and early years' staff. The majority of parents who responded were from private services and had been using their current service for two years or more. The majority of staff respondents were also from private services, had been working in childcare for three years or more and had no specific training for working with parents. The majority of respondents felt that parents should participate, but many parents were unclear about the opportunities that existed for participation. However not all respondents were positive and some negative views of partnership did emerge in the study. There did appear to be a high level of satisfaction with the parent-staff relationship. The main change that parents and staff would like to make their relationship was to increase levels of communication. The most common type of activity available to parent in their early years' service was attending a party or social event and few of the services appeared to have regular parent staff meetings. Factors that parents and staff identified as helping or hindering partnership related to communication, parent and staff attitude, types of activities available and the early years' environment. The next chapter will analyse and discuss in detail the data presented in this chapter.

# **Chapter 6**

## **Analysis and Discussion**

## **6.1 Introduction**

A central aim of this study was to assess the types of relationships that currently exist between professionals and working parents in a sample of Irish early years' services. The data collected in this study represents a variety of perceptions of partnership from both parents and early years' staff. The discussion is divided into three main sections based on the three main areas on which data was collected; parents and staff views of their relationship; level and types of partnership, which exists and the changes that parents and staff would like to make to their relationship. The first section examines parents and staff views of their relationship and of partnership with both similarities and differences emerging. The second section examines to what extent partnership exists. To assess the levels of partnership it was decided to use a number of theoretical models of partnership drawn from the literature. Partnership itself is a dynamic concept and each model offers a unique and individual perspective. The final section examines the changes that parents and staff would like to make to their relationship and also possible ways to increase the levels of partnership that currently exist. This discussion aims to provide analysis of both parents and staff views of the parent-staff relationship and their perceptions of partnership.

## **6.2 Parent and staff relationships in Early Years' Services- Views, similarities and differences**

### **6.2.1 Satisfaction with parent-staff relationships**

A high level of satisfaction emerged with the parent-staff relationship with over 90% of parents and staff agreeing that they were satisfied with the relationship. Howe et al. (2001, p18) refer to a 'sizeable body of research' concerning parental satisfaction with their early years' service with the majority of parents reporting a high level of contentment with their service. The majority of parents and staff agreed with the statements offered, which, were all positive statements concerning communication and relations between staff and parents. However the percentage of staff that strongly agreed with the statements was always higher than the percentage of parents who strongly agreed indicating staff were slightly more positive about their experience of parent-staff communication. This was especially apparent in relation to the statement

'communication between staff and parents shows respect' with 30% more staff strongly agreeing that communication did show respect. There was also a significantly higher percentage of staff strongly agreeing with the statement 'parents find it easy to approach staff if there is a problem' and statements in relation to the availability of staff at the beginning and end of each session. This was not only an issue in parents' responses to these specific questions but was also mentioned by parents in open-ended questions. This may indicate that staff are satisfied with their current level of availability to parents or are unaware parents would like if staff were more available at these times. Another statement, which a small number of parents disagreed with, was 'staff accept the views that I have as a parent'. This would indicate that some parents do not feel staff acknowledge the values and concerns they have as parents thereby undervaluing the critical role that parents play in their child's development. Reflecting on the results of the statements presented to staff and parents it appears staff have a higher level of satisfaction with the relationship they have with parents than *vice versa*. Parents appear to be marginally less satisfied with their experience of the parent-staff relationship.

### **6.2.2 Factors important in the parent-staff relationship**

While there were some differences in relation to staff and parents' perceptions of their relationship two common aspects emerged from both sets of respondents, which were the importance of trust and the importance of communication. Over 90% of parents stated that they trust staff to make good decisions concerning their children and many parents claimed that they relied on staff and appreciated the work that they did.

*"Be lost without them" Parent, Private, 53.*

Parents claimed they were 'grateful' to staff for helping them rear their children and giving them 'peace of mind' was mentioned by a significant number of parents. This appeared to be an important issue for parents in this study. This was mentioned by one third of parents in the comments that they made, particularly in relation to how the service facilitated their role as a working parent. Parents were conscious that they did not have spare time to spend in the service and trusting staff to look after their child seemed a necessity and something they valued highly.

Good communication was mentioned by staff and parents throughout the survey particularly in relation to barriers to partnership. It was the most frequently mentioned issue in relation to aspects of the relationship both parents and staff would like to change.

*“I would like to talk honestly about our kids, if there is a problem communication is important” (Mother, Private, 34.2)*

*“I would like more time to talk and to get to know them (parents) more as morning and evening time is so busy, it's difficult to talk to them.” (Staff, Private, 23.4)*

While parents and staff recognised the value of two-way open communication it was not always clear the extent to which this was taking place within services. A recurring theme for staff and parents was the need for more two-way communication. This will be discussed in further detail in Section 6.2.6.

### **6.2.3 Staff and parent views of “partnership”**

Parents and staff were asked their opinions of partnership and their responses portrayed a variety of perceptions of partnership. While the majority of parents (83.5%) agreed that parents should participate parents appeared to have very little knowledge of partnership and the benefits of it as identified in the literature. Only one third of parents were clear about opportunities for partnership at their early years' service, less than 20% were aware of a written policy on partnership and 20% did not know who decided whether or not parents could participate. Parent's perceptions of partnership, which emerged from this study, can be divided into three broad categories.

- (a). The first was a positive attitude towards partnership with parents wanting an active partnership.
- (b). The second was a wary attitude to partnership and lack of clarity about its benefits.
- (c). The third and least common attitude was a negative one with a small number of parents not seeing any benefit of having partnership with their early years' service.

(a). Parents who were positive concerning partnership viewed it as important for a variety of reasons. Continuity between the home and the childcare setting was seen as important by a small number of parents. As well as wanting to ensure continuity,

partnership was seen as a way of facilitating a greater flow of information between staff and parents. Parents also wanted an increase in the number of opportunities that currently existed for partnership.

*"I see room for improvement, I would like to be able to stay with my child and play with the other children at least for half a day once a month so I could be more involved in activities" (Mother, Private, 43.5).*

Parents also viewed participation as having benefits for all stakeholders. Some parents wanted to contribute to their early years' setting in any way that they could. A number of parents even claimed that by taking part in the study their awareness of partnership with their early years' setting had grown and they intended to seek out more opportunities for partnership. One mother stated that she had not previously thought about the early years' service from the point of view of the parent until taking part in the study.

(b) The second category to emerge was those parents who believed that partnership was a positive concept but should be developed within limits. One parent in particular thought while it is a positive development it is 'overrated'. Others thought it was only beneficial if staff structured it properly. A number of parents also felt that their early years' service did not require the help of the parents and this was viewed as a reason why there was little partnership with their service. This indicates that many parents view partnership solely as staff directed and requiring the presence of parents in the room, reflecting a limited understanding of what partnership entails. Parents expressed a number of concerns about parental participation. Parents were apprehensive of the presence of parents in the childcare setting for reasons such as children 'playing-up' on their own parents, parents would only focus on their own children and the effect it might have on children whose parents were not present.

*"You need to be careful involving parents as it can upset kids whose parents can't participate. There is a difference between a crèche and say a play school."*  
*(Mother, Private, 54.3)*

*“All parents won’t be able to be involved, so it can upset the kids whose parents don’t participate. In my experience it is better if the crèche are usually responsible for the children.” (Mother, Private, 45.5)*

Some parents viewed other parents’ motives for involvement as selfish and felt that parents may be too focused on their own child to the detriment of other children attending the service and there seemed to be a fear that certain parents would take total responsibility and exclude others. Howe et al. (2001) also found in their study that a number of parents perceived the presence of parents as having a negative impact on the centre. These views could again indicate that parents have a narrow perception of partnership and perceive it only as centre-based activities. This could be understood in the context that only one-third of parents reported knowledge of the opportunities that exist for partnership with their early years’ service. A number of parents from private settings commented that partnership was more appropriate in a play school or even in primary school. This may again reflect lack of information available to parents concerning the diverse nature of partnership or may indicate that some parents are simply not interested in partnership with their early years’ service. Many parents did not see the usefulness of partnership with a private service indicating that a number of parents see themselves as consumers of the service and feel that their role should be limited to purchasing care for their children while they are at work.

(c) The third category to emerge are those parents who do not view partnership as a positive concept. Approximately 30% of parents did not think that staff and children benefit from parental participation, which might suggest that some parents are unaware of the benefits of parental participation as identified in the research literature. These represent the third category of parents’ views on partnership, a minority of parents who did not see any benefits in parental participation and claimed that it unproductive to spend time developing partnership with their early years’ setting. Others claimed that working parents simply did not have time to participate and it was not a priority for them. Daytime activities usually clash with parents work schedules and night-time activities were seen as encroaching on their free time. One parent appreciated the fact that staff collected the child at the door and the parent did not need to go into the childcare setting, this may be due to lack of time on the parents behalf. Others wanted a clear line drawn between the home and the childcare setting and did not want continuity

between the two with one parent stating that the reason for this was that they felt they already spent enough time in the childcare setting. Continuity between home and the childcare setting was not a priority of these parents.

Common in the three different views which emerged is the fact that parent's views of what constitutes partnership appeared to be limited to the presence of parents in the early years' setting and only five parents referred directly to the notion of partnership as promoting continuity between home and the early years' setting. Parents in general seemed to have low levels of knowledge of the perceived benefits of partnership and also of how to contribute to their early years' service. A significant number of parents shared the perception that staff are responsible for establishing partnership. A significant number of parents were content to allow staff dictate the activities that children participate in at preschool with less than a third wishing to contribute to the curriculum of the centre and only 7% currently doing so.

In the same way as parents views of partnership were not homogenous, so too were there differing views of partnership among staff. While some staff felt that the concept of partnership with parents was a positive one and needed further exploration, others questioned the appropriateness of partnership with parents who were using full-time childcare. It was these staff in particular who claimed that it may be more suitable for playgroups and primary schools settings where they felt children would understand the process better. A possible explanation for this may be the variety of types of services surveyed and also the differences in the educational backgrounds of staff and the general lack of training among staff in working with parents. In general, staff from the publicly supported and community sector appeared to encourage greater partnership with parents than staff from the private settings surveyed (see section 6.3.4).

The qualitative comments from staff respondents referred more to the benefit of partnership than the respective comments from parent respondents and therefore staff appeared more aware of the benefits of partnership than parents. The majority of staff thought that all stakeholder, parents, staff and children benefited from partnership. The stakeholders they cited as benefiting least from partnership were themselves (see section 5.5.2). Staff mentioned that partnership is important for the development of the child and for ensuring continuity between home and the early years' setting.

*“This is a great topic, the more awareness there is about childcare education and research the better for both staff and parents. The more the parents know and are informed the more in control they feel plus they are more aware about the service and how their child is getting on.” (Staff, Private, 67.5)*

Partnership with parents and working as a team was seen by one staff member as essential not only for child’s development but also so the child enjoys the service. As well as wanting greater awareness many specifically called for greater research and exploration of partnership. However not all staff members were as positive about partnership with parents. One staff member felt that the installation of security cameras would be more appropriate for improving parent-staff relations rather than developing closer partnerships with parents. This is similar to the perceptions of a number of parents who equated partnership with increased opportunities for surveillance and monitoring of the care their child received which is a limited view of partnership and parents motives for wanting partnership and will be discussed further (see section 6.2.7). Furthermore the staff might perceive this as a negative approach to partnership. They feel it is more beneficial for parents rather than staff, which is in conflict with the basic concept of partnership which implies an equal sharing of power and decision-making. .

According to Galinsky and Weissbourd (1992) research literature indicated that teachers harbor many negative feelings about parents and are critical of the parents attending their centres. This researcher did not find that staff were necessarily critical of parents but there is evidence that some staff were not inclined to encourage partnership with parents and many were wary of the presence of parents in the early year setting, which may indicate less than positive views of parents. According to Wolfendale (1992) many childcare professionals are cautious about parents becoming involved in their child's education. The reason for this include; feeling their professionalism is undermined by the presence of parents in the classroom, perceiving parents views as not being well informed and perceiving parents who are involved as a self-selecting group who are not representative of the views of all parents. In the current study staff reported being wary of parents in the room and undermining their professionalism by disrupting routines and upsetting children. This was perceived by

staff as leading to a situation where the staff member is no longer in control of the children and subsequently the early years' setting which would indicate that the staff member feels they are losing power and are unclear of their role when the parent is present. Howe et al. (2000) found in their study that staff complained about the unprofessional manner of parents and reported tensions between the goals of parents and the goals of staff. Similarly in this study, some staff alluded to the unprofessionalism of parents such as not turning up on time for their rota or not turning up at all as mentioned by one staff member who had previously organised a community play group. Other problems mentioned by staff included parents giving their child preferential treatment. This concurs with the views of some parents who suggested that parent's motives for participation might be sometimes selfish. Again there were similarities between parents and staff views in the context of the perceived unsettling effects on children of having parents present in the childcare setting. These include children not listening to staff when parents are present and children 'playing-up' on parents and looking for attention and the general 'disruptive nature' of having parents freely walking around the setting.

A small number of staff also questioned whether or not parent's views were well informed and in particular it was felt that the views of the parents might contradict the policy of the service. Pugh and De'Ath (1989) found that even in the most open of centres there was still an imbalance of power between the staff and parents and it was difficult for staff to concede power to parents and allow them to participate fully. According to Howe et al. (2000) staff who are secure with their perceived capabilities are more likely to encourage the input of parents while those who are not feel threatened by calls for accountability and often resort to emphasising their professional status. One staff respondent in this study believed that when staff members have low confidence and lack motivation and education they are less willing to share information with parents. Galinsky (1992) also found that staff who had received the least training and the least pay were the most critical about parents. The imbalance of power between staff and parents will be discussed more fully in Section 6.2.7.

#### **6.2.4 Differences between parents and staff views of partnership**

Quantitative data revealed that parent and staff views of partnership differed frequently. Examples of this include, staff placing more value than parents on staff

training as a positive factor, which encourages partnership (see section 5.6.3). Other examples include respondent's perceptions of the opportunities available to parents to make suggestions to staff. There was a significant difference between staff and parents views on whether or not parents received enough information. Parents seemed less positive about this issue and felt they should receive more information. There was a significant difference between parents and staff perceptions of the accessibility of children's developmental records to parents. While 90% of staff claimed that parents had access to developmental records only 60% of parents claimed they had access to these records (see section 5.4.11). There was also a significant difference found in relation to parents being clear about opportunities for parental participation (see section 5.5.6). Staff stated that parents were clearer about the opportunities that existed for partnership than parents themselves reported. These differences in views may demonstrate a lack of communication between staff and parents or may be because staff and parents represent different perspectives (and stakeholders) within childcare. Increased awareness of these differences in opinion may help alleviate any misunderstandings and increase the opportunities for partnership.

#### **6.2.5 Perceptions of responsibility for initiating partnership**

There appeared to be a lack of agreement among staff and parents concerning who is responsible for initiating partnership. While parents placed the onus on staff to encourage partnership it seems that staff place the onus on parents for greater partnership. When parent and staff results are combined the factor most mentioned as helping or hindering partnership was parents' attitude with staff attitude rated as the second most important factor. Many parents felt that staff did not ask for their help or did not give them the opportunity to participate. Parents referred to the need for staff to 'let us be involved'. In contrast, many staff felt that parents did not have time to participate and therefore there was no point in trying to develop partnership. In particular, parents' lack of time was seen as the most important factor hindering the development of partnerships. They perceived parents as working long hours and not wanting to spend any extra time in the childcare setting. This reflects a very restricted view of what partnership entails i.e. that the focus of parental participation should be parent's actual presence in the service during the opening hours of the service.

Another issue that staff referred to was the apparent lack of parental interest in partnership and staff felt disheartened by this. The childcare settings, which were initially contacted to take part in this study and refused, cited parent's lack of interest as their main reason for not wishing to take part. Three services mentioned that previously other researchers or the service themselves had sent questionnaires to the parents and they had failed to return them so therefore they believed there was no point in taking part in this study. It appeared that this was decided by the staff at the services in question without consulting parents as to whether or not they would like to participate in the study. Even among the services which did take part in the study, many staff members cited lack of interest from parents as a problem when developing partnerships. Staff often felt it was difficult to keep parents interested in participating and while there may be initial enthusiasm it quickly fades and a small number of staff claimed to be disappointed at the low levels of partnership which existed.

#### **6.2.6 Lack of joint decision-making**

The opportunities that existed for parents and staff to engage in a joint-decision making process appear limited judging from the survey data. While over one third of parents were involved in planning for their child's individual needs the majority of parents stated that they would like to be involved in this process. There was also a lack of parent-staff meetings, which again restricts parent's opportunities to be involved in joint decision making with staff. A number of parents claimed they would like to increase the number of parent-staff meetings. Evidence of the lack of joint decision-making emerges again when both sets of respondents offer suggestions as to how they would like to change the parent-staff relationship (see section 6.4). Parents were asking for more information and feedback from staff and greater opportunities to discuss issues with the staff. As all parents in this study were working full-time it limited the types of participation they could be involved in because of time constraint and therefore they may not be involved in the traditional forms of involvement such as "classroom helper". There is an emerging need to develop other strategies to encourage partnership such as joint decision-making. Partnership is about empowering parents and the quality of staff- parent relationship and is not just about persuading parents to help or to come into the centre. This is particularly relevant when lack of time is an issue and increasing parent's ability to reach joint agreements with staff could help form partnerships. Another aspect of the relationship that some parents would like to change was for staff

to have less loving contact with children in front of parents. This may be a reflection of parent's own feelings concerning their usage of childcare. This is in contrast with comments from parents who appreciated and encouraged the fact that staff seemed to genuinely love their children and this gave them a confidence when leaving their child into the service. This relates back to the importance of trust, which was identified by working parents (see section 6.2.2).

### **6.2.7 Parents and staff feelings of disempowerment**

There were examples from the survey data of situations where parents and staff felt disempowered by aspects of their relationship. This was particularly true in relation to parents and staff perceptions of dealing with conflict. While the majority were satisfied with the resolution of conflict within the service a small number expressed concerns. A particular concern for parents was the feeling of powerlessness due to their reliance on the service. Some parents felt that the only alternative to dealing with the conflict was to leave the service and for many this was not feasible due to many reasons such as the shortage of childcare places or lack of time and resources to seek out new child care facilities. This can lead to a situation where the parent feels disempowered and may be reflective of the expert model of the parent and professional relationship as described by Dale (1996), where the professional remains in control and parents are dependant on their decisions leading to a very limited role for the parent who are not in a position to negotiate with the professional. This is particularly worrying for parents who are concerned about certain aspects of the care their child is receiving and feel unable to express their views to staff.

*"Sometimes I come unexpectedly to find my child crying on the floor and no one is paying any attention to her which makes me wonder" (Mother, Private, 56.3)*

This parent does not seem to have expressed her concerns to staff yet appears to be dissatisfied. Other concerns expressed by parents were staff turnover and in two cases the apparent lack of staff working at the service. Their power to 'opt-out' of the service, as is synonymous with a consumer model of service provision, appears to be diminished and therefore their rights as consumers and partners are negatively affected.

Other parents expressed concern over staff that they perceived to be too willing to appease parents and give into their demands without regard for the child's best interests. Staff also felt that sometimes they had to give into the parents' demands, which may not always be in the best interest of the child and service. In this situation it appears that the staff are disempowered and feel undermined as the parents make the final decisions. There does not appear to be a high level of joint or mutual decision-making process occurring in the services surveyed, Pugh and De'Ath (1989) saw joint decision-making as a central tenet of partnership.

### **6.3 Is there evidence of partnership between parents and staff in the study?**

#### **6.3.1 Positive elements of partnership found in the study**

While there were some positive elements of partnership in the study, the overall impression was that there was a lack of partnership in the services surveyed. Evidence of short-term partnership was apparent during the induction period and will be discussed in section 6.3.2. Other examples of partnership included; sharing experiences with parents through the use of video recording; parents choosing a suitable time to come into service and take part in activities; the use of parent councils and parents contribution to management; staff drawing on parental expertise; parents contributing to the early years' curriculum and planning their child's individual needs and setting goals for the child. Other examples include introducing parents to each other and other children and staff at the start of each year with an informal social gathering. One parent mentioned that parents and staff jointly set goals for the child, indicating mutual problem solving. While there were examples of all of these activities the number of parents who engage in these activities appears to be limited (see section 5.5.4). According to parents, 'parental expertise' such as parents teaching music or art, is the area that they have the least opportunity to participate in. While there are examples of elements of partnership in the study there is very little evidence of partnership consistent with the typologies of partnership outlined by Pugh and De'Aths(1989). However it is important to put these findings in the context of the needs of working parents as identified by parents themselves. These 'needs' are not always consistent with the hierarchical framework used in these typologies as evidenced by the fact that

one of the parents main concerns was 'peace of mind' while their child is attending the service. This issue will be discussed further in section 6.3.8.

### **6.3.2 Short-term partnership during the induction period**

The induction period for the child and the parent into the childcare setting has been acknowledged in the literature as a crucial time for establishing relationships and encouraging future partnership between staff and parents (Hyder et al. 1997, Powell, 1989 and Dali, 1999). The data from this study would suggest that many childcare settings encourage parents to stay with their children for short periods of time and encourage greater communication at this time indicating that there is evidence of short-term partnership between staff and parents during the induction periods. The induction period has been found to be central for parents and children in developing a positive or negative attitude towards preschool. Laloumi-Vidali (1998) in a study of childcare settings found that 51% of professionals did not encourage parents to stay even for the first day. In the current study two-thirds of staff stated that the parents were encouraged to stay in the centre while the child was settling in. The length of time parents were encouraged to stay varied with a small minority (7.6%) stating they were allowed to stay as long as they like but the majority indicating they preferred a more restricted induction period. While only one staff member stated that parents should not be encouraged to stay at all others felt it should be restricted to the first day or to a staff directed tour of the premises. However, almost all services appeared to encourage more frequent communication such as phone calls during the induction period.

Parents views of the induction period varied slightly to those of staff with a smaller number, 28 (35.4%) of the 79 parents, stating that there was a gradual induction period to the service where they were encouraged to stay until the child was settled. This is a much smaller percentage than found by Howe et al. (2000) in their study where 80% of parents and 91% of staff reported parents were encouraged to stay during initial settling in period. In the current study some parents stated that they were not allowed to stay but were encouraged to stay in contact with the service through phone contact or to drop back whenever they wanted and almost all parents were given a tour of the childcare setting by the staff. While very few of the parents had any negative comments to make regarding the induction period only one third of parents were encouraged to stay with the child at this time which would indicate that despite evidence in the

literature supporting the importance of parents presence in the childcare setting for all stakeholders, during the induction period the majority of parents were not present. This may be reflective of the expert model of the parent professional relationship where the parent is viewed as having a limited role and knowledge of their child and the professional remains in control of the situation. Even for the parents who are encouraged to stay during the induction period this appears to be limited until the child is settled. Lindon (1997) emphasises the importance of first contacts with parents and suggests initial contacts should include written material, possibly a visit to the family home and a meeting with parents and staff. There was very little evidence of these types of contacts found in this study. Only four parents mentioned receiving written material during the induction period.

There was a difference in the type of induction periods mentioned by both parents and staff in the private sector compared to the publicly supported and community services. The only reference to a home visit was in relation to a community service and in both community and publicly supported services there was more of an emphasis on open days and getting to know other parents and children attending the service. The main benefit of a home visit according to Marsh (1994) is establishing the relationship between parents and staff in surroundings familiar to child and parents. There was no mention of open days or home visits by staff or parents from the private sector.

*“All children and parents get together the first day. We all sat together drinking tea and all getting to know each other” (Parents, Community, 72.3)*

This emphasis on getting to know all stakeholders at the setting would indicate an acknowledgement of the importance of developing relationships for parents and children within the setting and acknowledging the family supports that a service can provide such as promoting parent-to-parent contact as well as parent-staff contact. It can be a more relaxed and less formal introduction to the setting, allowing the parent to move about and chat and can permit more openness than the staff guided tours as described by many parents attending private services. This may reflect the ‘participation’ typology as described in Pugh and De’Aths model where parents are physically involved in the centre under some supervision by staff. As reflected in the

differences reported by staff and parents during the induction periods, there is no single type of partnership found in the study and different types of partnerships are evident both in different types of services and in the same services at different times.

### **6.3.3 Lack of interconnectedness between home and the early year service**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory informs this study and offers a contemporary framework to describe the child's relationships within a multi-layered social context highlighting the importance of the role of the parent in the childcare setting (see section 3.3.1). In this context it is important to examine parents and staff perceptions of the opportunities that exist for continuity between home and the childcare setting. Continuity between childcare setting and the home is particularly important for working parents who may not have the time to be present in the childcare setting restricting traditional forms of partnership. A small number of parents directly mentioned continuity between home and the childcare setting. While the majority did not directly mention the concept, further examination of data would indicate that many parents were aware of continuity, particularly in relation to asking for greater communication between home and the childcare setting. One parent in particular thought that sharing information on nutrition and potty training helped ensure continuity between the home and the childcare setting.

A staff member from a publicly supported setting mentioned that video recordings of the children were made in the centre and sent home to parents so they could share the child's experiences. This appeared to be a rare example of staff actively promoting continuity between home and the childcare setting. This is in contrast to the staff respondent who commented that parents only perceived the child to be doing any work in the childcare setting when they had examples of the work to bring home. This situation could suggest a lack of trust and communication between the staff and the parents and the staff respondent failed to appreciate the importance of continuing activities at home both for the child and the parent. Parents wanted more feedback and meetings with staff and particularly information on child development. While some parents wanted more information to ensure continuity, others wanted clear boundaries between home and the childcare setting. This was particularly true for parents who felt that home should be a completely separate entity to the childcare setting. The main reason given for this was that the child already spent a substantial amount of time in the

setting. Some of these parents felt that increasing parental participation would increase the amount of time that parents, staff and children spend in the centre and this was perceived by them as a negative development. A small number of staff expressed similar views and more than one stated that at the end of a long day staff, parents and children want to go home and not spend any more time than necessary in the childcare setting. Again, this reflects a restricted view of what partnership entails or the value of partnership.

#### **6.3.4 Differences in types of provision**

Three types of services were surveyed in this study; private, publicly supported and community services. Types of partnership appeared to vary across these different types of provision. There were definite signs of partnership in publicly supported and community services while in the private services surveyed, partnership was less evident. Respect is an important aspect of partnership and crucial to the parent-staff relationship. An examination of staff comments concerning their relationship with parents reveals that only one staff member from public sector felt under-appreciated by parents. The other respondents from these sectors were all positive concerning the parent-staff relationship and it appears that parents use staff as a resource, in particular as an information resource. There appears to be a different trend in the private sector where twenty staff out of thirty-six voiced some concerns in relation to the parent-staff relationship particularly in relation to the lack of respect they received from parents. While in the community and public sector the role of staff as the professional or expert is clearly identifiable, in the private sector many staff members felt that they were under-appreciated by some parents and felt that they were treated like 'babysitters' and not 'fellow-workers'. This reflects Katz's (1995) view that childcare was traditionally viewed as a low status occupation by parents and society in general. A possible reason for the different relationship that exists between parents and staff in the different types of services may be explained by the function or aims of each service. The client groups of the community and publicly supported services are predominately from lower socio-economic groups and many of those attending the services have been referred by staff of the Health Boards or qualify through low income levels or lone parenthood. One of the main aims of these services is to act as a family support to parents and children and their advisory role is crucial in providing such a support. It was only in these services that parents mentioned they discussed domestic problems in child's life with staff. This may

be a positive aspect of the support the service provides but also indicates the childcare worker is seen as the professional or expert and a deficit model may characterise the parent-staff relationship. Some parents in community and publicly supported services were not happy with this type of parent-staff relationship and felt that staff were not always willing to negotiate with parents. In particular two parents using community services complained that if they were late dropping their child into the centre the centre refused to take the child for that session. This caused difficulty as the parent was forced to find alternative childcare arrangements or miss work on that day. This could lead to a situation where the parent feels disempowered by the centre and the centre is not flexible to the parents needs indicating a lack of partnership.

The private services are predominately funded by parent's fees and the aims of the service is to provide care for children while their parents are at work. Although this study did not examine the socio-economic background of services it is probable that the majority of parents using private services are in higher socio-economic groups due to the fact that they are in full-time employment and are more likely to be able to afford the costs of private childcare. Chazan (1978) claimed that staff may feel threatened by the more articulate and educated professional parent and this may be the case in private services in this study. Certainly some staff respondents claimed they found it hard to approach parents and stated that their views were not always respected by parents.

A range of strategies to promote partnership were more evident in the publicly supported and community services. Home-visits and open days for parents were mentioned by staff and parents from these sectors. There was no evidence of these initiatives in private services. There also appeared to more open communication in the community and publicly supported services with a greater number of parent-staff meetings and other types of communication were more frequently available such as notice boards.

Parents' participation in management varied according to the type of provision they attended. While no parent from a private service reported participating in management of a service, parents from other services, particularly publicly supported services, reported doing so. This is similar to the results of the recent Scottish survey (Howe et al. 2001), which found there was a lack of parental participation in

management and administration activities in private services. Pugh and De'Ath (1989) similarly found that there was limited opportunities for parental participation in private services. However, Howe et al. (2001) also found many parents using private services were less interested in participating and many used childcare predominately so that they could pursue other commitments. While only a very small number of parents in this study stated that they were not interested in partnership with their childcare service many did state that they were very restricted because of other commitments such as work (see section 6.3.2). Joint decision-making and accountability appear to be more common in publicly supported and community provision. The absence of these strategies in private services is an issue that needs to be addressed if parent-staff partnership is to be promoted.

### **6.3.5 Majority of activities available to parents are staff directed**

Howe et al. (2001) found the activities available to parents fell into three categories, daily activities, special events and administration. However, the study found that parents perceived daily activities and special events as more frequently available than administration activities. In this study similar results emerged with parents perceiving greater opportunities for participation in daily activities such as observing classroom activities and special events such as attending a party or social event. Administration activities such as serving on management committees were perceived as less commonly available as mentioned previously (see section 5.5.4). There were very limited opportunities for parents to take part on management committees and parent councils at the services they attended again indicating that few parents were in a position to be represented at the decision making level of the services they used. The most common activity that parents participated was attending a party or social event followed by planning their child's individual needs and observing a classroom activity. Planning their children's individual needs allows for some joint decision-making but as previously mentioned this activity is not available to all parents. Attending a social event organised by staff and observing classroom activities are typically staff directed activities and does not allow the parent to have a high degree of input or control in the childcare setting. This again may reflect the expert model of the parent professional relationship where the parent is viewed as having a limited role. It also reflects the support model in Pugh and De'Ath's typology of partnership where the parent provides external support from outside of the setting and attends staff organised events in the

setting. However, observing classroom activities may afford parents the opportunity to empower themselves with information concerning their child's daily activities and may allow facilitate more information exchange and questioning between parents and staff.

The activity that parents perceived as being least available to them was sharing parental expertise with the childcare setting (see section 5.5.4). Three parents reported participating in such an activity which demonstrates a strong partnership between staff and parents as it implies a sharing of skills and collaboration between parents and staff. As demonstrated, the types of activities that parents participated in were restricted. However, it is important to take into account that parents are working full-time and may not have time to be present in the centre so it is understandable that small numbers have carried out activities in the childcare setting. Nonetheless, despite their other commitments many parents stated that they desired greater opportunities for participation.

#### **6.3.6 Lack of meaningful engagement with parents**

Elliot (2002) found in her study of Australian parents that they wanted their voices to be heard and wanted staff to share information and knowledge with them. Similar views were expressed in this study and the need for greater communication was frequently mentioned by parents and staff throughout the survey. It was particularly important for parents when they discussed how the service met their needs as a working parent and many mentioned that they wanted to have more information on child development and more daily records. Evidence from the respondents in this study shows that currently there is little opportunity for parents to engage with their childcare service. Few services organised regular individual parent-staff meetings and group meetings occurred in less than 10% of the services surveyed. Notice boards and written information were only available in half of the services and newsletters available in a third of the services. The main opportunity for communication appeared to be at the beginning and end of each session and 80% of parents and staff felt that staff were available to parents at this time. However, a small number of parents and staff felt that this was a very busy time for staff.

Opportunities for parents to contribute to the curriculum or programme planning also appeared very limited with less than 10% of parent respondents currently doing so.

Other factors, which hindered engagement, included lack of privacy for consultation with staff which was mentioned by a small number of parents. Some parents felt that their only contact with staff was in a negative context such the child's misbehavior or only phoning the parent if the child is sick. A small number of staff indicated that parents found it difficult to approach them if there was a problem. Some parents complained that the staff did not freely offer information and parents had to ask questions to receive information. In contrast a small number of staff felt that parents were not interested in hearing about their child's daily activities. In this situation it seems that both parents and staff want to share information but seem unable to facilitate meaningful information exchange.

Many parents were not satisfied with the information they received or the opportunities they had to express their views. They wanted more time to talk to staff and for their conversations to be more open and honest. In particular, a small number of parents and staff felt that their respective views were not listened to in situations of conflict. Over 90% of staff in this study claimed that there was a way for parents to make suggestions to their service while a slightly smaller majority of parents, 77% of parents, agreed with this. Parents appear to want their voice to be heard in relation to childcare and two parents mentioned the lack of a national organisation for parents of preschool children as a factor, which hinders parent's communication at a policy level. Information provided by respondents on the written policies at their services appears to have very little information on the role of parents in relation to services. Written policies appeared to focus on materials the parents should supply for their child and rules for parents. None of the respondents mentioned any information in relation to partnership with parents. The written information appeared to focus on parents' obligations and not parents rights. Howe et al. (2001) claims that partnership should be based on shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each of the adult stakeholders. It appears in this study that roles are not clearly outlined for the stakeholders as no respondent reported an explicit written policy on partnership. This is also evident from the fact that 66% of parents were not clear about the opportunities that existed for partnership (see section 5.4.2). It is essential for parent-staff relationships that there are open channels of communication that stakeholders can identify and according to Powell (1989) communication is central to the development of partnerships.

While most respondents were satisfied with the way conflict was dealt with some respondents did mention that they had no choice but to give into the other stakeholder's demands even when they disagreed. Both staff and parents expressed these views. A small number of parents in particular felt that their only option was to agree with staff otherwise they would have to find a new childcare arrangement. This is a sign that in some of the services which responded there is an unequal relationship between parents and staff and this leads to a situation where it is impossible for stakeholders to reach a joint agreement. This may be similar to the situation described by Hughes and MacNaughton (2002) where staff knowledge is seen as the 'expert' and parent's knowledge of the child is seen as less important because it is based on experience and not scientific theory, allowing parents' views to be easily ignored.

### **6.3.7 Association between lack of trust and wanting increased partnership**

A number of parents comments highlighted a correlation between parents who had a negative attitude towards staff and a positive attitude towards partnership. Some parents stated that they trust staff completely and did not see the need for their participation while others felt that participation would increase the opportunities that they have to "keep tabs" on staff and check the care of their children. These parents appeared to view partnership as a form of surveillance and three parents wanted security cameras and web-cameras so that they could log on to view the care their child was receiving at any time. This is similar to the findings of Howe et al. (2000), that parents had two main motives for participation. The first was to monitor and obtain feedback about child's progress and secondly, to find out more about what goes on at preschools and to have input into their child's development. Many parents in this study expressed a desire for more information concerning preschool activities and their child's development. According to Galinsky (1992) parents who were attending centres, which were sensitive and responsive to their needs, were more satisfied and believed their child was doing better at the centre compared to parents who had a more detached relationship with staff and missed their children more and were less satisfied. In this study the parents who trusted staff less often desired closer monitoring of staff and appeared less satisfied with the relationship and more worried concerning aspects of the care their child was receiving.

### **6.3.8 Models of partnership and working parents**

An important aspect of this study was to examine the suitability of typologies of partnership in the context of working parents and their relationship with childcare providers. Furthermore, it is important to examine the reality of partnership for working parents in the Irish context. In section 5.5.6 partnership with working parents was examined and their perceptions of their needs were outlined. Giving parents 'peace of mind' concerning their child's welfare and safety while at work was the most frequently mentioned need, which helped working parents, followed by the provision of nutritious meals at the early years' service and the flexibility of the service. Very often parents spoke about benefits of the early years' service to the child and not to parents even when discussing their needs as working parents. In fact, one parent said that until reading the questionnaire she had never thought about the early years' service from the point of view of the parent. Communication with the staff also appeared to be a priority for parents. Partnership between staff and parents also appeared for many respondents to have an important social dimension. Some staff mentioned that the level of conversations they had with parents depended on how well they knew each other. As previously mentioned the main form of parental participation was attending a social evening or event, particularly in private services. Many staff and parents mentioned they enjoyed these occasions and in particular the opportunity to engage in adult conversation away from the children. This type of participation may provide an important social support for working parents who may otherwise not have the opportunity to engage with childcare staff or other parents.

Parents in this study seemed to be very aware of the effect that lack of time had on their opportunities for partnership. All of the fathers in the study and the majority of mothers identified it as the main barrier towards partnership. Many stated that lack of time gave rise to a situation where they were totally dependent on trusting staff. This situation may reflect Pugh and De'Aths' model of the passive non-participant where parents would like to be involved but are unable. This is in keeping with Bridges' (2001) notion that the current models of parental participation which expect parents' presence in the classroom are outdated and unfeasible and there is a need to develop new strategies to develop partnership with working parents. Parent engagement as described by Elliot (2002) may be a way forward for increasing partnership between parents and childcare providers. Elliot found that what parents really wanted was for

staff to share the knowledge and insights they have of children in their care through increased information exchange with parents (see section 3.6.2).

An important assumption of the traditional typologies of partnership is that staff are viewed as the professionals and partnership is seen as a way of empowering parents to have an equal relationship with staff. This may not be consistent with the current relationship that exists between many parents and childcare providers particularly in the context of private childcare. In private childcare settings parents are purchasing a service and are often very aware of their rights, as consumers and it is often the staff that may feel powerless and undermined by the parents. The traditional staff as expert model is also less relevant in the Irish childcare setting when the status of the childcare worker is examined. A recent report by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (2002), *Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning* found childcare workers in Ireland are poorly paid and it is viewed as a low status profession by Irish society. This is also reflected by staff views in this study, many of whom felt that parents treated them like 'babysitters'. This was more evident in the private setting. In this context, the role of the childcare professional which is central to Pugh and De'Aths' typology must be questioned and the whole issue of a model of partnership which seeks to empower both staff and parents needs to be addressed.

### **6.3.9 Staff-parent partnerships and the rights of children**

The importance of parents having the opportunity to express their opinions is not only crucial for parents but also for children. The parents in this study all have children aged 0-3, who because of their age, are limited in their ability to express their views. Therefore it is important that their parent(s) can act as an advocate for their needs and rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, stresses the importance of hearing the voice of the child and for very young children the parents may be considered to be in the best position to mediate this voice. The lack of opportunity for parents to express their own voice has been a recurring finding in this study and may therefore indicate that parents are not in a position to act as a voice for their child. This is apparent at both a national level, where there is a lack of an organisation to represent parents of pre-primary age children and at a local level where there are currently few opportunities for meaningful engagement between parents and childcare providers. The lack of meaningful engagement with parents affects the child's right to have their

opinions heard and their best interests promoted, which is a fundamental principle of current Irish law and policy concerning children including the *Child Care Act (1991)*, *The National Children's Strategy (2000)* and the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)*.

#### **6.3.10 Overall impression of lack of partnership**

While there are some positive examples of partnership, overall there is very little evidence of long-term commitment to partnership in the services surveyed. Using Pugh and De'Aths' typology the type of partnership in the study may be described as 'non-participation' attributed primarily to the lack time parents have for partnership. Other issues, which affect the overall level of partnership, include the lack of meaningful communication and parental engagement, which were referred to by both parents and staff. There appears to be inequality in the relationship and in particular many staff members in the private setting feel under-appreciated and undervalued. Situations where either staff or parents feel undermined affects their relationship and makes partnership an unattainable goal. This situation was more apparent in the private sector while in the public and community sectors the childcare workers role of professional seems to be more clearly defined, which in itself may lead to problems. Also in the private sector a number of parents mentioned that they were paying full time rates although their child was only attending the service part-time. One mother claimed this was the only reason she wasn't working part-time because she couldn't get part-time rates at her early years' service. This situation gives the impression that some services may not be meeting the needs of working parents and may be adding to parents' stress or problems instead of providing a support.

Throughout the study there was very little indication of parent's contributions being encouraged as parents were seen to have had little input into the curriculum, program planning or other areas of the early years' setting. According to Wolfendale (1994), recognising parents equal and equivalent expertise is one of the fundamental characteristics of partnership as is affording parents the opportunity to contribute to as well as to receive a service. Another aspect of partnership outlined by Wolfendale is sharing accountability and responsibility between parents and professionals. There was also very little evidence of this in the study with very few parents involved in management of services and few parent-staff meetings. However it is also important to

take into consideration that a small number of parents stated that they felt that the childcare staff were competent and did not need to consult the parent for every decision concerning the child. The majority of parents said that they had a trusting relationship with staff and many felt that they did not have the time to participate in all decision making. Therefore the characteristics of partnership as presented by Wolfendale may not be relevant to the parents who participated in this study and their perceptions of partnership.

An indication that partnership was limited in the services studied was the fact parents were only encouraged to stay during the induction period. Both parents and staff respondents suggested that parents might cause disruption in the childcare setting if they were encouraged to stay once the child had settled. Other parents felt that they were being rushed out of the childcare setting and were not given time to talk to staff. A significant number of parents were unclear about the opportunities that existed for them to participate in the early years' service and staff seriously underestimated the number of parents who were unclear about these opportunities. This would suggest that parents are not receiving information concerning partnership with their early years' service and that staff and parents are not exchanging views and information about parental participation. Many parents indicated they would like information not just about parental participation but also about all areas of the early years' service. Parents wanted not only to receive information but also want to be listened to and have their voices heard. Clarity concerning parents and staff respective roles appears to be compounded by lack of a clear policy on partnership in many of the early years' service studied. Rights and responsibilities were not clearly defined, parents were unclear about the opportunities for partnership and staff perceived parents as having a low level of interest in many areas of parental participation. In contrast many parents claimed they would welcome more opportunities to participate and wanted greater access to information.

## **6.4 Issues to be addressed in moving towards greater partnership**

### **6.4.1 Enhanced communication between staff and parents**

Communication was an issue frequently mentioned by parents and staff and in particular the need for more two-way communication. Parents want staff to provide them with more information more frequently, while staff want parents to ask more questions about their child's daily activities. One parent called for more daily written communication to improve continuity between home and the early years' service and several parents said that they would like more parent-staff meetings to improve information exchange.

*"I would like to feel I can ask questions regarding the girls when either I drop them or collect them" (Parent, 45, private)*

Other changes that parents wanted to make were nametags for staff and introductions to new staff members. Parents placed the onus on staff to provide them with more information while a small number of staff felt that parents failed to realise the benefits of such information about their child. Elliot (2002) found in her study that parents wanted a specific form of engagement with the service. In particular they wanted more information evenings to help them understand their children better and their child's development. This is similar to the desire of parents in this study for more information about their child and for more interaction with the service.

The importance of two-way communication between parents and childcare providers is well documented. A study by Smith and Hubbard (1998), found that more talk between parents and staff led to a warmer, more balanced relationship and resulted in the child being better adjusted to their surroundings. A possible way of increasing two-way communication would be through more widespread use of the keyworker system which would help establish greater links between home and childcare setting. Over 60% of parents and 50% of staff reported there being a key worker system at their early years' setting. There are still a significant number of services, which did not have a key worker system despite evidence in recent literature such as Marsh (1997) pointing to the advantages of having such a system in an early years' service. It has been found

to be particularly important in maintaining positive relationships between staff and parents and therefore an indicator of high quality childcare (Marsh, 1997).

Communication is a central issue for both parents and staff in this study, specifically the need for greater two-way communication. However while communication was mentioned as an important issue by many of the respondents, a small number of parents claimed that they did not need regular communication with their childcare setting because they trust the childcare provider completely to make decisions concerning their child.

#### **6.4.2 Barriers to partnership emerging in the study**

While low levels of partnership have been established it is important to examine why levels of partnership appear low and in particular the factors which help or hinder partnership. A variety of factors were identified by both parents and staff and the most frequently mentioned factor was parents' lack of time. A number of parents expressed very strong views in relation to this such as is clear that lack of time is a major barrier to parental participation for working parents and thus strategies need to be considered by childcare providers if they wish to facilitate partnership with working parents.

Employers and Policy Makers also need to consider more family friendly employment policies to allow parents time for partnership with their early years' service. Bridge (2001) claims that a likely explanation for low levels of participation is that parents have other demands on their time and it is unlikely that they are not interested in their child's education. Fine-Davis and Clarke (2002) in their study of the work-life balance also point out that Irish working parents are under enormous pressure due to lack of time and flexibility in the workplace is particularly important so that parents can have more satisfying lives. Lamb-Parker et al. (2001) also found in their study that the most commonly mentioned barrier to parental participation was parents having a schedule that conflicted with the activities offered by their early years' service. While parents and staff identified parents long working hours as the main barrier there appears to be few attempts to facilitate partnership outside of the normal working day. Again, this must be considered in the context of the long hours and the poor pay that staff receive.

Pugh and De'Aths' (1989) three-year study of partnership between professionals and parents in early years' settings identified ten factors, which help or hinder partnership. Pugh and De'Ath claim that during the course of their research they met no

parents who were not interested in their child's progress even though many factors prevented them from being involved in the centre. Five of the factors they identified were also identified in this study and are listed below.

### ***Establishing a policy on working with parents***

In the current study there did appear to be some confusion among parents in relation to their role and the opportunities available to them to participate in the childcare setting. Only 15% of parents reported knowledge of a written policy on parental participation. Just over half of the parents who didn't have a written policy said that they would like one suggesting that a significant number of parents would like a written policy. The publicly supported and community services scored best in this area with all parents from the community services and a third using publicly supported services reporting a written policy on parental involvement. However only four from the fifty-nine respondents using private services reported a written policy on partnership.

*"If the opportunity was presented I think more parents would be involved, given the chance." (Mother, Private, 46.3)*

Two thirds of all parents reported that they were not clear about the opportunities that existed for parental involvement at their early years' service. The Pugh and De'Ath (1989) study found that centres were more likely to be working towards partnership if they had "an explicit commitment in the form of a policy document on parental involvement" (p41). They found that when expectations were made clear both staff and parents were more satisfied with their roles.

### ***Parent's participation on management at the crèche.***

Few parents in this study were involved in the management of their early years' services and those that were involved were all from the publicly supported sector. Just over half of parents had been given no opportunity to be involved at management level and 40% of parents were not interested in participating in management. Pugh and De'Ath found in their study that, with the exception of playgroups and some community centres, very few parents were involved at management level of their childcare setting.

### ***Location and premises for parental activities.***

In the present study, a clear majority of parents (95%) claimed they were welcome at the early years' service at any time. Pugh and De'Ath(1989) found that the most important aspect of location and premises in helping or hindering partnership was whether or not the parent felt welcome there. Pugh and D'Ath(1989) found that another important factor in encouraging partnership was when parents had a space they identified as their own. Less than 10% of parents said that they had a parent room and one third of those who didn't have a parent room said that they would like one. Ten percent of parents and 2% of staff identified adequate space as the most important factor for encouraging partnership.

### ***Parents attitudes, expectations and role***

One of the main barriers to participation that Pugh and De'Ath(1989) found was whether or not a parent was working. Pugh and De'Ath identified a number of factors affecting parent's attitude towards extent and type of participation they wished for.

These included:

- *The parents needed to feel their help was wanted.*

Parents in this study often felt their help was not needed or else there was no need for them to participate.

*"I pay for my child to be cared for by the staff and therefore I do not need to participate". (Mother, Private, 35.5)*

Osborn and Milbank (1987) found in their review of literature relating to parental involvement in early years' services that the main reason that mothers were not participating was because they felt their help was not required. Approximately one in ten of the mothers that they surveyed claimed to be too busy or would not like to help. Osburn and Milbank also claim that the mother's answers might be subjective because they did not want to admit that they were not interested or didn't have time to be involved but preferred to say it was because they were not needed. While the majority of parents in this study claimed they did not have time to participate a small number also admitted they were not interested in participation. The main reason given for the lack of interest was because parents paid for their child to attend the early years' service

and while there the child was the responsibility of the childcare staff. Parents perceived themselves as consumers and some felt that they had no obligation to contribute to the childcare setting.

- *Parents perceive direct benefits to the parents or child.*

Over eighty percent of parent's felt that parents benefit from parental involvement while a slightly smaller majority 70% felt that children benefited from parental involvement. A third of parents and approximately one quarter of staff felt that parents own attitude was the most important factor in encouraging partnership.

### ***Changing professional roles, developing new skills and looking at attitudes of staff***

Some parents in this study stated that staff were not helpful in facilitating their partnership.

*"When I leave my child in, I strongly feel that I am being rushed so the staff can quickly get to work and get home." (Mother, Private, 15.3)*

*"The management of the crèche do not take enough interest and do not promote parental involvement or have enough meetings with parents." (Mother, Private, 34.5)*

Pugh and De'Ath found that if partnership is to exist between parents and staff there needs to be definition and clarification of roles so expectations are clear to both parties. Important strategies include staff training in working with parents, staff attitude to involving parents and staff actually wanting to work with parents. Katz (1977, cited in Rodd, 1994) claims that the relationship between parents and staff and the level of partnership is dependant upon the stage of the staffs' professional development. It is only when staff reach a mature stage of professional development that they can commit fully to partnership with parents and understand the necessity of collaboration with parents. There were a number of comments from staff in this study, which indicated that staff with low educational attainment and little experience may lack the confidence to develop a collaborative relationship with parents.

*"When staff have low confidence and lack motivation as well as education they are not as willing to share information. They fear that they will be asked something they don't know." (Staff, Private, 8.6).*

Rodd claims that for parent-staff partnerships to exist staff need to identify with parents and adopt a more mature and wider perspective. Staff may have to give up some control to allow partnership to develop and in certain cases review their expectations of parents. There was a small number of staff in this study who felt that parents were not interested in partnership. This limited expectation of parents could hinder any attempt to develop a partnership. Less than 10% of parents felt that staff training was the most important factor in encouraging partnership. In contrast staff rated staff training as a much more important factor in encouraging partnership.

The respondents in this study identified a number of factors, which were not identified by Pugh and De'Ath and may be helpful in developing strategies to facilitate partnership with working parents in early years' services. These included more meetings for parents to express their views and staff who were more willing to talk to parents and ask for their suggestions. Also mentioned was the issue of frequent staff turnover. Parents claimed this had a negative impact on their continued relations with staff and was viewed as a hindrance in developing partnership. One parent felt strongly about parental participation and suggested that it should be compulsory for all parents. She claimed she was not able to comprehend why some parents do not attend monthly meetings as "it's their (parents) children staff are discussing". The main factor identified as hindering partnership was a lack of time. This in itself is not surprising as all the respondents were working parents and it highlights the importance of developing new strategies so that the increasing number of working parents using childcare services can have a voice and some level of partnership. The whole issue of partnership needs to be reviewed for a changing context where issues such as trust and communication are key issues in partnership in contrast to the traditional styles of participation.

#### **6.4.3 Parents more willing to be involved than opportunities currently allow**

According to Howe et al. (2002) their study found that parents were more willing to be involved than opportunities currently allowed them to be. In this study a similar picture emerges. Data in Section 5.5.4 suggests that parents are available for greater participation than their childcare providers currently facilitate. A significant number of parent respondents indicated the 'would like to participate' section in a range of activities presented to them. The activities that parents appeared to be most

interested in participating in were helping with field trips, planning their child's individual needs and contributing to the early years' curriculum. In contrast, staff respondents marked the 'parents would like to participate' category less frequently than parents, particularly in areas of administrative activities such as serving on a parents council and serving on management committee which was not marked by any staff members. The staff did not seem aware of parent's interest in greater participation indicating that staff and parents views were not aligned and there appeared to be an information gap. The opportunities available to parents did not appear to meet parent's current needs or fit in with their time schedules yet many claimed they would like greater participation.

#### **6.4.4 All stakeholders want greater respect for childcare workers**

While the majority of staff claimed that parents did value their role a number of staff comments indicated they had concerns about the relationship. A particular concern for some staff was the respect they received from parents.

*"Parents should be more understanding towards staff and realise that their child is with us more than 8 hours a day and we know a lot about the way they grow"*

*(Staff, Private, 32.5).*

There was concern among staff that parents did not recognise the professionalism of the childcare worker and the contributions they make to childrens development or the stress that their job entailed. This is also evident when parents' views of staff training are examined. While many parents did mention they would like to see better training for staff overall it was not a priority for parents when looking at factors, which helped or hindered partnership and parents viewed it as the least important factor in encouraging partnership with parents. This appeared to be a contradiction and while parents appeared to value staff training they placed little emphasis on training staff to work with parents. Many parents stated they that relied on staff advice and expertise concerning child development. According to staff, however, some parents ignored their advice and did not accept their opinions. Staff even claimed that parents did not believe them if they make negative comments in relation to the child's progress and/or behavior leading to staff feeling frustrated and undervalued. This may not just be reflective of parent's

views but also wider societal perceptions of the role of childcare worker where it is one of the low paid jobs in the Irish economy. However a number of parents did appear to hold the childcare staff in great esteem and together with staff they stated that staff are underpaid for the job that they do.

*“I believe that the carers are not valued for their contribution to working families. They can not be overpaid/appreciated for the work/role they undertake.”*  
(Parent, Private, 32.5)

Although many parents complained about the high costs of childcare they also stated that childcare staff deserved better pay and more appreciation for the work that they do.

#### **6.4.5 Suggestions for increasing levels of partnership**

In this study just over one third of staff received training for working with parents and most staff described this training as focusing on communication. One staff member who was trained as a counselor and another had received communication training as part of their training to become a nurse. Only one staff member mentioned looking at the needs of parents. The majority of staff had no training for working directly with families. None of the respondents looked at the specific needs of working parents during their training yet all are working with this client group. There is very little evidence of partnership in the services surveyed yet many staff claimed that would like more collaboration indicating that staff may need more training to enable them facilitate partnership. As well as training staff in how to promote partnership it may also be helpful to give parents and staff more information about the benefits of partnership and the various ways they can participate in their early years' service. This may help parents and staff to develop more positive attitudes towards partnership. A number of parents claimed they knew very little about the concept of partnership. Lack of written policies on partnership and the low number of parents who were aware of the opportunities for partnership with their service indicates parents have received very little information on the topic.

In order to establish a parent-staff partnership a number of issues to the current parent-staff relationship need to be addressed. One of the main issues for staff and parents is a fundamental reconsideration of their roles and relationships. Parents and

staff need to view themselves as equal partners with the same goals and in particular staff need to be receptive to the concept of partnership with parents. Parents' busy schedules and lack of time from the staff perspective present a challenge to both parents and childcare providers when trying to establish a partnership. However it has already been established that parents are more willing to be involved than current opportunities affords them to be. This means that although they lack time most parents are willing to give more commitment to partnership with the service. Services should consult with parents to review the parent-staff relationship and consider strategies to promote partnership, which best suits them. Strategies such as more two-way communication do not necessarily have to be time consuming or mean that any stakeholders have to stay in the childcare setting after hours. Enhanced communication at pick up and drop off times as well as phone calls to parents at work during the day or more frequently take home reports would help improve communication and also improve continuity between home and the childcare setting. These types of initiatives would allow parents have a greater input into their child's care and give them the opportunity to express their views and ensure the voice of their child is heard.

## 6.5 Summary

Current childcare literature and government policy and emphasises the benefits of partnership, yet evidence in this study indicates that partnership between parents and childcare providers is not prevalent. In the study while there were some examples of partnership found it is apparent that partnership between staff and parents is not widespread. Analysis of the data in this study reveals a variety of views representing both positive and negative perceptions of partnership. The examples of partnership found in the study and respondents' views do not closely resemble those in the typologies of partnership cited in the literature. In particular parents do not seem to have very much information concerning partnership. This is apparent from the fact that two-thirds of parents are not aware of the opportunities for partnership in their early years' service. Few parents seemed to have the opportunity to play a very active role in their child's preschool setting yet their views would suggest that they would like the opportunity for greater participation. This indicates the importance of developing partnership to meet the expectations and needs of working parents. An important aspect

of this and an issue that was mentioned by all stakeholders is the need for more two-way communication. This would help parents and staff, understand each other's perspective and would facilitate the joint-decision making process.

# **Chapter 7**

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

## **7.1 Introduction**

The aim of the study is to illuminate the views of parents and staff in relation to partnership in early years' services in Ireland. The views of full-time working parents of 0-3 year olds, in the Dublin area are represented, as are the views of the early years' staff who care for their children. Through the study parents and staff had an opportunity to voice their opinions and desires in relation to parent-staff relationships and partnership in early years' services. A variety of perceptions of partnership emerged from both parents and staff in this study. This chapter examines the conclusions that can be drawn from these views and considers recommendations for future policy and practice in relation to partnership in early years' services. Finally, this chapter offers suggestions for future research in this area.

## **7.2 Conclusions**

### **7.2.1 Variety of perceptions of partnership emerged**

In general parents and staff felt that parents, staff and children benefited from partnership and parents were cited by both sets of respondents as the stakeholder who benefited most from partnership. Staff and parents views were not homogenous but were not necessarily in conflict with each other as they represented different stakeholders' viewpoints. Parents' and staffs' perceptions of partnership fell into three broad categories. The first category included respondents who viewed partnership as a positive concept for a variety of reasons such as enhanced continuity between home and the early years' setting. The second category included those who perceived partnership to be positive but believed it should be promoted within limits. The third and least popular category included those respondents who viewed partnership as a negative concept and as having no benefits for stakeholders.

There was a difference in opinion between parents and staff concerning who is responsible for initiating partnership. It appeared that while parents placed the onus on staff to initiate partnership, staff placed the onus on parents. While staff perceived parents as being too busy for partnership, parents felt that staff did not need, or in some cases want, parent's participation in their early years' service. Parent's apparent lack of

time, and parent and staff attitudes were cited by staff and parents as the most significant factors in the development of partnerships.

While perceptions of partnership were for the most part positive, there did appear to be a general lack of knowledge concerning the concept of partnership. Staff appeared to be more aware than parents of the benefits of partnership as described in the literature. This is similar to Fine-Davis's (2002) findings that Irish parents were, in general, lacking awareness of the benefits of early years' programmes and issues pertaining to quality childcare. The current study found that there was a common misconception among staff and parents that partnership was a staff directed activity, largely confined to parent's presence in the early years' setting and many felt this was inappropriate for full-time working parents.

While there appeared to be limited awareness of partnership a sizeable minority of respondents mentioned that they would like to have partnership. In particular, a number of staff not only called for greater awareness of partnership but also greater research on the topic. Interesting it was mentioned by some respondents that taking part in the study had greatly increased their awareness of partnership.

### **7.2.2 Types of partnership found in the study**

While there were some positive examples of partnership, overall there is very little evidence of long-term commitment to partnership found in the services surveyed. Using Pugh and De'Ath's typology the type of partnership in the study may be described as 'non-participation', attributed primarily to the lack time parents have for partnership. Other issues, which affect the overall level of partnership, include the lack of meaningful communication and of parental engagement, which were referred to by both parents and staff. There appears to be inequality in the parent-staff relationship and in particular many staff members in the private setting felt under-appreciated and undervalued. Situations where either staff or parents feel undermined affects their relationship and makes partnership an unattainable goal. Examples of partnership appeared to be more prevalent in community and publicly supported services than in the private services in the study.

Throughout the study there was very little indication of parents' contributions being encouraged and parents appeared to have little input into the preschool curriculum, program planning or other areas of the early years' setting. There was also very little evidence of parents and staff sharing accountability and responsibility for services in this study with very few parents involved in management of services and few even holding parent-staff meetings. However it is also important to take into consideration that a small number of parents stated that they felt that the childcare staff were fully competent and did not need to consult the parent for every decision concerning the child. The majority of parents said that they had a trusting relationship with staff and many felt that they did not have the time to participate in all decision making. One indication that partnership was limited in the services studied was the fact parents were only encouraged to stay during the induction period. Both parents and staff respondents suggested that parents might cause disruption in the childcare setting if they are encouraged to stay once the child has settled.

Some parents felt that they were regularly rushed out of the childcare setting and were not given time to talk to staff. A significant number of parents were unclear about the opportunities that existed for them to participate in the early years' service and some staff seemed to underestimate the number of parents who were aware of these opportunities. This would suggest that parents were not receiving adequate information concerning partnership with their early years' service and that staff and parents are not exchanging views and information about parental participation. Clarity concerning parents and staff respective roles appears to be compounded by lack of a clear policy on partnership. Rights and responsibilities were not clearly defined, parents were unclear about the opportunities for partnership and staff perceived parents as having a low level of interest in many areas of parental participation. In contrast many parents claimed they would welcome more opportunities to participate and wanted greater access to information.

The types of activities parents were participating in were, typically, staff directed, not characterised by a sense of partnership or mutual understanding and many parents viewed staff as the experts in relation to childcare. This is in line with the expert model that Dale (1996) describes, where the main role of the parent is as information provider. There appears to be limited opportunities for joint-decision making and

limited opportunities for parental engagement which is again suggestive of the expert-model where the staff member remains in control and the parent has little input into their child's care and education. A particular concern for some parents was the feeling of powerlessness due to their reliance on the service. Some parents felt that the only alternative to dealing with conflict was to leave the service and for many this was not feasible for many reasons such as the shortage of childcare places or lack of time and resources to seek out new child care facilities. This can lead to a situation where the parent feels disempowered and may be again reflective of the expert model of the parent and professional relationship. While the majority of parents seemed to be aware of the beneficial nature of partnership few seemed to have the opportunity to play a very active role in their early years' setting.

### **7.2.3 Importance of trust for working parents**

There appeared to be a high level of contentment with the parent-staff relationship and there was a general consensus that trust between parents and staff was a particularly important aspect of the relationship, particularly for working parents. It was mentioned by a third of parents in the study and many claimed that staff offered them 'peace of mind' concerning their child's welfare while they were at work. There also appeared to be a link between lack of trust and wanting greater partnership with the early years' service. Parents who trusted staff completely seem less interested in partnership while those who did not appear to trust staff saw partnership as a way to monitor staff and linked partnership to increased surveillance of their early years' service. A small number of staff also had similar views and one even suggested that webcams maybe an alternative to partnership. This again illustrated that many parents and staff may not be aware of the meaning and benefits of a parent-staff partnership. The apparent lack of awareness concerning partnership maybe a factor in why motivation for partnerships appears to be limited.

### **7.2.4 Importance of communication**

Throughout the study, both parent and staff respondents frequently mentioned the importance of communication. It was the most frequently mentioned factor in relation to changes that they would like to make to the parent-staff relationship. In particular, the need to increase two-way communication and have a greater flow of information were frequently cited by parent and staff. There appeared to be limited

opportunity for meaningful engagement for parents with the early years' services in the study. There was little evidence of written information, yet a significant number of parents wanted it. There were few staff-parent meetings, few notice boards and some parents felt that staff were not available to them at the beginning and end of each session. Few parents were contributing to the curriculum or program planning at their early years' service and a small number of parents even found it difficult to approach staff if there was a problem. A significant number of parents were not satisfied with the amount of information they were receiving from their service. Many parents indicated they would like information not just about parental participation but all areas of the early years' service. Parents wanted not only to receive information but also to be listened to and have their voices heard.

### **7.2.5 Professional development of early years' workers**

The findings of this study may have implications for current early years' personnel training in Ireland. In this study just over one third of staff received training for working with parents and most staff described this training as focusing on communication. None of the staff members in this study had specific training focusing on full-time working parents yet all were working with this client group.

Another finding in the study was that some staff members were uncomfortable with parents presence in the early years' setting and had a negative view of partnership and collaboration with parents. There was also a small number of staff who felt that parents 'uninformed' views may contradict those of the service. The literature suggests that these findings maybe linked to the stage of professional development that a staff member has reached. According to Katz (1977, cited in Rodd, 1994) staff, need to develop a more mature, wider perspective to work effectively with parents and not to feel undermined or threatened by parental participation. This may indicate that a number of staff in the study lacked the expertise and confidence to develop a collaborative relationship with parents. There was also evidence in the study to show that resolution of conflict often led to the situation where either parents or staff, were forced to concede their views. This led to an imbalance of power and some staff found it difficult to concede power to parents and felt threatened by calls for accountability. Recognising parents' as having equivalent expertise is a fundamental characteristic of

partnership and is one premise on which parents are offered the opportunity to contribute to the service.

However there was also a number of staff in the study who felt that parents did not respect them or treat them as equal workers, and this was more evident in private services surveyed. Staff were particularly concerned that parents did not recognise their professionalism or listen to their opinions concerning childcare. This may not just be reflective of parents' views but may reflect wider societal perceptions of the role of the childcare worker, which is a low paid and low status job in the current Irish economy.

#### **7.2.6 Appropriateness of current forms of partnership for working parents**

An important aspect of this study was to examine the appropriateness of typologies of partnership in relation to working parents and the reality of partnership for working parents in the Irish context. While there were examples of the existence of elements of partnership in the study there is very little evidence of partnerships, consistent with the typologies of partnership such as that outlined by Pugh and De'Ath. However it is important to put these findings in the context of the needs of working parents as identified by parents themselves. These 'needs' are not always consistent with the hierarchical framework used in these typologies as evidenced by the fact that one of the parents main concerns was 'peace of mind' while their child is attending the service. Many parents do not appear to have a significant amount of time for meaningful contact with the childcare providers. This situation may reflect Pugh and De'Ath's model of the passive non-participant where parents would like to participate but are unable. This is in keeping with Bridges' (2001) notion that the current models of parental participation, which expect parents' presence in the early years' setting are outdated and unfeasible and there is a need to develop new strategies for partnership with working parents. Another assumption underpinning the traditional typologies of partnership is that the early years' staff are viewed as professionals and partnership is seen as empowering parents to have an equal relationship with staff. This model may more adequately describe 'compensatory' services where parents were often seen to be in need of family support and advice or re-direction. This is a very different situation to that of many of the working parents in this study who see themselves as consumers of childcare. This situation may undermine the significance of the traditional partnership typologies in this situation.

### **7.2.7 Promoting partnership for working parents**

An important finding of the study was that despite parents other commitments many stated that they had a desire for greater participation. Parents are more willing to participate than current opportunities allow. Parents and staff suggested a number of factors they viewed as helping or hindering partnership. The most frequently mentioned was lack of time, and parents and staff busy schedules present a challenge to all stakeholders. This in itself is not surprising as all the respondents were working parents and it highlights the importance of developing strategies so that the increasing number of working parents using childcare services can have a voice and some level of participation. A large number of parents also stressed the importance of being given an opportunity to express their views in relation to childcare. The problem of lack of time cannot be resolved only within the service but is also dependent on the promotion of more family friendly work arrangements in the work place. A lack of suitable activities was also cited such as evening events or parent-staff meetings. Parents and staff suggested those more family friendly policies in the workplace and an organisation to represent the views of preschool parents at a national level maybe helpful in promoting partnerships. Also positive staff and parent attitudes were cited as important aspects for encouraging partnership.

### **7.2.8 Limitations of the study.**

There are a number of limitations with this current study which may be addressed in future studies on this topic. The response rate for the study was relatively low which may be due to the fact that the main method of data collection was a self-answering questionnaire. The use of self-answering questionnaires in the study meant that the researcher was unable to have control over which parents and staff answered the questionnaires. Staff bias may dictate that only the parents they perceive, as being likely to answer the questionnaire in a positive manner will receive it. Also self-report measures may not capture the dynamic nature of the staff-parent relationship or parents' participation in the early years' service. The views represented in the study are only those of the parents and staff of the early years services, children's views were not consulted which may have added an extra dimension to the study. Other methods of data collection such as in-depth interviews and case studies may have provided more detailed data and added to data corroboration in the study. Also the majority of respondents were from one particular type of provision, private early years services,

which means that the study mainly reflects the experience of partnership in private services in the Dublin area.

### **7.3 Recommendations**

Arising from the findings of the study a number of recommendations can be made for future practice and policy concerning parent-staff partnerships in Irish early years' services.

- Staff and parents could be made more aware of the importance of partnership in early years' services. There needs to be more information available to all stakeholders on both strategies for promoting partnership and the benefits of a partnership for all the stakeholders in early years' services.
- The recent framework for training of early years' workers in Ireland "Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning" (2002) recognises as one of its core value statements that parents, guardians and family are the child's primary source of well-being. There needs to be an increase in the levels of training for early years' staff in the area of working with parents and more specifically training for dealing with the needs of full-time working parents.
- Early years' staff need to get the respect and remuneration they deserve as professional childcare workers to allow them develop a mature collaborative relationship with parents. There also needs to be a balance between the needs of staff, parents and children.
- Early years' services need to be made aware of the importance of providing regular updates for parents. More two-way information exchange between parents and staff should be encouraged and more extensive use should be made out of innovative communication such as videotaping and e-mail. Parent engagement, which stresses the importance of communication between parents and childcare providers, may be a way forward for increasing partnership.

- The roles and obligations of parents and staff need to be outlined in each early years' service in a written policy, which is easily accessible to all staff and parents. Also parents need to be made more aware of the opportunities that exist at their early years' service for partnership.
- A central issue that has arisen from the study is how to develop partnership with working parents. There needs to be a move away from the traditional view of working with parents, which required the parent to be present in the setting. A more practical approach would be to involve parents in decision making processes and increase home school continuity through the use of enhanced two-way communication with parents and allowing parents to contribute to the preschool curriculum and program planning in their own time. In general a new attitude that incorporates the 'shared care' between parents and childcare professionals needs to be developed and would require time and expertise to explore.
- Early years' services need to assess the needs of working parents at an individual level so that they can ensure the service they provide is as supportive as possible to working parents.
- At a policy level, family friendly policies need to take into account parental participation in early years' services. This is already happening in Sweden where parents have two days paid leave a year to visit their child's preschool or school setting.
- The introduction of an organisation to represent the views of parents of preschool children at a national level may allow parents to have an influence on future early childhood care and education policy and may provide parents with the confidence to feel that they have a right to be involved.

- The introduction of a parents' charter and a children charter for Irish early years' services would help ensure that parents' rights and obligations are clearly outlined and accessible to all.

## **7.4 Directions of future research**

This study has elicited the views of parents and staff and revealed some diverse views and practices pertaining to partnership in an Irish context. Future research needs to further investigate parental voice in Ireland and further assess the needs of working parents for the future development of early years' services. Many parents in the study emphasised the importance and valued the opportunity of having their views listened to and recorded. Comparing and contrasting parent and staff opinions has provided interesting and illustrative data and future research may be further enhanced by including the views of the third main stakeholders, children. Children's opinions of partnership would provide a unique perspective and may provide useful information on the concept of partnership and the benefits that it may provide. It would also be useful to assess the types of activities that children would like to have their parents participating in at home and at their early years' service. It may also be useful to assess the long-term results of partnerships not only for parents, staff and children but the impact it may have on the wider community in general.

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## **Glossary of terms**

### **Parent**

The term parent is used in this study to refer to the mother, father or adult carer who has parental responsibility for the care and upbringing of the child.

### **Early years services**

The term early years' service is used in this study to refer to services which provide daycare facilities and services to pre-school children and includes private services, publicly supported services and community supported services.

### **Sessional day care**

According to the National Childcare Census Report (2001) sessional care, refers to childcare facilities, which usually offer a service for a few hours a day such as a morning play group. Types of sessional care include drop in crèches, playgroups/pre-schools, Montessori schools, parent and toddler groups and homework clubs.

### **Full day care**

According to the National Childcare Census Report (2001) full-day care services provides childcare for longer hours than sessional care. Types of full-time day care include crèches/day care, pre-schools, Montessori schools and workplace crèche.

### **Staff**

This refers to the staff members working in early years services which provide daycare facilities and services to pre-school children. In this study this term includes members of management of these services as well as regular staff members who replied to the survey questionnaires.

### **Naíonraí**

During the 1960s Irish speaking pre-schools or Naíonraí were established, the first of which was set up in Shannon, Co. Limerick. By 1975 there were 38 Irish speaking playgroups in the Republic of Ireland.

# Appendices

## Appendix A

### Cover letter of questionnaire for parent and staff surveys

Postgraduate Office,  
School of Social Science,  
DIT,  
Rathmines House,  
143-149, Rathmines Rd,  
Dublin 6.

Dear Parent/ Staff,

My name is Shirley Martin and I am a Post Graduate Student with Dublin Institute of Technology. I am currently carrying out a Masters research project entitled '*Parents and Early Childhood Services in a Changing Context – An Exploratory Study*'. The purpose of the study is to investigate parent's views, ideas, needs and expectations in relation to childcare. In particular, the study will focus on the relationship that parents have with childcare providers.

With an ever-increasing number of mothers now working outside of the home there is a growing reliance on childcare as an essential family support. As the childcare sector is expanding it is becoming apparent that there is a lack of research in relation to parents and childcare in Ireland. As parents are becoming increasingly dependant on resource outside of their immediate family to help them in their children's upbringing it is necessary that the voice of parents be heard, and that they are allowed to contribute to the developing childcare sector. The results of this project will contribute to knowledge on parent's views and expectations of childcare services and will be of interest to policy makers and service providers. The results will also be used to inform Early Childhood Care and Education training courses at DIT.

I would be very grateful if you could take time to complete the enclosed questionnaire. The questionnaire should take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete.

**Total anonymity and confidentiality of individual respondents is guaranteed.** The questionnaires will only be seen by myself and will not be available to any third party such as the crèche. If you could please return the questionnaire to me in the next week or by the 30<sup>th</sup> of January in the attached stamped addressed envelope I would be very grateful.

Should you have any questions or problems regarding the survey please feel free to contact.

Yours sincerely,

Shirley Martin  
Postgraduate Student

## Appendix B

### Instruction page for early years services accompanying questionnaires

Postgraduate Office  
School of Social Science & Legal Studies  
DIT Rathmines House  
143-146 Rathmines Rd  
Dublin 6

Dear Staff,

Following our recent telephone discussion I now forward you the staff and parent questionnaires for my project. I would be very grateful if you could distribute the questionnaires to staff and parents in your crèche. Please find attached to both staff and parent surveys a cover letter with each survey, which explains the purpose of the project and my contact details.

- There are 2 staff surveys and 4 parent surveys enclosed.
- Could you please distribute the survey to parents who have a child aged **under 4 years** who are attending the crèche for **20 hours or more** a week.
- Each survey has a stamped addressed envelope attached, which should be used when returning the survey.
- The survey should be returned within the next 10 days if possible.
- Total anonymity and confidentiality for parents and staff is guaranteed.

I would sincerely like to thank you for your co-operation in facilitating this project. Should you have any questions or problems regarding the survey please feel free to contact me at 01-4023453.

Yours sincerely,

Shirley Martin  
Postgraduate Student

## Appendix C

### Reminder letter to early years services February 2002

Postgraduate Office,  
School of Social Science,  
DIT,  
Rathmines House,  
143-149, Rathmines Rd,  
Dublin 6.

Dear Staff,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for allowing me access to your crèche for the purpose of my data collection for my study '*Parents and Early Childhood Services in a Changing Context – An Exploratory Study*'. To date I have had a good response rate to the questionnaire and I am sending this letter to ask you to remind any parents and staff who have not returned the survey to do so by the 13<sup>th</sup> of March. If you have misplaced the surveys or did not receive them please contact me by phone at (01) 4083520 and I would be happy to forward you new surveys.

I would once again like to reassure you that total anonymity and confidentiality of individual respondents is guaranteed. The questionnaires will only be seen by myself and will not be available to any third party.

Should you have any questions or problems regarding the survey please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Shirley Martin  
Postgraduate Student

---

## Appendix D Staff Questionnaire

### 1. Background information

1. Do you have a childcare qualifications? Yes  No

If yes please give details:

Course Title: ..... Award: .....

What college did you attend? .....

For how long did you attend? .....

2. How long have you been working in the early years services? .....

3. a. How long have you been working in this particular crèche? .....

b. What is your current position at the crèche? .....

4. What type of crèche are you currently working in?

Workplace  Private Crèche  ADM crèche  Publicly  Other   
Crèche  funded crèche

5. What age group are you mainly working with at the crèche?

0-1 years  1-2 years  2-3 year  3-4 years  4-5 years

6. Do you have any specific training in working with parents? Yes  No

Please give details

.....  
.....

### 2. Children Starting at the Crèche

1. How do staff introduce parents and children to the crèche?

.....  
.....  
.....

2. Read the following and tick the statement which best reflects your views.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Parents are encouraged to spend time at the crèche when their child is settling in.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mothers and fathers are made feel welcome at the crèche	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parents are provided with written information before starting	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
There is adequate provision at the crèche for under threes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### **3. Parents communicating with staff**

1. Are parents welcome at the crèche at any time? Yes  No

2. When does the main contact with parents occur?

.....

3. What are the main topics of conversation when you meet parents?

.....  
 .....

4. How does the crèche exchange information with parents?

*Please tick which options apply to your crèche*

<input type="checkbox"/>	News letter	<input type="checkbox"/>	Written notes
<input type="checkbox"/>	Conversations at the beginning and end of each day	<input type="checkbox"/>	Individual parent-staff meetings
<input type="checkbox"/>	E-mail	<input type="checkbox"/>	Group parent meetings
<input type="checkbox"/>	Notice board	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other, please specify:
<input type="checkbox"/>	Telephone call	<input type="checkbox"/>	

5. Does your crèche organise staff-parent meetings?

Weekly  Monthly  Every 3 Months   
 Twice a year  Yearly  Never

6. Do parents have access to their child's developmental records? Yes  No

7. Is there a way for parents to make suggestions/or give feedback at the crèche? Yes  No

8. What happens if there is a conflict between your views and the views of parents?

.....  
 .....

9. Is there a key worker system at the crèche? (Key worker is a staff member who takes special responsibility for you and your child) Yes  No

If no would you like such a system to be in place? Yes  No

### **4. Opportunities for Parental Participation**

1. Is there a written policy on parental participation at the crèche? Yes  No

If yes, what does this involve?

.....  
 .....  
 ...

*If no, do think there should be a written policy on parents? Yes  No*

2. a. Are parents clear about the opportunities that exist for parental participation? Yes  No

b. Are staff clear about the opportunities that exist for parental participation? Yes  No

3. Who makes the decisions about whether or not parents participate in activities at the crèche?

Crèche owner  crèche manager  room supervisor  other

4. Do you think parents should participate in the crèche? Yes  No

**5. In which of the following activities do parents participate?**

	Have participated	would like to	not interested	no opportunity
Help with field trips	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Help with program planning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Assist in fund raising	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Observe class room activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participate during meal times	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Attend party or social event	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Help with class room activity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Serve on parent council/board.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Carry out activity i.e. story telling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Plan their child's' individual needs with staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contribute to the crèche curriculum	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organising books or toy clubs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Serve on management committee of the crèche	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parental expertise is used at the crèche (music or art)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**6. In your opinion what factors help parents to participate in the crèche?**

.....  
 .....

**7. In your opinion what factors prevent parents from to participating in the crèche?**

.....  
 .....

**8. Rank the following statements according to the extent you think they have a positive effect on parent's participation in a crèche.**

*Please rank in order from 1,2, 3, 4, 5, with 1 having the most positive effect.*

There is a written policy for working with parents	
Shortage of space in the crèche for parent activities	
Staff have training in working with parents	
Staff are interested in working with parents	
Parent's own attitude towards involvement i.e. Do they think it is beneficial?	

Parent Area

9. Is there a parent room or parent area at the crèche? Yes  No

10. If there is do you feel parents are making use of this facility? Yes  No

11. If not would you like to see an area set aside strictly for parents? Yes  No

Reasons for parental participation

12. a. Do you feel children, benefit from parental participation at the crèche? Yes  No   
 b. Do you feel parents, benefit from parental participation at the crèche? Yes  No   
 c. Do you feel staff, benefit from parental participation at the crèche? Yes  No

## 5. Parent-Staff Relations

1. Are you satisfied with the relationship that you have with parents at the crèche?  
 Yes  No

2. What, if anything, you would like to change about this relationship?

.....  
 .....

3. Read the following statements and indicate the statement which best reflects your views.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Staff training is very important	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff find it easy to approach parents if there is a problem	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communication between staff and parents shows respect and trust.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff are readily available to parents before each session starts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff are readily available to parents at the end of each session	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parents find it easy to approach staff if there is a problem	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. In your opinion do parents value your role as a childcare worker? Yes  No

Give reasons for your answer .....

## 6. Needs of working parents

1. What are the things my crèche does which are helpful to a working parent?

.....  
 .....

2. What are the things my crèche does that are not helpful to a working parent?

.....  
 .....

2. Is there any other comments you would like to make in relation to the issues raised in this survey?

.....  
 .....

**Thank you for taking the time to answer this questionnaire.**

## Appendix E Parent Questionnaire

### 1. Background information

1. How many children do you have in total?
2. What age is your child/children? .....
3. How long have you been using this childcare service?  
Less than 6 months  Less than 1 year  Less than 2 years  More than 2 years
4. Where does the child/children attending the crèche come in the family?  
*First Born*  *Second*  *Third*  *Other*
5. What type of crèche are you currently using?  
*Workplace*  *Private Crèche*  *ADM crèche*  *Publicly funded crèche*  *Other*
6. Are you parenting alone? Yes  No
7. What is your relationship to the child?  
*Mother*  *Father*  *Other*

### 2. Starting at the Crèche

1. How did staff introduce you and your child to the crèche?
- .....
- .....

2. Tick the box which best reflects your views.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I felt comfortable spending time at the crèche when my child was settling in.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mothers and fathers were made feel welcome at the crèche	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My child is happy to attend	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parents are provided with written information before starting at the crèche.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
There is adequate provision at the crèche for under threes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I believe the provision offers value for money	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I receive enough information regarding my child's' progress	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**3. Communicating with staff**

1. Are parents welcome at the crèche at any time? Yes  No

2. When does the main contact with staff occur?

.....  
 .....

3. What are the main topics of conversation when you meet staff?

.....  
 .....

4. How do you receive information from within the crèche?

*Please tick which options apply to your crèche*

News letter	<input type="checkbox"/>	Written notes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Conversations at the beginning and end of each day	<input type="checkbox"/>	Individual parent-staff meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>
E-mail	<input type="checkbox"/>	Group parent meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>
Notice board	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other, please specify:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Telephone call	<input type="checkbox"/>		

5. Does your crèche organise staff-parent meetings?

Weekly  Monthly  Every 3 Months   
 Twice a year  Yearly  Never

6. Parents have access to their child's developmental records? Yes  No

7. Is there a way to making suggestions/give feedback to staff at the crèche? Yes  No

8. What happens if there is a conflict between your views and the views of staff?

.....  
 .....

9. a. Is there a key worker system at the crèche? (Key worker is a staff member who takes special responsibility for you and your child) Yes  No

b. If no would you like a key worker at the crèche? Yes  No

**4. Opportunities for Parental Participation**

1. Is there a written policy on parental participation at the crèche? Yes  No

If yes what does this involve?

.....  
 .....

*If no, do think there should be a written policy on parents?* Yes  No

2. Are you clear about the opportunities that exist for parental participation? Yes  No

3. Who makes the decisions about whether or not parents participate in activities at the crèche?  
 Crèche owner  crèche manager  room supervisor  other

4. Do you think parents should participate in the crèche? Yes  No

5. In which of the following activities have you participated or would like to participate?

	Have participated	would like to	not interested	no opportunity
Helped with field trips	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Helped with program planning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Assisted in fund raising	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Observed class room activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sharing meal/snaek	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Attended party or social event	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Helped with class room activity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Served on parent council/board.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Carried out activity i.e. story telling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Planning your child's' individual needs with staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contributed to crèche curriculum	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organising book or toy club	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Serve on management committee of the crèche	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parental expertise is used at the crèche (music or art )	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**6. In your opinion what factors help parents participate in the crèche?**

.....  
 .....

**7. In your opinion what factors prevent parents from participating in the crèche?**

.....  
 .....

**8. Rank the following statements according to the extent you think they have a positive effect on parent's participation in a crèche.**

**Please rank in order from 1,2, 3, 4, 5 with 1 having the most positive effect.**

There is a written policy for working with parents	
Space in the crèche for parent activities	
Staff have training in working with parents	
Staff are interested in working with parents	
Parent's own attitude towards involvement i.e. Do they think it is beneficial?	

Parent Area

9. Is there a parent room or parent area at the crèche? Yes  No

10. If yes, are you making use of this facility? Yes  No

11. If no, would you like to see an area set aside for parents? Yes  No

Reasons for parental participation

12 a. Do you feel children, benefit from parental participation at the crèche? Yes  No

b. Do you feel parents, benefit from parental participation at the crèche? Yes  No

c. Do you feel staff, benefit from parental participation at the crèche? Yes  No

**5. Parent-staff relations**

1. Are you satisfied with the relationship that you have with staff at the crèche?

Yes  No

2. What if anything you would like to change about this relationship?

.....  
 .....  
 .....

3. Read the following statements and indicate the statement which best reflects your views.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Staff accept the values that I have as a parent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I trust staff to make good decisions concerning my child	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff are easy to approach if there is a problem	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff training is very important	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff are readily available to parents before each session starts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff are readily available to parents at the end of each session	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communication between staff and parents shows respect and trust.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I generally meet the same staff when I visit the crèche.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**6. Needs of working parents**

1. What are the things the crèche does that are helpful to me as a working parent?

.....  
 .....  
 .....

2. What are the things my crèche does which are not helpful to me as a working parent?

.....  
 .....  
 .....

3. Is there any other comments you would like to make in relation to the issues raised in this survey?

.....  
 .....

**Thank you for taking the time to answer this questionnaire.**

## Appendix F

### Statistical tests employed using SPSS

The majority of tests to be used for the data analysis in this project will be non-parametric tests. These are called assumption free tests because they make no assumption about the type of data on which they can be used (Field, 2000). Most of these tests work on the principle of ranking data. By ranking data some of the information about the magnitude of difference between scores is lost and because of this non-parametric tests are less powerful than parametric (Field, 2000). Non-parametric tests are distribution free test and therefore do not assume normal distribution. According to Foster, when using nominal scales there are some parametric tests which are appropriate such as the chi-square. A number of non-parametric tests which are used in this study are described in detail below.

#### Mann-Whitney test

The Mann-Whitney test is the non-parametric equivalent of the independent t-test and is used to compare data collected in an independent group design. It is used when data are only of ordinal level of measurement. This can be used with samples of different sizes. The test ranks the results of the two independent samples and tests whether the two samples are different by carrying out a calculation on the rank.

*“The Mann-Whitney test works by looking at differences in the ranked position of scores in different groups” (Field, 2000, p52)*

Mann Whitney relies on scores being ranked from lowest to highest therefore the group with the lowest mean rank in the group. According to Sarantakos this test tests the null hypothesis about the identity of the population. There was also a significant difference in scores in relation to the question on adequate space for under

*“The Mann-Whitney compares the scores on a specified variable of two independent groups. The scores of the two groups are ranked as one set, the sum of the rank values of each group is found and a U statistic is then calculated” (Foster, 1998, p224)*

If probability is less than 0.05 there is a significant difference between scores for grouping variables 1 and 2.

#### Bivariate correlations.

Spearman's rho is a non-parametric bivariate correlation coefficient. There are two possibilities when using the test. The first is the one-tailed, which should be selected when there is a directional hypothesis. The second option is the two-tailed, which is the weaker of the two tests, is used when the direction of the relationship cannot be predicted. The table of results is referred to as a correlation matrix. Spearman's rho ranks the data and then applies Pearson's equation (a parametric test) to the data. It is used for ordinal data. If the significance value for this correlation coefficient is less than 0.05 it can be concluded that there is a significant relationship (Foster, 1998).

## Appendix G

### Statistical tests and tables from chapter 5: Presentation of data

#### 5.2 Background information

##### 5.2.1 Type of service and parental status

type of creche used \* are you a lone parent Crosstabulation

Count		are you a lone parent		Total
		yes	no	
type of creche used	private creche	11	51	62
	ADM creche	1	2	3
	Publicly funded	5	8	13
	Other	1		1
Total		18	61	79

#### Correlations

			type of creche used	are you a lone parent
Spearman's rho	type of creche used	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.239*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.034
		N	79	79
	are you a lone parent	Correlation Coefficient	-.239*	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.034	.
		N	79	79

\*. Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

##### 5.2.2 Type of service worked in and having a childcare qualification

#### Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	16.770 <sup>a</sup>	6	.010
Likelihood Ratio	18.126	6	.006
Linear-by-Linear Association	.004	1	.952
N of Valid Cases	44		

a. 9 cells (75.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .36.

#### Correlations

			type of creche you are working in	childcare qualification
Spearman's rho	type of creche you are working in	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.195
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.184
		N	48	48
	childcare qualification	Correlation Coefficient	-.195	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.184	.
		N	48	48

### 5.2.3 Type of service worked in and length of time working in the service.

Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
type of creche you are working in * how long you been working in this creche	48	100.0%	0	.0%	48	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	39.637 <sup>a</sup>	24	.023
Likelihood Ratio	32.541	24	.114
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.845	1	.009
N of Valid Cases	48		

a. 37 cells (94.9%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .08.

### 5.2.4 Position in crèche and qualification.

what is your current position in the creche \* childcare qualification

Crosstabulation

Count		childcare qualification		Total
		yes	no	
what is your current position in the creche	Owner	2		2
	managment	31	2	33
	staff	10	3	13
Total		43	5	48

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.137 <sup>a</sup>	2	.208
Likelihood Ratio	2.943	2	.230
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.060	1	.080
N of Valid Cases	48		

a. 4 cells (66.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .21.

### 5.2.5 Position in the service and type of qualification gained.

**what is your current position in the creche \* What type of qualification has been gained**  
Crosstabulation

Count		What type of qualification has been gained				Total
		Cert	Diploma	Degree	NCVA	
what is your current position in the creche	Owner		2			2
	management	11	14	3	4	32
	staff	2	3	1	4	10
Total		13	19	4	8	44

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.796 <sup>a</sup>	6	.340
Likelihood Ratio	6.995	6	.321
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.958	1	.047
N of Valid Cases	44		

a. 9 cells (75.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .18.

**5.2.6 Type of service and having a childcare qualification.**

**Correlations**

		type of creche you are working in	What type of qualification has been gained
Spearman's rho	type of creche you are working in	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.197
		N	48
What type of qualification has been gained		Correlation Coefficient	.197
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.199
		N	44

**5.3 Starting at the crèche**

**5.3.1 Mothers and fathers feel welcome at the service**

**Ranks**

	staff or parent	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
mothers and fathers feel welcome at the creche	parent	79	69.13	5461.50
	staff	48	55.55	2666.50
	Total	127		

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

	mothers and fathers feel welcome at the creche
Mann-Whitney U	1490.500
Wilcoxon W	2666.500
Z	-2.477
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.013

a. Grouping Variable: staff or parent

### 5.3.2 Parents are provided with written information before starting at the early years' service

Ranks

	staff or parent	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
parents are provided with written information before starting at the creche	parent	79	72.66	5740.50
	staff	48	49.74	2387.50
	Total	127		

Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>

	parents are provided with written information before starting at the creche
Mann-Whitney U	1211.500
Wilcoxon W	2387.500
Z	-3.913
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

a. Grouping Variable: staff or parent

### 5.3.3 There is adequate provision for children under three years of age.

Ranks

	staff or parent	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
there is adequate provision for under threes	parent	79	70.79	5592.50
	staff	48	52.82	2535.50
	Total	127		

Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>

	there is adequate provision for under threes
Mann-Whitney U	1359.500
Wilcoxon W	2535.500
Z	-3.006
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.003

a. Grouping Variable: staff or parent

## 5.4 Parent and staff relations in early years' services

### 5.4.1 Service type and how often parent staff meetings were organised

#### Parents results

Correlations

		type of creche used	how often does creche organise staff parent meetings
Spearman's rho	type of creche used	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.
		N	79
	how often does creche organise staff parent meetings	Correlation Coefficient	-.264*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.019
		N	79

\*. Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

## Staff results

Correlations

			type of creche you are working in	how often does creche organise staff parent meetings
Spearman's rho	type of creche you are working in	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.443**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.002
		N	48	48
	how often does creche organise staff parent meetings	Correlation Coefficient	-.443**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.
		N	48	48

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

## Combined parent and staff results

Correlations

			type of creche you are working in	how often does creche organise staff parent meetings
type of creche you are working in	Pearson Correlation		1.000	-.269**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.	.002
	N		127	127
how often does creche organise staff parent meetings	Pearson Correlation		-.269**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002	.
	N		127	127

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## 5.4.2 Combining staff and parents data for Mann-Whitney U tests

Ranks

	staff or parent	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Do parents have access to developmental records	parent	79	71.22	5626.50
	staff	48	52.11	2501.50
	Total	127		
how often does creche organise staff parent meetings	parent	79	65.99	5213.50
	staff	48	60.72	2914.50
	Total	127		
Is there a way to make suggestions to staff	parent	79	67.47	5330.00
	staff	48	58.29	2798.00
	Total	127		

Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>

	Do parents have access to developmental records	how often does creche organise staff parent meetings	Is there a way to make suggestions to staff
Mann-Whitney U	1325.500	1738.500	1622.000
Wilcoxon W	2501.500	2914.500	2798.000
Z	-3.604	-.932	-2.078
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.352	.038

a. Grouping Variable: staff or parent

## 5.4.3 Satisfaction with the parent-staff relationship

**Ranks**

	staff or parent	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
are you satisfied with the relationship you have with parents at creche	parent	79	64.52	5097.00
	staff	48	63.15	3031.00
	Total	127		

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

	are you satisfied with the relationship you have with parents at creche
Mann-Whitney U	1855.000
Wilcoxon W	3031.000
Z	-.516
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.606

a. Grouping Variable: staff or parent

## 5.5 Opportunities for Parental participation

### 5.5.1 Respondents are clear about opportunities that exist for parental participation

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

	clear about the opportunities that exist for parental involvement
Mann-Whitney U	1027.500
Wilcoxon W	2203.500
Z	-4.894
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

a. Grouping Variable: staff or parent

**Ranks**

	staff or parent	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
clear about the opportunities that exist for parental involvement	parent	79	74.99	5924.50
	staff	48	45.91	2203.50
	Total	127		

## 5.5.2 Rank table containing staff and parents views of opportunities for parental participation

Ranks				
	staff or parent	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Who makes decision about whether parents participate	parent	79	67.68	5346.50
	staff	48	57.95	2781.50
	Total	127		
Is there a written policy on participation	parent	79	86.55	5257.50
	staff	48	59.80	2870.50
	Total	127		
Do you think that parents should participate	parent	79	63.45	5012.50
	staff	48	64.91	3115.50
	Total	127		
children benefit from Parental participation	parent	79	66.18	5228.50
	staff	48	60.41	2899.50
	Total	127		
parents benefit from Parental participation	parent	79	64.65	5107.00
	staff	48	62.94	3021.00
	Total	127		
staff benefit from Parental participation	parent	79	65.49	5173.50
	staff	48	61.55	2954.50
	Total	127		
are you satisfied with the relationship you have with Parents/staff	parent	79	64.52	5097.00
	staff	48	63.15	3031.00
	Total	127		

## 5.7 Factors which help or hinder partnership

Table 5.14 Mann-Whitney U results for section 5.7

Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>					
	written policy has a postive effect on parental involvement	space in creche for parental activity has poistive effect on parental involvement	staff training has a positive effect on parental involvement	staff are interested in working with parents has a postive effect on parental involvement	parents own attitude to parental involvement has a postive effect on parental involvement
Mann-Whitney U	1391.500	1228.000	1019.000	1432.000	1238.500
Wilcoxon W	2381.500	3506.000	1965.000	3710.000	3516.500
Z	-.512	-1.358	-2.669	-.054	-1.289
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.608	.174	.008	.957	.197

a. Grouping Variable: staff or parent

