

Original Research Study

Opportunities for Parent Partnership and Advocacy in Early Years Services in Ireland

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Abstract

As childcare use is increasing it is apparent that there is a gap in what research can inform us about parents say in their child's care and learning and their participation in settings. The aim of the study reported in this paper was to explore the relationship parents of children aged between birth and three have with their service providers. A further aspect of the study was to elicit the views of parents and staff of these services about parent-staff partnerships. The parents were full-time working parents and the study sampled services in the Dublin area. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory was drawn on as a theoretical framework for this study. 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 research literature and Irish government policy emphasises the benefits of partnership, evidence in this study indicates that partnership between parents and childcare providers is not prevalent. The lack of opportunity for parents to express their own voice suggests that parents may not be in a position to act as an advocate for their child. Parents are not in this position because of staff and parent perceptions of full-time working parents and lack of time for partnership, limited opportunities in the early years services for joint-decision making, lack of information available to parents on opportunities for partnership and organisational constraints such as lack of parent participation on the management committees of services.

Key Words: Parents, parent-staff relationships, partnerships, infants and toddlers

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, p.44).

True partnership requires parents and professionals to have a relationship characterised by openness and mutual respect (Powell, 1989; Wolfendale, 1993). Parents are a main stakeholder in childcare and as Larner and Phillips (1994) have argued it is important to understand parents' views and expectations of services. Katz (1995) suggests that the role of parents is to be their child's strongest advocate in childcare services. It is particularly important for parents of children aged birth to three years to be in a position to express their views and to act as a voice for the child who may be too young to articulate their own viewpoint. An OECD report claimed that parent's involvement as partners in their child's early years setting is essential for "rebuilding educational institutions as more open and democratic settings" (OECD, 2000, p.119).

According to the OECD (2004) there are over 17,000 children in centre-based early years services on a full-time basis in Ireland. There is little evidence of parent influence in early years services in Ireland according to the OECD. There is no specific national organisation for parents using an early years service. While parents are represented on the majority of County Childcare Centre Committees, they do not have "a strong voice at the national level" (OECD, 2004, p.62). In the Netherlands and Portugal, for example, parents are seen as partners in the consultation process leading to the formulation 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.

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises the important role that the State has to play in ensuring that children can express their views. 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 National Children's Strategy* (2000). The *Irish Constitution*, Article 42.1 states "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 provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children". 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.

Childcare has been subject to government regulation since the Preschool Regulations (1996) were enacted as part of the Child Care Act (1991). As professionalism within the childcare sector is increasing there is a growing need to consult parents on their views, as parents are the primary carers and educators of their children. But, a number of studies involving parents and childcare providers report that staff and parents often have conflicting views (Pugh and De'Ath, 1989, Wolfendale, 1993; Hughes and MacNaughton, 2000). According to Hughes and MacNaughton (2000) 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. Parents and staff come from different perspectives and Hughes and MacNaughton (2000) suggest that communication becomes possible when parents and staff shift away from non-negotiable facts and move towards negotiable knowledge. Staff need to welcome parents' input without feeling that they have relinquished their professional identity.

Staff also need to make time for sufficient face to face interaction with parents. Staff and parents need to negotiate a shared meaning about the child and set goals together.

Defining Partnership

Smith (1980) refers to partnership with parents as a paradoxical and ambiguous notion because it can be defined in so many different ways in practice. Powell (1989) claims the concept of 'partnership' is used interchangeably or in parallel with concepts of 'parent involvement' and 'parent-teacher collaboration'. Powell points to a lack of consensus as to the precise definition of 'partnership' creating the potential for enormous variation in the way this and similar concepts are interpreted in practice. 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, p.20). This is very similar to Pugh and De'Ath's (1989) definition of partnership:

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 (pp. 35-36).

Real partnership is when parents and staff have a relationship characterised by openness and mutual respect; and they 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 (Wolfendale, 1993).

The term 'parent engagement' has recently been used to encapsulate all types of communication between staff and parents and is a useful idea in understanding the opportunities parents have to be an advocate for their child in an early years setting. In an assessment of parent engagement in services in Australia Elliot (2002) reported that this was usually restricted to staff organised functions leaving little opportunity for parents to get insights into and evaluate programmes. The result of this is that parents are unable to review and evaluate the service effectively and unsuitable goals or programme objectives may be provided for their children.

Frameworks for Partnership

Frameworks representing partnership are useful tools in the analysis of the realities of the parent-staff relationship. One of the earliest and most influential frameworks for participation was developed by Arnstein in 1969 and represents eight levels of citizen participation. 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. Table 1 shows the eight rungs of the ladder as presented by Arnstein (1969) with corresponding examples to highlight levels of partnership that parents may have with staff which have been developed by the researcher specifically for this study.

Table 1: Ladder of Citizen Participation

Citizen control	Parents identify and conceive ideas and work with staff as 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	Parents' 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	Staff use their professional status to disempower the parent thus preventing any meaningful involvement.
Manipulation	This is the lowest level of participation and represents situations where parents are given inaccurate or incorrect information and their views are not taken into account.

Pugh and De'Ath (1989) proposed a framework for staff to allow them to examine the relationship that they have with parents. This framework represents a five-fold model of parental involvement. The five steps of this model are non-participation, support, participation, partnership, and the highest level is control where parents determine and implement decisions within the service

These two frameworks provide a hierarchy of partnership in two different contexts. Arnstein's model was established in the context of citizen participation (which in this study 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.

Benefits

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 early years curriculum. According to Lamb-Parker (2001) partnership between parents and staff has positive benefits for children's cognitive development and academic achievements, a finding that first emerged in the 1960s. For example Tijus et al (1997) conducted a study of the interactions between parents, staff, and children in four intercultural day-centres for disadvantaged families in France and found that parent participation had a positive impact on their child's cognitive development.

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, p.8).

The results were very positive and showed those parents and staff participating together created an environment rich in 'cognitive interactions'.

The action research study carried out by Bridge (2001) to increase parental involvement in children's learning using parent and child home planning shows that it is possible for staff to involve working parents who often do not have time to spend within the early years setting. Bridge (2001) found that parent and child planning at home resulted in the production of "rich play activities that were connected to their (child's) home culture" at the preschool (p.6). It also resulted in more regular interaction between staff and parents and allowed parents to have a direct influence on the preschool curriculum. Staff in the study reported some concerns about losing control of the curriculum but it also and gave them the opportunity to reflect on their role as teachers.

A study that examined the effects of staff taking time to visit families at home reported that this resulted in the development of partnership due to the increased communication between staff and parents and staff becoming acquainted with the family, thus allowing them to understand the child more fully (Vernon & Smith, 1994).

Problems

The notion of partnership recognises that parents and teachers have complementary skills, knowledge and experiences to contribute to the child's learning. Despite the overwhelming evidence supporting the importance of good communication about children "early childhood staff often find communicating with parents stressful and problematic" (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000, p.14). Wolfendale (1992) contends that many early education professionals are cautious about parents becoming involved as they perceive themselves as the teacher. The reasons for this include: feeling their professionalism is undermined by the presence of parents, perceiving parents 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. Howe et al (2000) found in their Scottish study of parent involvement in preschools that staff complained about the unprofessional manner of parents and reported tensions between the goals of parents and the goals of staff. According to Howe et al (2000) staff who felt secure with their perceived capabilities were more likely to encourage the input of parents while those who did not feel secure appeared threatened by calls for accountability and often resorted to emphasising their professional status.

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems theory informs this study and offers a contemporary way to understand the child's relationships within a multi-layered social context highlighting the importance of the role of the parent in the childcare setting. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory considers the relationships between people and the environment to be mutually shaping. The ecological model allows for the conceptualisation of relationships among individuals across numerous forms of social organisations (i.e. families and childcare institutions) through multiple structural influences (Greene, 1994). 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 and is therefore particularly relevant to this study.

Sample

A random sample of 85 full-day early years services that included private and public services were selected using the National Childcare Census (2001). Of these services 45 agreed to participate in the study. Most were private (75%), 8.3 percent were community supported, and 16.7 percent were Health Board nurseries (i.e. State funded). All services were contacted by phone with a follow-up reminder three weeks after the questionnaires were sent out to encourage questionnaire completion which boosted the initial response rate. The researcher requested that only staff working with under three-year-olds and only parents with an under three-year-old complete the questionnaire.

From the 45 services, 79 parents returned questionnaires (7 fathers and 72 mothers) and 48 staff members responded. Eleven parents had children aged less than 12 months old. Twenty-four parents had children aged between one and two years and 44 parents had children aged over two years but less than three years. The majority of staff respondents were supervisors/directors (68.8%), just over one-quarter were teachers without management responsibilities (27.1%), and a small number were owners of their early years centre (4.2%). The average length of time staff had worked in childcare was 3.94 years and all staff respondents were female.

Eleven of the 85 services initially contacted did not want to take part in the study. The main reason given was that parents would not be interested in taking part in the study; however this decision was reached without prior consultation with the parents. Also on follow-up contact with the services it emerged that 10 of the original 85 services did not provide care for children under the age of 18 months and felt it was not appropriate to take part in a study which focused on children aged birth to three years.

Methods

The main data collection method for this study was a survey of parent and staff views from 45 services using a postal questionnaire. The survey consisted of a five-page self-completion questionnaire for parents and a separate five-page self-completion questionnaire for staff containing three question types, factual questions, opinion questions and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was written so that responses would be amenable to quantitative analysis and was similar to that of the mixed format questionnaire as described by Sarantakos (1998). The parent and staff questionnaires were both divided into six themes including background information, induction to the early years service, parent-staff communication, opportunities for parental participation, parent-staff relations and the needs of working parents. The questionnaires were initially piloted, in a private and a public early years service, to assess their feasibility and any problems with content or interpretation. After feedback was solicited from these services a redrafted version of the questionnaire was developed. The questionnaires were distributed through the post to the services who had agreed to take part in the study with the inclusion of detailed instructions on the target group for the study. Each questionnaire had attached a stamped addressed envelope so the respondent could return it anonymously and directly to the researcher.

Analysis

The data collected in the questionnaires was both qualitative and quantitative. The analysis of the quantitative data was completed using the statistical analysis computer software SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The majority of tests used for the data analysis in this study were non-parametric tests which are used for ordinal data (data is categorized into groups and ranked in a continuum ranging according to magnitude. i.e. lowest to highest). Non-parametric tests 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 such as the Mann-Whitney test, which is used in this study, are distribution free tests and therefore do not assume normal distribution. These tests can be used with samples of different sizes and because of the small sample size in this study non-parametric tests were appropriate to use.

Three steps were taken in the analysis of the qualitative data: data reduction, data organisation and data interpretation (Sarantakos, 1998). The first step, data reduction, helped identify the important issues, which had arisen and was done through summarising, coding and categorising the data. For the second step, data organisation, data was assembled around certain themes and information categorised in more specific terms. The third step involved interpretation, that is making decisions, identifying patterns and drawing conclusions concerning the data (Sarantakos, 1998).

Ethical Considerations

This study complied 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. In this study access to the research setting was gained through a 'gatekeeper', the management of the early years service. According to Greig and Taylor (1999) gatekeepers can be extremely helpful and good communication with them was a prerequisite to a successful study. It was particularly important that parents understood that any information they gave was confidential and was not shared with their early years service.

Methodological Limitations

There are a number of limitations with the methods used in this study. The sampling method has a number of disadvantages. Staff as gatekeepers to the research setting had the opportunity to decide which parents at their service would complete the questionnaire. Staff bias may have dictated that only the parents they perceive as being likely to answer the questionnaire in a positive manner would 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. It is hoped that surveying both parents and staff has helped to overcome some of these limitations, as it has allowed data comparison and clarification and contributed to data triangulation.

Results and Discussion

In general all respondents felt that parents, staff and children benefited from parent-staff partnership and parents were cited by both sets of respondents as benefiting most from this. To understand the reality of partnership for working parents it is necessary first to consider parents' views about the purpose of childcare. Parents in the study were asked how their childcare service supported their needs as working parents and the most frequently mentioned support factor was giving parents 'peace of mind' concerning their child's welfare and safety followed by the provision of nutritious meals at the early years service and the flexibility of the service.

The majority of parents (83.5%) agreed with a statement on the questionnaire that parents should participate in their early years service, but their responses indicated they had little information about how partnership could/should occur in the early years setting. They viewed partnership as something which was limited to physical presence in the early years setting and only five parents referred directly to the notion of partnership as about promoting continuity for children between home and the early years setting. While most staff (85%) held a positive view of parent-staff partnerships, others questioned the appropriateness of partnership with parents who were using full-time childcare. These staff considered parent-staff partnership was not feasible but believed it would be suitable for playgroups and at primary school levels.

Parents' and staff' views on partnership fell into three broad categories. The first category (32% of parents and 40% of staff) included respondents who viewed partnership as a positive concept for a variety of reasons. The second category (48% of parents and 45% of staff) included those who perceived partnership to be positive but believed it should be promoted within limits. The third (20% of parents and 15% of staff) and least common category included respondents who viewed partnership as a negative concept and as having no benefits.

Parents whose responses fitted into this third category expressed a number of concerns about parental participation. They were unsure if it was a good idea for parents to be in the setting for reasons such as children 'playing-up' for their own parents, parents would only focus on their own children and the effect it might have on children whose parents were not available to be 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)

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. It seems therefore that staff who want to strengthen partnerships with parents will need to be aware of the possibility that some parents may believe that partnership only means parents' participation in the activities within the setting. In the present study only one-third of parents reported knowledge of the opportunities that existed for partnership with their early years service. Thirteen (27%) of the staff in the study reported a written policy that made reference to partnership with parents at their early years service. 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'. Less than 20 percent of parents were aware of a written policy on partnership and 20 percent did not know who decided whether or not parents could participate. Many parents (20%) 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 is to purchase care for their children while they work. This explanation could reflect parents' lack of knowledge about the forms of partnership possible with staff and that partnerships may still be achievable even if they are working full-time, or it may simply indicate that some parents are not interested in partnership with the staff of their child's early years setting.

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. (Mother)

Staff appeared to be more aware of the benefits of staff-parent partnerships than parents. This is similar to Fine-Davis's et al. (2002) findings that Irish parents were, in general, lacking awareness of the benefits of early years programmes and issues pertaining to provision. Individual staff respondents from all three service types 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 member)

As stated above not all staff members (15%) were as positive about partnership with parents. One staff member wrote that the installation of security cameras would be a better idea for improving parent-staff relations rather than developing closer partnerships with parents. This is similar to the perceptions of a small number of parents who equated partnership with increased opportunities for surveillance and monitoring of the care their child received. This request for 'surveillance' is a quick way of giving parents information and insights into their child's participation in the setting but may not necessarily result in any improvement in shared communication between parents and staff unless they take the time to discuss recordings, planning goals and assessing the child's well-being and progress.

A small proportion of staff (12%) referred to the unprofessionalism of parents, such as not turning up at a pre-arranged time for a parent-helper session. This problem of staff viewing themselves as more professional than parents has been written about in the wider literature (for example see Howe et al 2002; Wolfendale, 1993). Another perceived problem mentioned by five staff respondents was that parents gave their child preferential treatment. This concurs with the views of some parents (mentioned above) who suggested that parent motives for participation might be sometimes selfish. Thus there were similarities between the views of some parents and staff on the perceived unsettling effects on children of having parents present in the childcare setting.

Parent Activities

Parents reported that daily activities and special events were more often available for them to participate in than administration activities. Parents reported more opportunities for participation in daily activities such as observing classroom activities and special events such as attending a party or social event (see Table 2). Opportunities for parents to take part on management committees and parent councils at the services they attended appeared to be few.

Staff over-estimated parent awareness of opportunities for partnership in their service. Thirty-five percent of parents stated they had received information from their service on opportunities for partnership in contrast to 85 percent of staff who stated that parents were clear about opportunities for partnership. Increased awareness of these differences in opinion may help alleviate any misunderstandings and increase the opportunities for partnership.

Table 2. Types of Parent Participation

	Have participated	No opportunity available	Not interested/ not able to
Helped with field trips	12 (16%)	52 (65%)	15 (19%)
Assisted in fund raising	3 (4%)	53 (67%)	23 (29%)
Observed class room activities	27 (35%)	41 (51%)	11 (14%)
Shared meal/snack	14 (18%)	45 (57%)	20 (25%)
Attended party or social event	44 (55%)	27 (35%)	8 (10%)
Helped with class room activity	11 (14%)	52 (65%)	16 (21%)
Served on parent council/board.	4 (6%)	50 (61%)	25 (33)
Planned their child's individual needs	31 (40%)	42 (53%)	6 (7%)
Contributed to curriculum	6 (7%)	56 (71%)	17 (22%)
Organised books or toy club	2 (3%)	50 (62%)	27 (35%)
Served on management committee	2 (3%)	48 (59%)	29 (36%)
Parental expertise is used at the crèche (music or art)	3 (4%)	54 (69%)	22 (28%)

The most common activity that parents participated in was attending a party or social event followed by planning their child's individual needs and observing a classroom activity. Being involved in programme planning for their child was reported by 40 percent of parents. The types of activities parents were participating in were, typically, staff directed and not characterised by a sense of partnership or mutual understanding. This 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.

A range of strategies to promote partnership were more evident in the publicly funded and community services. Home-visits and open days for parents were mentioned by staff and parents from these sectors but not by respondents from private services. Staff in the public and community services reported more open communication than in the private services with a greater number of parent-staff meetings and other types of communication 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, one parent from a community service and four parents from the publicly supported services, reported doing so. This is similar to the results of the recent Scottish survey (Howe et al. 2001), which found evidence of a lack of parental participation in management and administration activities 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, particularly parents using private services, that they were very restricted because of other commitments such as work.

Opportunities for Parents to Express their Views

Elliot (2002) reported that Australian parents 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. 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 was frequently cited by parents and staff.

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 member)

Parents (54%) stressed the importance of daily conversation as a means of encouraging partnership. A number of parents also said it was important that staff members were willing to listen to parents and allowed them participate. Few services organised regular individual parent-staff meetings and group meetings occurred in less than 10 percent of the services surveyed. Notice boards and written information were only available in half of the services and parent-newsletters available in a third of the services. The main opportunity for communication appeared to be 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. (Mother)

I would like to feel I can ask questions regarding the girls when either I drop them or collect them. (Father)

Parents (52%) wanted to be asked their opinions and to be supported to put forward suggestions. Ten parents mentioned that if staff gave questionnaires to parents or suggestion sheets this would help facilitate communication and partnership.

Appropriateness of Current Forms of Partnership for Working Parents

A central aspect of this study was to examine the suitability of typologies of partnership in the context of working parents with infants and toddlers and their relationship with childcare providers. While examples of the existence of elements of partnership were in evidence, little evidence of actual partnerships in practice could be found. However to put this into the context of the needs of working parents, the most frequently cited need was 'giving peace of mind' – not having an effective partnership with their child's early years teachers.

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'Aths model of the passive non-participant where parents would like to participate but are physically unable. In terms of the Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation outlined in Table 1 the parent and staff relationships in this study may reflect the 'informing stage' which is characterised by one-way information exchange from staff to parents. This is in keeping with Bridges' (2001) notion that the current models of parental participation, which expect parents' physical 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 as described in the introduction to this article is that the early years staff assume a professional role and partnership is seen as empowering parents to have an equal relationship with the professional. 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 do not see themselves as deficient in knowledge about their child and instead see themselves as consumers of childcare. In private childcare settings parents are purchasing a service and they view staff as working for them. Only one staff member from the community sector mentioned that she felt under-appreciated by parents in contrast to 20 staff members from the private sector who voiced some concerns about parents' showing them a lack of respect.

The different expectations of parents toward staff in private services in contrast to the public-funded and community services may be explained by the function 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 their 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.

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) stated that childcare workers in Ireland are poorly paid and that childcare is viewed as a low status profession by Irish society, and as previously mentioned this perception was shared by some parents in this study. This situation may undermine the significance of the traditional partnership typologies in this situation. 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.

Conclusion

Current childcare literature and Irish government policy emphasises the benefits of partnership. Evidence in this study indicates that partnership between parents and childcare providers is not prevalent and in practice their relationship more closely resembles placation and consultation rather than partnership or delegated power (see Table 1). The lack of opportunity for parents to express their opinion and to have input is a key finding of this study. This suggests that childcare parents are not in a position to act as an advocate on behalf of their child. Given that the parent sample in the study have babies as young as six months using full-day childcare it is particularly important that services should be making every effort to collaborate with parents on their infant's care. Wallach and Caulfield (1998) state that the establishment of a parent-staff partnership has a positive impact on caregiving practices for infants and enhances the formation of an infant's secure attachment to parents and other main caregivers. This is also in agreement with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory which emphasises the importance of relationships and continuity between the home and the childcare setting to a child's development.

It is a problem that at national level there is not one organisation to represent parents of pre-primary age children (0-4 years). But perhaps a more serious issue from the perspective of the rights and welfare of the very youngest children is the finding reported here that in at least 35 services catering for children under aged three years there was inadequate engagement between parents and staff and a lack of working in partnership for the child's benefit. A lack of meaningful engagement with parents by staff affects parents' ability to advocate on behalf of their child and thus the child's right to have their best interests promoted, which is a fundamental principle of current Irish law and policy concerning children.

While there were some positive examples of partnership, overall there was very little evidence of long-term commitment to partnership found in the services surveyed. Using Pugh and De'Ath's typology the predominant 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 affected the overall level of partnership, included the lack of meaningful communication and parental engagement, which were referred to by both parents and staff. Parents did not have very much information concerning partnership. Few parents seemed to have the opportunity to play an active role in their child's early years 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 parents and staff 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.

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. 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. 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 requires the parent to be present in the setting. A more realistic approach would be to involve parents in decision making processes and increase home-service continuity through enhanced communication with parents and allowing parents to share in children's learning in the early years programme through materials and information sent home, and to have input into goal setting and programme planning. Increased utilisation of home-visits by staff may also increase staff knowledge of children's experiences and family practices and values and contribute to parent-staff partnerships.

More research is needed to further investigate parental voice in early childhood services. It would be useful to see if the findings reported here concerning early years services in Ireland are similar to are different to services in other countries such as New Zealand and Australia because this could help in policy development and identifying effective ways of strengthening parental voice. 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. More research exploring practices through observational research and looking at the perceptions and views of children about relationships between their parents and teachers is needed.

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