

Preparing Pre-Service (Student) Teachers in Ireland to Work with Parents for the Benefit of All

(awaiting publication)

Finn Ó Murchú and Áine Lynch

Abstract

Since 2017 the National Parents Council (NPC) in Ireland has offered an Initial Teacher Education module to final year student (candidate) teachers in their preparations for *Working with Parents to Support their Children's Learning*. This work is lead and delivered by NPC personnel and involves varying levels of engagement with three initial teacher education (pre-service) providers. This paper shares the findings from pre and post module attitude surveys undertaken by representative cohorts from each setting (n= 100). In turn, a follow-up series of interviews was undertaken with two focus groups (n=8) in 2022, from one provider and involved student teachers from the class of 2020 and of 2021. These students attended the same institution and are all practicing teachers with one focus group completing the module online in 2020 and the other sample group completing their programme on campus in 2021. An interpretivist paradigm is adopted in capturing the perspectives of these student and newly qualified teachers (Clarke & O' Donoghue 2017). Framed in the context of parent and teacher preparation research (Epstein & Sheldon, 2023; Mandarakas, 2014) findings indicate that students at the time, and subsequently, value the engagement with the NPC. Positioning of themselves and parents emerge as key findings from our study. Of note is the value bestowed by participants on the transferable skills associated with the initiative and the manner in which the workshops supported the twin axis of competence and confidence associated with working with parents to support their children's learning.

Introduction: The Irish Context

In Ireland, as elsewhere, family involvement has increasingly been recognised as important for student learning and an increasingly important dimension of the work of being an effective teacher (Berger 1991; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Goodall & Vorhaus, 2008). Our small study across three teacher preparation colleges focuses on efforts by the National Parents Council (NPC) in Ireland to assist student (preservice) teachers better prepare to be the teachers long advocated in research, namely teachers who understand, value and and can engage in working with parents to support their children's learning (Edwards et al., 2019; Epstein, 2018; Mandarakas, 2014).

A theoretical underpinning of the concept of family involvement is framed by McCormick et al. (2016) who state that “ A broad definition of family involvement includes behaviours, attitudes and activities in which families (generally parents and primary caregivers) engage to increase children’s success in school (p. 281). They conclude that “new research to understand the dynamic interchanges between teachers and families to encourage (or hinder) family involvement at home and at school is warranted” (p. 284).

In Ireland, educational policy makes frequent reference to the role of parents and the importance of teacher-parent relationships (Education Act, 1998; Teaching Council Standards, 2013/20; Chief Inspectors Report, 2021). Some schools in Ireland have access to Home School Community Liaison personnel (Ryan & Lannin, 2022) which is usually associated with supporting pupils and families in socio-economically disadvantaged areas and may involve the deployment of an established teacher to undertake a range of activities to build relationships of mutual benefit between home and a number of local schools.

With particular reference to student teachers, the standards for initial teacher education (CÉIM) published by the Teaching Council (2020) make a number of references to parent-teacher relationships. The Teaching Council list seven core elements that are required of any preservice programme and the third such element addresses:

Professional Relationships and working with parents: (to include working with parents, pupils, peers, external agencies and others; preparing for school placement; the school as a learning community; and legislation relevant to the school and classroom) (p. 14).

On a related note these standards place a strong emphasis on teacher agency and professionalism, where teachers work in collaboration with others including parents.

Agency refers to teachers’ understanding of their status as autonomous professionals teaching in community contexts (community of practice; school community). It also refers to their capacity to act on this understanding in intentional, responsible and

innovative ways that reflect and enhance their relationships with peers, students, parents and the wider community (p. 3).

Schools and school placement are considered to be ‘the fulcrum of teacher education’ (p. 7), and strategic school placement is identified as one key action in supporting preservice teachers. In turn, the standards state that during each placement students will ‘demonstrate an understanding of working with parents’ (p. 18).

The Chief Inspectors Report 2016-2020 (2021), based on inspection reports of schools and centres, devotes a chapter entitled Partnership with Parents and Learners where it is advised “giving voice and agency to children, young people and their parents is a key element of partnership” (p. 202). These laudable goals are not new and their regular revisitation would indicate that progress in their realisation is slow with often entrenched resistance to parental involvement as captured by Hargreaves and Fullan (2013) when they speak of parents being perceived by teachers as being ‘more demanding’ and of course the perjorative phrase of ‘how best to deal with parents’ is still a feature of common parlance.

The above national report indicated that inspection findings reveal effective and established practices exist for sharing information with parents but that ‘there is scope to strengthen the role of parents in school governance and decision making’ (p. 210). It was highlighted that post-primary schools appear to engage less with parents than primary and earlier years. Of those surveyed 60% of parents deemed parental involvement in their school to be satisfactory, with 40% stating that parental involvement was seen to be good or very good. The same report also makes reference to legislation and the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill which is intended to strengthen the involvement of parents, children and young people in their schools. Although these findings suggest that schools need to be more active in involving parents in their self-evaluation processes, the report concludes with a note of optimism by stating “close

communication that schools have had to maintain with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic sets the scene for developing parental involvement further” (p.211).

A research study commissioned by the NPC (O’Toole et al, 2018) which explored the experience of parental involvement in primary school settings concluded that:

Schools must also actively work to acknowledge and address power imbalances and emphasise to parents that schools are ‘their place’ too. The crucial nature of relationships is the common finding across a range of disparate research... There may be a role for Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development in supporting teachers to learn how to do this.

It is within such a context that the NPC engaged in their work with preservice teachers.

Preparing student teachers to work with parents

While aware of efforts elsewhere, for example see Nathans and Brown’s (2022) study of four institutions in the United States of America, to our knowledge the NPC series of workshops is the only intentional and discrete engagement by teacher preparation colleges in Ireland to address how best to work with parents to support children’s learning. Recent research on student teachers and their early career experiences (Hick et al, 2019; Uí Choistealbha & Ní Dhuinn, 2021) suggest that such work is necessary if we are to address the policy ambitions outlined above and if we seek to better prepare student teachers to work with parents in the interests of the children and young people in their classrooms. Insights into student teachers and newly qualified teachers (NQTs) perspectives are captured by the commissioned work of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) which supported a 3-year study on ITE4I (Initial Teacher Education for Inclusion, Hick et al, 2019). This study tracked student teachers across their final year of college and their first two years of engagements as early career teachers. Another subsequent and insightful study of perspectives and experiences of early career teachers, was commissioned by the Teaching Council and the report Droihead: Exploring and Eliciting Perspectives, Experiences, and Narratives (DEEPEN, 2021) also offers

insights and guidance with particular reference to the induction programme (Droichead, meaning Bridge in Irish) accessed by newly qualified teachers (NQT). The three non-teaching priority needs that NQTs identified in the DEEPEN report were working with parents followed by additional school responsibilities and working with colleagues. This mirrors Hicks et al's (2019) work in relation to inclusive practices among student and early career teachers. They identified that

...the lack of preparation for liaising with parents and with external professionals was a consistent longitudinal finding across data sets, which has implications for both support for NQTs and for planning school placements.

Such findings align with the work of Epstein (1995, 2006) who found that “most educators enter school without an understanding of the family backgrounds, concepts of caring, or the framework of partnerships so, therefore, most teachers are not prepared to understand, design, implement, and evaluate practices of partnerships with the families of their students” (p. 706). A more recent examination of preservice learning opportunities in Belgium, Netherlands and USA, by Willemsse et al. (2017) suggests that little preparedness is undertaken. The work of Nathans and Brown (2022) highlight similar concerns with the challenge of a congested teacher preparation programme being deemed a common challenge across a number of jurisdictions including Australia, England and Spain.

The engagement between home and school is often characterised as microsystems with the work of Bronfenbrenner (1995) used to capture the ‘proximal processes’ that involve home and school interactions. Others conceptualise such relationships between home and school as a form of social capital with relationships enabling information sharing and access to resources built on trust united by the common goal of improving the learning and life chances of the students involved (McCormick et al., 2016).

Where family involvement programmes were accessed preservice teachers speak of being more confident and more prepared to communicate with parents, for example by facilitating parent-teacher meetings, phone calls or conferences devoted to identified special or additional needs. As Nathans and Amber (2022) highlight, the majority of students who undertook such courses, felt more prepared and confident than their peers who did not access such skills development. That said, the authors noted that participants also stated that they would appreciate more learning opportunities in this area in the future. Being better prepared to work with families from a range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds is also identified by participating preservice teachers. This latter point is particularly of interest in Ireland at this time where the past twenty years has witnessed a considerable diversity emerge in the family profile of pupils in our schools. At this point the concept of inclusion in Ireland extends beyond the traditional focus on special education to a broader understanding that attends to any learner at risk of not learning.

Significantly, where preservice teachers are involved in such family-engagement course work they speak of the importance of all these activities in fostering student learning outcomes. It is in this context that the NPC initiated its engagement with pre-service teachers. The delivery and content of the programme is outlined in the next section.

The NPC programme

The NPC programme is based on a series of workshops delivered by NPC personnel that have evolved from its inception in 2017. The module is specifically designed to explore pre-service teachers' beliefs and values and equip them with the knowledge and skills to build effective relationships with parents.

Informed by Epstein's Six Types of Parental Involvement (2019), the module is delivered over eight sessions in two of the colleges, with the third college adding two additional sessions for additional reading and self-reflection. Review and evaluation are a constant with changes made in response to participants feedback and emerging developments in both research and policy, for example, the aforementioned Chief Inspector's Report (2021).

The classes are usually capped at 25 students. Student selection for the programme are based on two different methods. In two colleges the students enrolled in the course, involving eight by 2 hour sessions, as part of their accredited course as an elective programme. In the third institution, students who took part in their course did so on a voluntary basis during their extended lunch break and received the same experience as the other colleges but there was no academic credits assigned. Rather, this latter cohort were issued a certificate of attendance from NPC on completion of the course and received a letter of commendation from their college.

The eight sessions in the module cover the following areas:

Session 1 - is an introduction to students values and beliefs regarding working in partnership with Parents. The learning outcomes developed for the session enabled the student to:

- Have a clear overview of the course content and any assessment requirements for the module
- Have reflected on their attitudes and beliefs relating to working in partnership with parents in supporting their child/student's learning in school
- Have opportunities to explore the impact of their values when working with parents
- Explore how to engage, work with and include parents, from diverse backgrounds and cultures, in their child/ student's learning

Session 2 – examined relevant research. The learning outcomes developed for the session enabled the student to:

- Be familiar with current national and international research regarding parent engagement in their child/student's education
- Have an improved understanding of the value of parental engagement in a child/student's learning
- Have reflected on their practice in relation to working in partnership with parents

Session 3 – examined the factors involved in creating welcoming or unwelcoming schools and classrooms. The learning outcomes developed for the session enabled the student to:

- Have constructed a welcoming and unwelcoming school and presented on their key components.
- Understand the decisions and issues that schools have regarding access and welcome for parents and the impact that these may have in relation to the child/student's learning
- Explore how the class teacher can ensure that his/her classroom is welcoming and inclusive of parents and children/students.

Session 4 – explored the Curriculum in the context of home learning. The learning outcomes developed for the session enabled the student to:

- Understand how teachers are an important support for parents in the home learning environment.
- Have an opportunity to explore the purpose, benefits and unintentional outcomes of homework.

- Be aware of how they as teachers can reinforce the participation of parents in the child/student's education through the type of homework they give.
- Understand the importance of the home learning environment and how they can support parents in creating an environment to suit their child/student's needs
- Be familiar with the range of training modules that NPC offers Parent Associations and how it promotes parental engagement in the child's education.

Session 5 – covered the area of communication and active listening and was the first of two sessions on this topic. The learning outcomes developed for the session enabled the student to:

- Have a knowledge and understanding and practice the key Active Listening skills, paraphrasing, reflecting, clarifying, exploring options and summarising.
- Have a knowledge and understanding of different forms of communication with parents and the purpose of each
- Be enabled to identify opportunities for communication with parents which will support their children/student's learning
- Have an opportunity to hear parents' experiences of parent teacher meetings and ask questions on same
- Reflect on and identify their own practise in relation to communication with parents

Session 6: covered the area of communication and active listening and was the second of two sessions on this topic. The learning outcomes developed for the session enabled the student to:

- Have a clear overview of using a restorative approach, how it can be utilised in schools and used with other communication skills taught in this module

- Be aware of importance of active listening and other effective communication strategies in developing trust, mutual respect, and knowledge of shared purposes that will be necessary for a productive parent-teacher relationship and to be able to begin to develop a restorative ethos into a primary school
- Have an opportunity to role play Parent/Teacher meetings and work through difficult conversations in a solution focused way.
- Reflect on their attitudes and beliefs relating to parents' involvement in supporting their children in schools and how restorative language might facilitate communication
- Begin to analyse why parents' experiences of schools and how teachers' values and beliefs can impact on parent's engagement and participation in their child/student's education

Session 7 - explored inclusion and diversity. The learning outcomes developed for the session enabled the student to:

- Explored the meaning of inclusion in an Irish context
- Seen evidence of good practise of inclusion of parents and children/students
- Identified some of the challenges of inclusion of parents and their children/students from diverse backgrounds or with special education needs and explored possible solutions to those challenges
- Learned of the availability of supports for parents of children/students with Special Education Needs
- Had an opportunity to hear the views of parents of children/students with Special Education Needs and from diverse backgrounds

Session 8 – looked at working in partnership with parents; programme evaluation and developing a professional practice plan. The learning outcomes developed for the session enabled the student to:

- Have reflected on their learning throughout the semester in relation to working with parents
- Understand partnership working and the role it can play in supporting better outcomes for children/students in school
- Be aware of how they can promote the participation of parents to support their children/student's learning
- Have identified and analysed they how they can be an important support for parent's participation in school structures and policy making.
- Complete a personal/professional plan relating to working in partnership with parents in the classroom and school.

While each session has it's own goals and area of focus it should be noted that all sessions are interdependent and support a spiral curriculum that allows participants to revisit previous learning or learning experiences. An interactive approach is adopted throughout with facilitation of cooperative learning, problem solving, scenario setting and role play key features of each session.

The conduct of the study

The key purpose of the research was to gain insights into the impact of the intervention by seeking to capture the perspective of student teachers regarding their engagement with the workshops delivered by the NPC with the working title *Working with Parents to Support their Children's Learning*. The first phase involved gathering data immediately before and following completion of the programme and this was undertaken in three teacher preparation colleges (

two primary and one post-primary setting). These evaluations spanned a period of time from 2017-2021 and involved the use of Likert scales to deductively capture the responses of participants to a series of statements associated with the acquisition of levels of knowledge, skills and awareness.

- Q1. Knowledge of current research on parental involvement in education
- Q2. Understanding parental involvement and how to support parents with their children's learning in line with the National Strategy in Literacy and Numeracy
- Q3. Awareness of your personal values, beliefs and biases and how they impact on children's learning
- Q4. Awareness of your communication and engagement skills and style with parents
- Q5. Practice skills and strategies of how to build effective working relationships with parents in schools
- Q6. Knowledge of equality and diversity in education policy and practice in Ireland
- Q7. Awareness of your own practice as teacher, how it impacts on being inclusive of all parents
- Q8. Knowledge and understanding of parents' views and issues regarding their child's learning

Subsequent follow-up focus group interviews were undertaken with two groups of four students who had graduated from the post-primary provider and were now teaching in schools throughout Ireland. The first group of four graduated in 2020 and the second group in 2021. It should be noted that the graduating class of 2020 accessed the programme on campus while the class of 2021, due to Covid-enforced restrictions, accessed the programme online. An inductive approach was adopted at this point in the research.

To that end, the authors set out to generate theory on the perspectives of recently appointed teachers in Ireland on how the workshops were of benefit to them in their engagement with parents. The associated central guiding research question was, given engagement had taken place with the NPC workshops, as follows: What is the most comprehensive theory that can be generated on the perspectives of recently appointed post-primary teachers in Ireland on how best to work with parents for the benefit of their children? That in turn led to the generation of the following sub-research guiding questions based on the four component parts of 'perspectives' as explicated by Blackledge and Hunt (1985):

1. What are the views of recently appointed teachers' on the workshops delivered by the NPC and what reasons do they give for having them?
2. What strategies used by the NPC proved most beneficial to these teachers and what reasons do they give for having them?
3. What significance do these teachers attach to their engagement with parents in their job as teacher and what reasons do they give for having them?
4. What outcomes do recently appointed teachers in Ireland say that they should expect as a result of how they engage with parents in schools and what reasons do they give for having them?

Grounded theory was the associated research methodology adopted in the context of best supporting an interpretive paradigm that seeks to capture the interpretation of social phenomena, in this case a series of workshops associated with working with parents. Grounded theory was chosen, in part because it makes its greatest contribution in areas like that studied in which little research has been undertaken (Bryant, 2013). Furthermore as argued by Fernandez (in Walsh *et al.*, 2015) grounded theory is an approach to research that “privileges context” over academic theory, and thus is particularly applicable when the impacts of specific cultural contexts are at the heart of a study. Levina (in Walsh *et al.*, 2015) developed it further, stating that grounded theory “embraces the richness and uniqueness of the context without necessarily ignoring the development of theory applicable to other phenomena and contexts” (p.592).

Consistent with the grounded theory research approach the researchers selected the research methods of semi-structured interviews with two focus groups and the analytical approach of open coding. Purposeful participant selection was used to ensure that information-rich participants were interviewed (Patton, 1990). On that, as the study aimed to generate theory

not yet developed it was not necessary to work with large numbers of participants (O'Donoghue, 2018). It was realised too that collecting too much data could impede analysis and lead to 'conceptual blindness' (Morse, 2010). Therefore, it was held it was important for participants to be chosen whose responses would be likely to maximise the quality, rather than the quantity of data.

Table 1. Participants and their context

| Name | Age | School Size (students) | Location | Years teaching |
|---------|-------|------------------------|----------|----------------|
| Gene | 20-24 | 600+ | Urban | 1 |
| Charlie | 20-24 | 300+ | Rural | 2 |
| Emer | 25-30 | 1,000+ | Urban | 1 |
| Anne | 20-24 | 250+ | Rural | 2 |
| Kathy | 25-30 | 400+ | Rural | 2 |
| Máire | 20-24 | 250+ | Rural | 2 |
| Breda | 20-24 | 800+ | Rural | 1 |
| Phil | 25-30 | 400+ | Urban | 1 |

An interview schedule was developed based on eliciting the perspectives of these 8 newly qualified teachers on their recollection of the experience of the programme at the time, their views on its impact on their practice and how their relationship with parents was perceived at the time of interview. The actual order of the questions was partly determined by the interviewees, with the interviewer allowing participants to take the lead and on occasions directly respond to one another's contributions. The interviews were conducted online, recorded with the permission of participants and initial transcripts were checked for accuracy as set against the original recording.

In accordance with grounded theory approaches to analysis (Punch & Oancea, 2014), the authors interrogated the data to generate conceptual categories, find relationships between them, and conceptualising these relationships. Coding was undertaken at three levels: open

coding, axial coding, and selective coding. (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The authors engaged in these processes until they considered they had reached ‘saturation’.

Findings

Findings from the survey and subsequent follow-up interviews confirm many aspects of what we already know from research about pre-service and early career teachers’ experiences when engaging with parents. As with similar programmes elsewhere there is a strong endorsement of the NPC-led programme in Ireland. What appears to be of most benefit for participants is a recognition of a greater understanding of the importance of intentionally engaging with home combined with an increased level of confidence to undertake such actions.

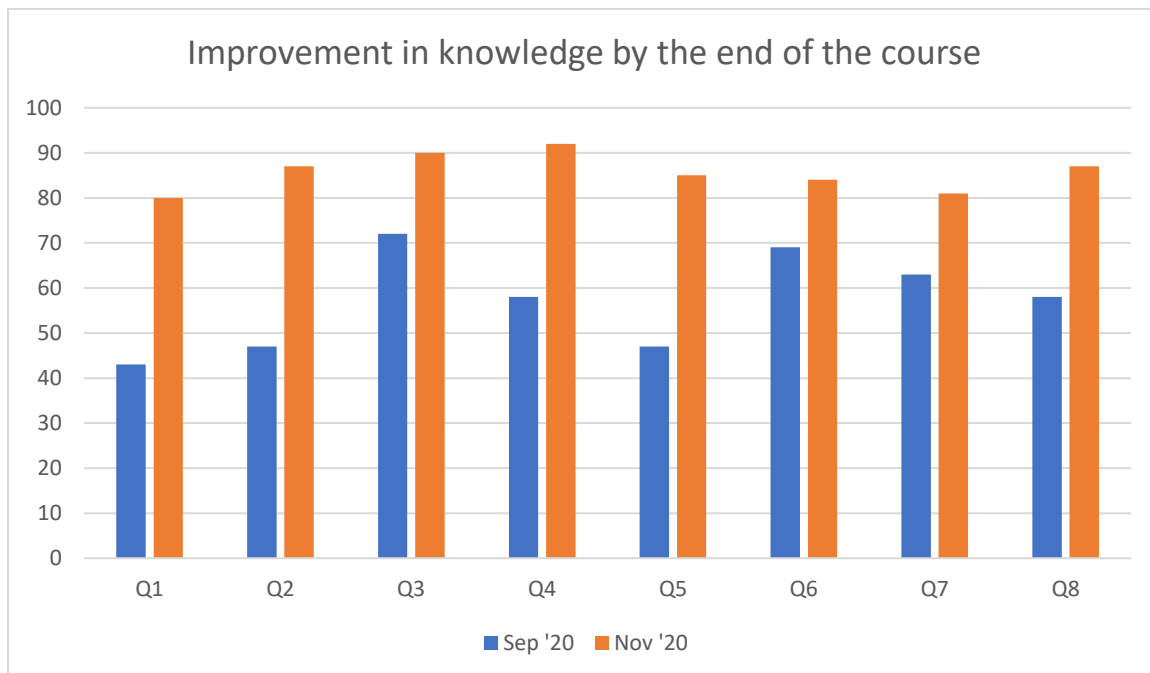
Of note in our small study is a number of emerging themes from the early career teachers that may be of interest. Their observations as early practitioners include a recognition of the transferable nature of the skills they acquired and developed. They offer insights on how best to position such programmes in the congested preservice curriculum. Indeed actions associated with positioning themselves and parents is also a common theme from the focus groups with emerging themes of trust, power, vulnerability, leadership and identity coming to the fore.

Survey Findings

A review of the Likert statements across all three campuses reveal a similar pattern and the example in Table 2 below is indicative of the findings. Whilst all areas showed an improvements in the pre and post module data the areas perceived as having the most impact were those associated with Question 1: *Knowledge of current research on parental involvement in education*; Question 2: *Understanding parental involvement and how to support parents with their children's learning in line with the National Strategy in Literacy and Numeracy* and

Question 5: *Practice skills and strategies of how to build effective working relationships with parents in schools.* Pre-service teachers' exposure, through the course of their studies, to other components of learning may explain the more stable responses as captured with Question 6: *Knowledge of equality and diversity may explain why the before and after results for question.*

Table 2. The perceived improvements in levels of learning as set against 8 statements



In the initial baseline survey students stated that they would like to learn communicating skills and develop confidence when engaging with parents, to which the majority of students said they would like to gain skills to communicate with parents and have confidence to engage with parents. At the end of the module the students comments were overwhelmingly about the skills and confidence they had gained.

Again, looking at comments at the end of the module the student teachers said that they had gained knowledge and understanding in the area of supporting parents to affect the best outcomes for their children, they also had a better understanding of how important it was to

have parents involved with the school and build relationships with them. Students also reflected on an increased awareness of how their own values and beliefs might impact on their interactions with parents and how they taught their students.

“Yes, learned how important it can be to have a restorative approach”

“Following the programme I have a more informed understanding that my own values and beliefs can and do have an impact”

“I understand that how I present myself to parents may have an impact on their opinion of me as a person”

“I have a greater understanding of how I can either positively or negatively impact both parents and students and am able to adapt it to suit all needs”

“Increased awareness of my actions and reactions to pupils' behaviours and results when knowing more about the pupil and their home life”

“How my own values impact the way I speak to and engage parents in my students learning”

“I have improved skills in communication to parents, empathy and understanding students and how their backgrounds can impact on their school life”

Focus Group Findings

In this second section attention is given to the findings from the focus group interviews. A common theme that links both the preservice findings and the early career comments is the value placed on roleplay and scenario setting as an integral part of the programme and one that clearly has an influence to date on the early career teachers interviewed.

Scenario Setting/Role Play

There was very strong support for the NPC programme with the lasting memory being the valued scenario setting exercises where preservice teachers played the role of parent or teacher as set against certain issues. These issues ranged from communicating with home, to meeting a parent who may have a concern or indeed be angry with the actions of the school or the individual teacher. Following the role play or scenario setting a discussion would ensue to capture the key moments, feelings, actions, learnings and next steps as determined by the class. Young teachers recalled how “I thought the scenario setting was really beneficial. You know,

what would you do in that situation and then you reflect on that. (Máire 2)”. The opportunity to practice their communication skills and regulate their emotions were described as being used on a daily basis in schools and in classrooms as reflected by the manner in which they engaged with their students and their teaching colleagues. One teacher explains their use of the acquired communication skills as follows:

I think I use them nearly every day when talking to students...or even if approaching a colleague to seek advice or support. We learned for example about body language and the messages I can give off to students or other teachers if I am closed down with my arms folded...those small things are big things when trying to communicate with someone or motivate them to do certain things.

In general the young teachers were of the view that key areas of learning that they recalled and continue to use in a variety of situations include, active listening skills, awareness of voice and body language (both their own and others), how best to frame and ask questions as well as how to deliver difficult messages. Of note is their engagement with colleagues in preparation for meetings and it was encouraging to hear how more experienced colleagues added to these neophytes preparation in a manner that was, for the most part, in keeping with the efforts of the college and NPC personnel.

Collective goal setting with parents

An encouraging finding in this study is the recognition of partnerships with parents that acknowledge the contribution parents can make to enhancing the learning experience and learning outcomes of their children. While this may be in part a result of the work undertaken on the programme it also, no doubt is influenced by the culture of the school in which the young teacher is working. As one young teacher says ‘It’s not enough to just ring home, say your peace and leave it at that...it’s about how do you follow through on this and work with parents to make things happen’ (Phil, 1). When asked about the influence of the NPC programme on such actions and beliefs the same student observed that it is difficult to isolate some learnings into discrete areas and while acknowledging the key role the NPC programme played in their

development as a teacher, such growth was deemed to be the result of a combination of factors including personal traits and other learning opportunities that the four-year programme of study had made available.

We are not all the same

It emerged that young teachers were quick to note that teaching students in post-primary settings means that parental expectations for 12 year olds may not be the same for those who are 18 years old. They also spoke of themselves and parents, no more than their children, not being members of homogenous groups. Indeed they also mentioned that some preservice teachers are themselves parents with children in school. The programme offered by the NPC was valued for extending their understanding and their repertoire of responses to certain situations, and as noted ‘What might work brilliantly with one parent may not do so with another’ (Gene, 1).

In the context of their subject specialisms participants were of the view that the NPC programme could complement their subject-specific methodology classes which are undertaken the semester before they engage in school placement. Linking the NPC programme more directly to school placement aligns with the Teaching Council’s observation of the school being ‘the fulcrum of teacher education’. In that regard the young teachers suggested that scenarios used by the NPC be incorporated into their methodology tutorials which would expand the programme’s accessibility and also attend to subject-specific scenarios and hierarchies of concern i.e. parents concerns with state examinations, demands of the subject and other similar issues.

Positioning and being positioned

A significant finding in our small study is the concept of positioning where young teachers speak of their awareness of how they position parents by the manner in which they interact

with them. In turn they speak of how they as young teachers, are positioned by students, parents, colleagues, and senior school leaders. Common themes that emerged included the concepts of power and trust as well as understandings associated with personal and professional identity and what it means to be a teacher.

In engaging with parents students spoke of 'learning to compromise and taking a step back as a professional.' This included 'not taking things personally but to move forward in the situation'(Gene, 1). Some referenced the restorative practices being engaged in by the schools and how they aligned with the college and preservice programme aims and with their views of what it means to be a professional teacher.

Phil spoke of now engaging with parents and students in goal setting, something which he notes would not have happened, or would not have happened as quickly, but for the course he had undertaken. This positioning of himself and parents and students to seek a common goal for student learning is in keeping with a more dynamic and reciprocal relationship with parents as advocated by government policy and more recent research. 'We show the parents like that we do care and that we are on a journey with them. We are there to support them in every way that we can all the time' (Phil, 1). Making yourself available and approachable as a teacher was also captured by another participant who spoke about 'making parents aware that you are on the same team' (Charlie, 2) and that there is a level of satisfaction and affirmation when a parent agrees to be on the team or reports that one of the shared learning goals has been achieved. These young teachers positioned themselves as having a key role in ensuring 'buy in' from parents so that all goals can be supported at home and have a better chance of being achieved by a collective response. Extending and nurturing that reciprocal relationship and understanding of roles was reported by one young teacher to be recently enhanced by technology where platforms can be used 'and there's an option to invite the parent or guardian so they can see the classwork being undertaken, the quality of their child's engagement and

what work is due' (Charlie, 2). Making contact with home for positive reasons was also deemed important by these young teachers such as postcards home 'catching the child being good' and other such efforts.

Teachers also spoke of the post-primary context making 'teachers harder to catch' given that unlike primary school, a pupil may have 9 classes a day and meet upwards of 10 teachers a week. In this context teachers stated that, while acknowledging the role of year heads and class tutors, it was their responsibility as professionals to keep in touch with home as they recognised the challenges faced by parents in making contact with school. In turn, they were of a view that parents asking questions regarding the rationale for actions should be encouraged rather than avoided. It appears such a view was not always held by some more established members of the teaching staff.

Establishing good lines of communication with home was also seen as offering an opportunity to share successes with parents that aren't always captured by standardised tests or similar academic metrics. As observed, '...like not all of them are going to be doctors and they may not be fantastic in my subject, but parents love to hear that their child is really good at helping others, is coaching the younger ones in sport and that the other skills are recognised' (Anne, 2).

It was also stated that the leaders in the school play a key role in communicating deemed appropriate actions that involve parents. In the example above the postcard home was observed as having the support of senior leaders. Young teachers spoke of the NPC programme alerting them to the supports from other teachers and middle/senior leaders who could assist and advise them while on placement and when subsequently employed as qualified teachers. They also speak of compromises that sometimes have to be considered in the context of navigating their way in a school where they usually do not secure tenure of employment immediately. This

vulnerable position can lead to teachers being conscious of teachers' and parents' views of them as set against such views being communicated to the school principal or school board. Some participants in smaller schools speak of the need to be professional at all times given the extended family networks that any given student may have in a small rural community. 'People are naturally curious and friendly and you walk into a shop they want to know where are you coming from, and do you know my son or granddaughter?' (Phil, 1). Such awareness also extends to being related or neighbours to some of their students in the school. These contextual considerations obviously present some challenges but also opportunities to maximise engagement between home and school.

Participants also were grateful for the schools efforts to be more inclusive of parents as it made their role and position as beginning teachers easier. One participant spoke of teaching in a rural school in a disadvantaged area where parental memories of school would cause them to be put off from engaging with school. Efforts to run events, courses and shared social outings were assisting in building relationships of trust and mutual benefit. 'They now see us teachers as more a part of the solution, rather than being the enemy' (Charlie,).

In general the findings from our research would suggest validation of the programme across the three teacher preparation institutions. While encouraged to continue to improve on such a programme, there are more general conclusions to be drawn from this small scale research and these are outlined in the next section,

Conclusion

The research undertaken has given insights into the impact of the programme on fledgling teachers, where both quantitative and qualitative results indicate that participants in NPC's *Working with Parents to Support their Children's Learning* benefitted from the experience and recalled in particular key communication skills as well as demonstrating

changes in knowledge, attitude and skill development. While avoiding overstretch, and not ignoring areas for improvement, it would appear that such a programme offers opportunities for participants to enhance both their confidence and competence in working with parents. The use of the skills acquired across a range of engagements, be it with parent, colleagues or pupils is an encouraging finding and one that merits further research.

Areas where improvements might occur are clearly related to capacity building within the teacher preparation colleges and in the schools. The programme is heavily dependent on the NPC input and greater alignment of skills acquisition, such as communication skills, with other aspects of course provision offer opportunities for consolidation and expansion of student teachers' learning while on campus. The value placed on pedagogical practices such as role play and scenario-setting also merit consideration when planning learning experiences for student teachers.

The school placement dimension of teacher preparation and how it can assist in working with parents, is an area that requires more intentional engagement both at college campus and school level. The programme is currently a stand alone intervention and it's content and impact would benefit from being more closely aligned with the experiences of students on school placement.

Significantly, evidence from our research indicates such an alignment would not only inform the programme content and delivery, but would also open up conversations and possible collective action within schools. In short the programme has the potential, with leadership support in schools, to leverage improved relations with parents for all, not just the student or newly qualified teacher but for the entire school community itself. Again, this is an area ripe for development and research.

In listening to our research participants it is clear that teacher identity and issues of equity and inclusion are very important concepts when we speak of teachers and parents cooperating together. There is frequent reference to how student teachers perceive themselves and others, and how they believe others 'see them'. In that regard the use of Positioning Theory, described by Linehan & McCarthy, (2000) as "an analytical tool that can be used flexibly to describe the shifting multiple relations in a community of practice" (p. 441), may offer researchers a lens to explore how best we can support teachers in *Working with Parents to Support their Children's Learning*. In short, our findings indicate there is significant value in the work being undertaken but there is more to be achieved in collaboration with school and college personnel.

Bibliography

- Berger, E. H. (1991). Parent involvement: Yesterday and today. *The Elementary School Journal*, 91(3), 209-219.
- Blackledge, D. A., & Hunt, B. D. (1985). *Sociological interpretations of education*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1995). *Developmental ecology through space and time: A future perspective*.
- Bryant, A. (2013). The grounded theory method. In *Reviewing qualitative research in the social sciences* (pp. 120-136). Routledge.
- Choistealbha, J. U., & Dhuinn, M. N. (2021). Submitted to the Teaching Council September 3rd 2021.
- Clarke, S., & O'donoghue, T. (2017). Educational leadership and context: A rendering of an inseparable relationship. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 65(2), 167-182.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). Strategies for qualitative data analysis. *Basics of Qualitative Research. Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, 3(10.4135), 9781452230153.
- Edwards, Patricia, et al., *Partnering with Families for Student Success: 24 Scenarios for Problem-Solving with Parents*. NY: Teachers College Press.

- Epstein, J. L. (1995). School/family/community partnerships. *Phi delta kappan*, 76(9), 701.
- Epstein, J. L. (2006). Families, schools, and community partnerships. *YC Young Children*, 61(1), 40.
- Epstein, J. L. (2018). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Routledge.
- Epstein, J. L., et al. (2019). *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*. Fourth edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Epstein, J. L., & Sheldon, S. B. (2023) *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools*, 3rd Edition, New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Goodall, J., & Vorhaus, J. (2011). Review of best practice in parental engagement.
- Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2015). *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school*. Teachers College Press.
- Hick, P., Matziari, A., Mintz, J., Ó Murchú, F., Cahill, K., Hall, K., ... & Solomon, Y. (2019). Initial teacher education for inclusion: Final report to the National Council for Special Education.
- Ireland (1998a) Education Act (Dublin: Stationery Office).
- Ireland (2022) Department of Education Chief Inspector's Report (Dublin: Stationery Office).
- Linehan, C., & McCarthy, J. (2000). Positioning in practice: Understanding participation in the social world. *Journal of the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 30, 435-453.
- Mandarakas, M. (2014). Teachers and parent—school engagement: international perspectives on teachers' preparation for and views about working with parents. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 4(1), 21-27.
- McCormick, M. P., Cappella, E., O'Connor, E., Hill, J. L., & McClowry, S. (2016). Do effects of social-emotional learning programs vary by level of parent participation? Evidence from the randomized trial of INSIGHTS. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 9(3), 364-394.
- Morse, A. F., De Greeff, J., Belpeame, T., & Cangelosi, A. (2010). Epigenetic robotics architecture (ERA). *IEEE Transactions on Autonomous Mental Development*, 2(4), 325-339.
- Nathans, L., & Brown, A. (2022). Differences in Pre-Service Teacher Attitude Change about Family Involvement across Four Universities. *Societies*, 12(2), 65.
- O'Donoghue, T. (2018). *Planning your qualitative research thesis and project: An introduction to interpretivist research in education and the social sciences*. Routledge.
- O'Toole, L., Kiely, J., & McGillicuddy, D. (2019). *Parental involvement, engagement and partnership in their children's education during the primary school years*. National Parents Council.

- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. SAGE Publications, inc.
- Positioning Theory (Phd)
- Punch, K. F., & Oancea, A. (2014). *Introduction to research methods in education*. Sage.
- Ryan, S., & Lannin, C. (2022). *Pathways to Partnership: Engaging Families in Learning—Mapping the Way*. Limerick: Mary Immaculate College Publications.
- Sheldon, S. B., & Epstein, J. L. (2005). Involvement counts: Family and community partnerships and mathematics achievement. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 98(4), 196-207.
- Teaching Council. 2016. “Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers 2nd ed.” <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/publications/fitness-to-teach/code-of-professional-conduct-for-teachers1.pdf>
- Teaching Council. 2020. “Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education.” <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/news-events/latest-news/ceim-standards-for-initial-teacher-education.pdf>
- Walsh, I., Holton, J. A., Bailyn, L., Fernandez, W., Levina, N., & Glaser, B. (2015). What grounded theory is... a critically reflective conversation among scholars. *Organizational Research Methods*, 18(4), 581-599.
- Willemse, T. M., de Bruïne, E. J., Griswold, P., D’Haem, J., Vloeberghs, L., & Van Eynde, S. (2017). Teacher candidates’ opinions and experiences as input for teacher education curriculum development. *Journal of curriculum studies*, 49(6), 782-801.