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# The BUDDIES Study

**Building BriDges, DimInishing Educational DiSadvantage**

Examining the Role of Home-School Community  
Liaison (HSCL) across the island of Ireland

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# Executive Summary

Although family engagement in children's learning is a well-established predictor of educational success (see e.g. Higgins & Katsipatakis, 2015 and Axford et al., 2019), many children do not enjoy such involvement and several schemes have been put in place across different countries to encourage parents/guardians to take a more active role in their children's education (Axford et al., 2019).

One such initiative which has been gaining ground in the Republic of Ireland is the Home-School Community Liaison scheme, funded by the Department of Education through the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme and regulated by Tusla/TESS. It aims to support families in areas of high deprivation whose children are at risk of educational disadvantage, by means of a Home School Community Liaison Coordinator (HSCL). Although existing research shows that such a scheme can be advantageous in bridging what can sometimes be a large home-school gap (Mulkerrens, 2007); improving parents' confidence and competence in supporting their child's education (Weir et al., 2018); and in nurturing the well-being of children and their families (Ross et al., 2021) little is known about the 'lived reality' of the HSCL in practice, particularly with regard to tackling educational disadvantage. Likewise, although anecdotal evidence would suggest that a similar type role, known as a Parent Officer for the purposes of this study, can be found in some schools in Northern Ireland on an ad hoc basis, little, if anything, is known about how it works in practice.

In light of the above, the study in question set out, principally by means of a qualitative research design, to learn more about the 'lived reality' of the HSCL/Parent Officer in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and across the different school phases i.e. pre-school, primary and post-primary in an effort to:

- explore the implementation and administration of the HSCL type role across the island of Ireland, with a particular focus on how they operate in schools (early years to post-primary) serving disadvantaged communities;
- gather evidence on how HSCLs/Parent Officers operate in practice and how they are perceived by a range of stakeholders, e.g., addressing issues such as 'best' practice, perceived benefits (particularly for those more disengaged from education and at risk of educational underachievement), outcomes, and barriers/challenges; and



- share learning across the island of Ireland in order to inform policy and practice for both pre-service and in-service teacher education.

Six schools participated in this research study (three from the North and three from the South) and all school phases, i.e. pre-school, primary and post-primary, were represented. In each school, research participants included: principal/senior leaders, HSCLs/Parent Officers, teachers and parents and the data collection methods used included one-to-one interviews and focus groups where appropriate. Light touch observations were also carried out across most of the schools to gain a deeper insight into the type of activities carried out by the HSCL/Parent Officer, the plans and resources used and their daily routine. A brief online questionnaire was distributed to principals/senior leaders in an effort to garner a larger response on some of the high level issues regarding type of schools where HSCLs/Parent Officers are found, funding sources, employment status etc.

The study's main findings are organised around four themes:

1. **HSCL/Parent Officer as Policy:** the study highlighted that the policy context pertaining to the HSCL/PO role differs substantially between the two jurisdictions. While the HSCL coordinator in the Republic of Ireland has a clearly defined role, with a long history and embedded in a high-profile policy initiative at national level, the situation in Northern Ireland is much less formalised, and therefore much more diverse. In both jurisdictions, funding for parental engagement is subject to eligibility criteria and is targeted to benefit pupils and families from disadvantaged social groups. This is in keeping with the overall aim to reduce educational disadvantage which informs policies across the island of Ireland. However, in the Republic of Ireland, while DEIS Post-Primary schools and DEIS Urban primary schools have access to an HSCL, DEIS Rural primary schools are no longer included in the HSCL scheme and currently the DEIS programme does not extend to pre-school. The main funding streams in Northern Ireland, however, do not distinguish between school phase or geographical location as it is at the discretion of the principal/senior leader whether they invest the funding in a Parent Officer or something else.



2. **HSCL/Parent Officer in Practice:** While it was appreciated that all HSCLs/POs bring with them: “their own unique skillset”, the study indicated that certain characteristics are necessary on the part of an HSCL/PO to ensure success in their role: it was considered necessary that HSCLs/POs are warm, sensitive, caring, approachable and empathetic, alongside being able to form relationships with others as well as being genuine, trustworthy and a good communicator – an holistic skillset which could be summed up as a ‘professional’ buddy – personable, sociable, yet highly professional. The type of activities engaged in also appeared quite similar across both jurisdictions. These ranged from relaxed events to nurture healthy relationships between teachers and parents as well as between parents themselves, to more structured activities to familiarize parents with the school and to provide them with feedback about their own children as well as upskilling them on a variety of issues to help them support their children’s learning at home. The range of activities carried out in both jurisdictions and across all settings coincided with best practice recommended by the wider literature base where interventions that address parents’ own role construction and support their ability to engage with their children’s learning in the home are considered most successful. One particular area of contention arose around the notion of HSCL/Parent Officer as ‘teacher’ versus ‘community worker’. While releasing a teacher, as in the ROI, to focus directly on this role was deemed ‘gold standard’, it was agreed that “*Finding that person who is the right fit for the community is invaluable.*”
3. **HSCL/Parent Officer as Value:** While family engagement was considered a priority by all concerned, the study highlighted both North and South and across all school phases, the level of importance attributed to the role of the HSCL/Parent Officer in terms of making this a success in practice, summed up in the quotation: “*couldn’t cope without them*” (Primary, Teacher, ROI). The benefits of having an HSCL/Parent Officer in practice were associated with those softer benefits of keeping everyone happy and in so doing, enabling the school and school life to run smoothly: “it takes out the aggro” (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI). It was also considered intrinsic to reducing barriers to learning, where strong communication between home and school ensured “the best school experience possible” that a child could potentially have. Furthermore, it was associated with increased attendance and enhanced academic outcomes i.e.

pupils' overall success, particularly at a post primary level. Having an HSCL/PO type role was considered integral to school life both North and South: *"Principals love it, parents love it and HSCLs love it"* (ROI policymaker).

4. **HSCL/Parent Officer as tackling educational disadvantage:** The study has indicated that one of the main roles played by HSCLs/Parent Officers is helping to break down barriers and changing mindsets to address parents own negative recollections of schooling as well as being there as a support for families at all times is integral to their success. It is the "direct link" (Primary, Parent, ROI) or indeed the "safety net" (Primary, Parent, NI) they provide for parents that help them deal with the many financial constraints and emotional challenges they encounter on a regular basis, a support mechanism which parents considered was so "vitally, vitally important". Furthermore, the study has highlighted that encouraging all teachers to fully appreciate the challenges of disadvantage instead of having "unrealistic expectations" was also a key role played by the HSCL/Parent Officer, and in so doing, enabling all children, irrespective of their background, the opportunity to reach their full educational potential. The findings from this study have showcased, that investing in a definite role or individual whose core goal is to build bridges between home and school for the benefit of the children concerned can really make a difference to the lives of all concerned.

# Key Definitions

Throughout the report, some abbreviated terms are frequently used that may require clarification:

- **HSCL:** Home-School Community Liaison coordinator
- **Parent Officer:** although several terms are used to describe this role in the Northern Ireland context, we have used the term, Parent Officer or PO throughout for consistency reasons
- **DEIS:** Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
- **NI:** Northern Ireland
- **ROI:** the Republic of Ireland
- **PP:** Post-Primary
- **SEN:** Special Educational Needs
- **EANI:** Education Authority, Northern Ireland
- **TUSLA/TESS:** Tusla Education Support Service in ROI
- **MaxQDA:** is software for conducting principally Qualitative Data Analysis.
- **SPSS:** Software that is used as a Statistical Analytic Tool in the field of Social Science
- **BERA:** British Educational Research Association
- **CPD:** Continuing Professional Development

# Chapter 1: Introduction

*The purpose of this chapter is to provide an introduction to the study, its background context, aims and design. It concludes with an outline of the key research questions that guided the course of the entire study.*

It is widely recognised that family engagement in children's learning is a well-established predictor of educational success (see e.g. Higgins & Katsipataki, 2015 and Axford et al., 2019). Yet evidence tells us that not all children enjoy such interaction and a variety of schemes have been put in place across different countries in an effort to encourage, support and enhance parental involvement in children's learning (Axford et al., 2019). One such initiative is the Home-School Community Liaison scheme in the Republic of Ireland, linked to the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in School) programme, which aims to support children and families at risk of educational underachievement at the intersection between home and school, particularly in areas of high deprivation, by means of a Home School Community Liaison Coordinator (HSCL). Although limited in perspective, existing research shows that such a scheme can be advantageous in: bridging what can sometimes be a large home-school gap (Mulkerrins, 2007, 8); improving parents' confidence and competence in supporting their child's education (Weir et al., 2018); and in nurturing the well-being of children and their families (Ross et al., 2021). Yet, little is known about the 'lived reality' of the HSCL in practice.

This project therefore is particularly timely as it aims to understand how the role of the HSCL works in practice, particularly in terms of addressing educational disadvantage. Furthermore, as it seems that there is no comparable scheme in Northern Ireland, but that Parent Officers are employed by schools on an ad hoc basis, it is fitting to examine what is happening in practice across the island of Ireland from a policy and research perspective.

The main aims of this research therefore are to:

- 1) explore the implementation and administration of the HSCL type role across the island of Ireland, with a particular focus on how they operate in schools (early years to post-primary) serving disadvantaged communities with higher proportions of educational underachievement;
- 2) gather evidence on how HSCLs/Parent Officers operate in practice and how they are perceived by a range of stakeholders, e.g., addressing issues such as 'best' practice,

perceived benefits (particularly for those more disengaged from education and at risk of educational underachievement), outcomes, and barriers/ challenges; and

3) share learning across the island of Ireland in order to inform policy and practice for both pre-service and in-service teacher education.

The focus of the BUDDIES research study was guided by the following key research questions:

RQ 1) To what extent are HSCLs/Parent Officers employed in early years, primary and post-primary schools across the island of Ireland?

- In which types of schools are they more often found?
- How is the post funded?
- Are these posts temporary/permanent/contracts, part-time/full-time?
- How does the role fit within the wider strategy/policy of the school?

RQ 2) How does the HSCL/Parent Officer role operate in practice?

- What is their core role?
- What does this look like in a school context?
- What does 'best practice' look like?
- What is the quality assurance process? Who determines what 'best practice' actually is?
- Has the role been impacted by Covid-19, and if so, how?

RQ 3) How is the role of HSCLs/Parent Officer perceived by the school community (by the HSCL themselves, school leaders, teachers, school pupils, parents, and policy makers)?

- What are the perceived benefits, outcomes, barriers and challenges of the HSCL type role?

RQ 4) How does practice and perceptions differ between ROI and NI? And what can each jurisdiction learn from the other in terms of the potential for HSCLs to address educational underachievement in socially disadvantaged communities?

## Chapter 2: Methodology

*This chapter details the methods used in the study, to meet the demands of the objectives set. After a brief rationale of the design, the samples, data collection and data analysis, where appropriate, are presented across each key phase. The chapter ends with an overview of the ethical decisions made for the purpose of the study in question.*

The overarching aim and subsequent research questions of the study demanded principally a qualitatively rich methodological approach in an effort to understand the ‘lived reality’ of the HSCL/Parent Officer more fully in practice and to consider its full potential in tackling educational disadvantage, rather than measuring and evaluating. To this end, the research was conducted across three principal phases.

### Phase 1

Initially, a policy-driven desk-based scoping review was undertaken within the following parameters:

- The numbers of schools across the island of Ireland who currently employ a HSCL/Parent Officer
- Types of school which employ a HSCL/Parent Officer, i.e. pre-school, primary, post-primary or from what type of area (in terms of disadvantage)?
- How the HSCL/Parent Officer role is funded?
- The capacity in which the HSCL/Parent Officer works - is it full time or part-time?
- The type of qualifications HSCL/Parent Officers have and the types of training they undergo?
- The job description of the HSCL?
- Who employs the HSCL/Parent Officer – is it the school, the Education Authority, the Department?

A range of different sources/ resources were employed to conduct this review, including databases held by the Departments of Education and local government. Where necessary, relevant permissions was sought to gain access to the appropriate

databases. The information gathered was synthesised using the search parameters (noted above) as a guiding framework.

## Phase 2

Following the scoping review, the research team conducted in-depth qualitative case studies with six schools from across the island of Ireland.

## Sample

Three schools were purposively recruited from both Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (ROI), i.e. n= 6 in total. The main inclusion criteria was their use of a HSCL or Parent Officer. Representation was sought from across Pre-school, Primary and Post-Primary schools/settings, as well as differing geographical areas e.g. urban/rural. In order to protect the anonymity of the schools and individuals involved in the study, we do not identify the names of the school or their specific location, but Table 1, below, provides some information on regional characteristics and the type of schools involved in the project.

Jurisdiction	School Type	School Management	Deprivation Level	Geographical Area	Total number of chn/pupils	Gender Mix of School
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	Post-Primary	Controlled	5 <sup>th</sup> <sup>1</sup>	Urban	1074	Boys only
	Primary	Controlled	5 <sup>th</sup>	Rural	147	Co-Ed
	Pre-School (Nursery)	Maintained	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Urban	57	Co-Ed
<b>Republic of Ireland</b>	Post Primary	Community College (ETB)	DEIS <sup>2</sup>	Suburban	283	Co-Ed
	Primary	National School (Church patron)	DEIS 1	Suburban	811	Co-Ed
	Primary (pre-school)	National School (Church patron)	DEIS 1	Urban	294	Girls only

*Table 1: School Characteristics*

The Profile of the HSCL/Parent Officer in each of the schools is also detailed below.

<sup>1</sup> There are 890 SOAs in Northern Ireland and each has a Multiple Deprivation Measure Rank – the most deprived area has MDMR=1 and the least deprived has MDMR=890. The 1<sup>st</sup> decile includes SOAs ranked from MDMR=1 to MDMR=89, the 2<sup>nd</sup> decile includes the next 89 MDMRs and so on. The average MDMR of the three areas where the schools are placed in NI is: 342.3 – this is within the 4<sup>th</sup> SOA decile

<sup>2</sup> In ROI, Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) is an initiative of the Department of Education and Skills aimed at lessening educational disadvantage and bringing about social inclusion in primary and second level education. In Primary Schools, level of social need is greater in DEIS 1 primary schools than in DEIS 2. In post-primary DEIS schools are not banded.



Jurisdiction	School Type	Title	Employment Status	Experience
Northern Ireland	Post-Primary	Parent Officer	Part-time	Former cleaner in school, then school technician, now Parent Officer – lives in the community
	Primary	Parent Officer	The Vice-Principal largely took responsibility for aspects of this role in addition to her VP duties	VP in the school
	Pre-school (Nursery)	Parent Officer	Part-time	Former parent – lives in the community
Republic of Ireland	Post-Primary	HSCL	Full-time	Qualified Teacher
	Primary	HSCL	Full-time	Qualified Teacher
	Primary: Pre-School <sup>3</sup>	HSCL	Full-time	Qualified Teacher

Table 2: Profile of HSCL/PO in both contexts and across each school phase

**Procedure:** In-depth qualitative case studies were conducted in each school/setting. These comprised one-to-one interviews and focus groups (FG) with relevant stakeholders, including: HSCLs/Parent Officers; school leaders; teachers; parents, and relevant policy makers. The intention had been to include children/pupils also in the dataset; however, on further consideration, it became clear that the role of the HSCL/Parent Officer was to interact principally with parents therefore children/pupils' understanding of such a role would have been minimal. The research team contacted the principal of the above schools to obtain their agreement for their school to participate as a case study. All 6 agreed and all participating stakeholders (i.e. teachers, parents, HSCLs/Parent Officers) were identified and recruited by school principals. As such, each case study included a different number of participating interviewees, reflecting the contexts of each participating school. Interviews/focus groups all took place in person in a room allocated by the principal of each participating setting and were conducted, where possible, by two members of the research team (i.e. one from NI and the other from ROI). Interviews and/or focus groups lasted approximately 45

<sup>3</sup> This Primary School was chosen as it has strong pre-school links and has the preschool transition programme in place

minutes and were principally semi-structured in nature, following a broadly similar set of questions, tailored slightly for each group.

Table 3 summarises the characteristics of participants in each interview/focus group. All participants gave prior informed consent before taking part in the research.

<b>Case Study Type</b>	<b>Jurisdiction</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Methodology</b>
<b>Post-primary school</b>	ROI	Principal	1-1 interview
		HSCL	1-1 interview
		Teachers (x3)	Focus group interview
		Care Team (Vice principal, SEN lead teacher)	Focus Group Interview
<b>Primary School (amalgamated school – one school across three campuses)</b>	ROI	Principal	1-1 interview
		Principal of school on separate campus	1-1 interview
		HSCL	1-1 interview
		Teachers: Group A = 4 Group B = 3	2 focus group interviews
		Parents (x6)	Focus group interview
<b>Primary school with pre-school links</b>	ROI	Principal	1-1 interview
		HSCL	1-1 interview
		Parents (x 11)	Focus group interview
		Teachers (x 3)	Focus group interview
<b>Post Primary</b>	NI	Principal	1-1 interview
		Vice Principal (pastoral)	1-1 interview
		Parent Officer	1-1 interview
		3 parents during individual home visits	1-1 interview
<b>Primary</b>	NI	Principal	1-1 interview
		Vice Principal (who shared role of Parent Officer with the principal)	1-1 interview
		Teachers (x3)	Focus group interview
		Parents (x5)	Focus group interview
<b>Nursery School</b>	NI	Principal	1-1 interview
		Parent Officer	1-1 interview
		Teacher	1-1 interview
		Parent	1-1 interview

*Table 3: Participants and selected methodology*

In addition, an in-depth one-to-one interview (approximately one hour in length) took place with one policy maker in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland respectively. The policymaker interviews were conducted online for convenience of the interviewee – the NI interview was conducted by a NI member of the team and the ROI interview was conducted by both a NI and ROI member of the research team.

All interviewees agreed that the interviews could be recorded, and these will be destroyed within 3 months of completion of the project.

A light touch form of observation was also conducted across most of the case study sites. These principally comprised a tour of the school, showcasing the parents' room or rooms, if available, and observing written and photographic evidence re. types of activities undertaken, planners, daily timetables, resources etc. On one occasion, in the North, the HSCL/Parent Officer was observed in action undertaking three home visits respectively. However, on the majority of occasions, although HSCLs/Parent Officers and parents spoke freely about their experiences and were happy to share snapshots from them, they were reluctant to allow any member of the research team to watch them in action, principally for reasons of parent and their associated children's confidentiality. The detail of these light touch observations cannot be specifically detailed, but instead, an overview of the type of experiences provided and the manner in which they were conducted contributed to two cameos of practice, one with a focus on Northern Ireland and the other, in the Republic of Ireland, to report on a typical day in the life of an HSCL or Parent Officer.

## Phase 3

For the purpose of garnering a wider range of principal and senior leaders' perspectives on the role of the HSCL/Parent Officer across the island of Ireland, a short, online questionnaire survey was designed and developed.

The questionnaire focused on the following three questions:

- to gather background information about the school;
- to discover whether a HSCL/PO is employed there; and if so; and
- to determine what such a role looks like and how is it funded.

For ease of completion, the response option formats were tick box in design, but some open-ended responses were included to allow for respondents to explain their answer in

greater depth if they desired. Before distribution, the online survey was piloted with four teachers (2 ROI and 2 NI, representing all school phases from post-primary to pre-school) and their associated responses in relation to the content, layout and wording of the survey were incorporated into the final version.

## Procedure

The survey was advertised on the social media platforms of Facebook and Twitter from 25th May and was available until 20<sup>th</sup> July 2022. It was also directly emailed to a convenience sample of schools both in NI and ROI. The survey had 371 usable responses (in addition there were 138 partial responses and these were not used).

## Data Analysis

Interview and focus group data were transcribed verbatim (using automated transcription software Otter.ai and checked for accuracy by a member of the research team). The data were analysed using MaxQDA, following Mukherji and Albon's (2018) steps for analysis of qualitative data. A process of thematic analysis took place based on a 'grounded' approach, allowing the themes to emerge from the data. The latter applied also to the light touch observations where key trends/themes were generated to inform a 'typical' account in both contexts (NI and ROI). The questionnaire data were imported into SPSS for processing. Descriptive statistics (counts and percentages) were generated for key variables, disaggregated by jurisdiction where appropriate. Regarding the more detailed open-ended responses (e.g., where respondents provided their insights into the benefits of HSCLs), all data were collated and key themes were extracted and presented.

## Ethics

This research was not considered to be sensitive in nature. Nonetheless, the research was conducted within stringent ethical practices in line with BERA (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* and the College Code of Ethics (2018) across each of the 3 participating institutions

*Voluntary participation:* All participants were advised that participation in the research was voluntary and they were made aware of the right to withdraw at any stage of the study. There were no withdrawals throughout the study.

*Informed consent:* All participants were provided with full information prior to taking part in this research, and as such, full and informed consent was obtained. Information sheets, were accessible and tailored to each audience. All participants had the opportunity to seek further clarity prior to taking part in the research, if required.

*Data management:* All data was held securely on password protected PCs and within the guiding principle of GDPR regulations.

*Ethical review:* Prior to commencing, the research protocol went under the scrutiny of Stranmillis University College's Research and Ethics Committee, accompanied by an institutional letter of agreement from the other two participating universities, and only began upon receipt of full ethical approval.

## Chapter 3: A Policy-Based Perspective

*This policy-driven scoping review aims to contribute to a better understanding of the current policy landscape in relation to HSCL/Parent Officer across the island of Ireland, as well as the potential of the HSCL in terms of addressing educational disadvantage, an issue that has been hugely exacerbated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020). To this purpose, it includes an empirical review of policy documents from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as well as a “review of reviews” covering empirical evidence in relation to HSCL and its impact on educational outcomes. The literature review draws on a number of systematic and scoping reviews, some of which were commissioned by governments in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand. These introduce an international element, which allows lessons to be drawn from further afield.*

### Introduction

This policy-focused scoping review has explored policy documents from relevant Government departments and their respective arms-length bodies on the implementation and administration of HSCL/Parent Officer in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In particular, the policy element of the scoping review aimed to address the following points:

- The numbers of schools across the island of Ireland who currently employ a HSCL coordinator or Parent Officer;
- Types of school which employ a HSCL coordinator or Parent Officer (including stage, socio-geographical characteristics, and sector);
- HSCL funding sources and eligibility criteria;
- Whether the HSCL role is full time or part-time;
- Training of HSCL coordinators or Parent Officers;
- Job descriptions of HSCL roles;
- And HSCL staff employers.

A key constraint in relation to data on the Northern Ireland case has resulted from the fact that school budgets in Northern Ireland are devolved, and no centrally defined role akin to the HSCL Coordinator in the Republic of Ireland currently exists or has ever existed in this jurisdiction. Instead, Northern Irish schools have substantial freedom to allocate funds according to their own needs and priorities. This is in keeping with expert

opinion recommending “flexibility within local communities to direct the nature of the spend” (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement, 2021: 39) under a place-based approach to tackling educational inequality and is indeed explicitly intended to make schools “more responsive to parents, pupils, the local community and employers” (Department of Education (NI) 2021, 2). However, for the purpose of this policy review, the resulting diversity of HSCL practice in Northern Irish schools meant that useful data on the HSCL practice in Northern Ireland was hard to come by. Answering some of the questions detailed above in relation to Northern Ireland would thus be a task for further empirical research with Northern Irish schools.

The policy review was complemented by a literature review covering several evidence reviews, including scoping, meta, and systematic reviews, as well as “grey literature” reports commissioned by government bodies in England, Australia and New Zealand. This literature review addressed the evidence in relation to parental engagement with a particular focus on its impact on educational outcomes. It covered research from a broader geographical area, introducing an international element to the review. The purpose of this evidence review was to offer insights into elements of HSCL that have been shown to “work” through rigorous studies producing high-quality evidence.

## Methodology

### Policy Review – Search Strategy

In Northern Ireland, search engines on the websites of the Department for Education (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/>), Education Authority (<https://www.eani.org.uk/>), and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (<https://ccea.org.uk/>) were initially searched using the Boolean search string (parent\* OR communit\*) AND (engag\* OR liais\*). This search strategy proved unviable for the EANI and CCEA search engines, which didn’t recognize the Boolean operators, treating them as search terms instead. In the case of the Department for Education search engine, the search string resulted in a very manageable 14 results but appeared to exclude a number of known relevant documents. Searching for each search term individually resulted in an excessive number of irrelevant results in all three search engines. It was therefore decided to search for key policy documents manually, starting with known documents and gradually



including further documents that were quoted in documents already included or were listed as associated documents on the relevant websites.

In the Republic of Ireland, the focus of the review was targeted specifically at the Home School Community Liaison scheme. The Department of Education and the Tusla Child and Family Agency websites were searched using the search terms “HSCL” and “DEIS”. Results from these searches were complemented with known publications on HSCL and key publications discussed in the literature.

Documents were included in the review if relationships between schools and parents/homes were addressed anywhere in the full text of the document, irrespective of wording. The use of the specific term HSCL was not required.

### Policy Review – Search Results

In Northern Ireland, eight relevant documents were found across four Government and Arms-Length Bodies, including the Department of Education, the Education and Training Inspectorate, the Education Authority, and the NI Audit Office.

In the Republic of Ireland, nine relevant documents were found. These were published by six Government departments, Arms-Length Bodies, and related organisations, including the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Tusla Child and Family Agency, the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Education, and the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation.

### Literature Review – Search Strategy

For the literature review, databases including Academic Search Complete, Education Abstracts (H.W. Wilson), Education Research Complete, Educational Administration Abstracts, and ERIC, were searched using the following search string:

((parent\* AND (school\* OR education\*)) OR home-school) AND (partnership OR participation OR involvement OR engagement OR liaison) AND (systematic OR scoping OR review) NOT (clinical OR health OR patient OR “book review”)

The search was limited to title only and was set to include publication dates from 2000 – 2022. The search was not limited to peer-reviewed publications, so as not to exclude literature reviews commissioned by government departments.

Following automatic removal of duplicates, the search resulted in 15 publications. However, following title, abstract, and full-text screening, only one relevant study

remained. For this reason, the sample was expanded to include literature reviews known to the research team and important reviews mentioned in the literature. A total of nine reviews were eventually taken into account.

## Home-School-Community Liaison on the Island of Ireland

The Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme in the Republic of Ireland was initiated as a pilot project in 1990. It was further extended in 2005 under DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), the Department of Education and Skills' (DES) main policy initiative to tackle educational disadvantage. Today, the scheme is operated by TUSLA Education Support Service and forms part of the School Support Programme, which includes a range of interventions aimed at supporting the educational needs of children from disadvantaged communities (Department of Children and Youth Affairs et al., 2019). The scheme has been frequently cited as a model scheme for parental engagement and stands in contrast to a much less formalized parental engagement landscape in Northern Ireland. The following section uses a comparative approach to examine a range of policy documents with regard to different aspects of parental engagement on the Island of Ireland.

### How many schools in Ireland currently employ a HSCL?

In the Republic of Ireland, the number of schools served by a HSCL under the DEIS scheme has changed over the years. Starting out with 31 HSCL serving 55 schools (Phádraig, 2010), the scheme was extended to all DAS (Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage) schools in 2005, but its scope was later affected by spending cuts. Rural schools within the DEIS scheme initially had access to HSCL services, but this entitlement was later removed (INTO, 2017) and doesn't form part of current supports for DEIS Rural schools (Department of Education (Republic of Ireland), 2022).

DEIS schools are further classified into four categories – DEIS Urban Band 1, DEIS Urban Band 2, DEIS Rural primary schools and DEIS Post Primary schools – based on geographic location and an identification model that takes into account a range of indicators of disadvantage. In the school year 2021-2022, there were 884 DEIS schools, including 227 DEIS Urban Band 1 primary schools, 104 DEIS Urban Band 2 primary schools, 356 Rural DEIS primary schools, and 197 DEIS Post-Primary schools

(Department of Education (Republic of Ireland), 2021). All DEIS Urban Primary schools (i.e. Band 1 and Band 2) and all DEIS Post Primary schools are currently included in the Home-School Liaison scheme and are being served by 415 full-time HSCL Coordinators (all teachers assigned to HSCL roles and released from normal teaching duties) either in individual schools or clusters of schools (Oireachtas, April, 2021).

In Northern Ireland, no up-to-date data on the numbers of Parent Officers (or similar roles) deployed in schools could be found in the documents reviewed. The most recent data on this matter features in a 2012 report on improving attendance in schools serving deprived areas (RSM McClure Watters, 2012), commissioned by the Department of Education. A survey conducted as part of that study found that *“22.4% of Primary and 57.7% of Post-Primary respondents stated that their school had a home-school liaison person” (p.38), but it is unclear what is meant by “home-school liaison person”.*

Some indication of the extent of spending and activities relating to parental engagement can be gleaned from a recent report by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (2021), although this doesn't specifically address employment of a dedicated Parent Officer. Under the Targeting Social Need (TSN) element within the Department of Education's Common Funding Scheme, schools may receive additional funding to tackle educational underachievement and support pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Additional funding is also available for schools with pupils from the Traveller and Roma communities, children looked after, and newcomer pupils.

While schools have considerable freedom regarding how they spend these funds, they are required to account for their use of them (Department of Education (NI), 2021). The Northern Ireland Audit Office (2021) conducted a survey of schools in receipt of TSN funding as part of its report. Approximately 35% of survey respondents indicated that TSN funding was used for provision of pastoral care and home-school liaison, although the data doesn't allow us to identify how much of this percentage relates to pastoral care and how much to home-school liaison, nor does it tell us what any such liaison looked like in practice (e.g. whether schools employed a dedicated member of staff or purchased a parental communication app). It is also possible that schools may have used funding from other sources to pay for HSCL, in which case the percentage might be higher.

The Department of Education's Extended Schools Programme (discussed in detail under Funding and Eligibility Criteria) also provides funding for schools in deprived areas. Since 2012/13, schools working together in clusters can obtain additional funds for parental engagement programmes and services. This extra funding has resulted in an increase in programmes targeting parents and families (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2019: 9), and according to the Education Authority (2019: 18), *"on average over 25,000 parents participate in Extended Schools activities each year."*

### What types of school employ a HSCL/Parent Officer?

In the Republic of Ireland, as aforementioned, all primary schools and all post-primary schools, eligible under the DEIS scheme, are entitled to an HSCL Coordinator – the role is thus limited to socio-economically deprived areas. However, rural DEIS primary schools are not currently entitled to HSCL services and there is currently no formalised provision at the pre-school stage<sup>4</sup>.

In the Northern Ireland case, no data is currently available on the characteristics of schools which employ a Parent Officer or similar. However, while schools have freedom in principle to use part of their core budgets for this purpose, additional funding packages aimed at targeting educational underachievement and improving home-school relations are made available based on social deprivation measures (see below).

### What funding and eligibility criteria exist?

The HSCL scheme, is available to all DEIS Urban Band 1 and Band 2 primary schools and DEIS post-primary schools. Initially, DEIS Rural schools were also eligible, but these were later excluded as a result of funding cuts (INTO 2017). Schools included in the DEIS programme are those assessed by the Department of Education as having the highest percentage of students that come from backgrounds at risk of educational disadvantage. The DEIS identification model has changed over the years and was last refined in March 2022 as a result of Budget 2022, when the number of schools which were classified as having DEIS status increased by a further 30% approximately (Department of Education (Republic of Ireland), 2022). Within each school, the scheme is also targeted, focusing on the most disadvantaged families (Department of Children and Youth Affairs et al., 2019). This targeted approach has become more important with

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<sup>4</sup> The ROI policymaker has indicated that currently TUSLA/TESS and Parent Plus are currently running 5 Parent Plus Early Years Pilots in a number of Primary Schools regionally which look at the impact of preschool – primary school transition from a parental engagement perspective. This has been made explicit through Circular 0016/2019 of the Department of Education which suggests that HSCL coordinators 'support the establishment and further development of links between early years' settings, parents, families, schools and communities to support children across the education continuum.'

the expansion of the scheme in recent years, which led to increasing heterogeneity of pupil backgrounds within participating schools (Weir et al., 2018).

In Northern Ireland, most schools are “grant-aided” and under the funding authority of the Education Authority. This includes both the Controlled and the Maintained sector<sup>5</sup>. Core school budgets in Northern Ireland currently contain a Targeting Social Need (TSN) element, which is allocated “in recognition of the additional challenges and costs involved in supporting children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as those at risk of educational underachievement” (Department of Education, no date). For primary and nursery schools, the TSN element is allocated based on the proportion of children entitled to free school meals within each school, or children whose parents receive certain benefits in the case of nursery children. Additional Social Deprivation funding is available for those schools with the greatest concentration of children from socially deprived backgrounds (Department of Education (NI), 2021). At post-primary level, in addition to the social deprivation element measured through entitlement to free school meals, an educational attainment element is also taken into account, which is based on the percentage of pupils who are performing below the expected level for their age.

Under the Common Funding Scheme, schools are at liberty, in principle, to use their core budget to address their own identified priorities. It is unclear how schools spend TSN moneys (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2020), and anecdotal evidence suggests that they are not always spent specifically to address educational underachievement (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland, 2021).

However, other funding schemes do require money to be spent on targeted measures to school address educational underachievement and improve parental engagement. These additional funds are often subject to funding criteria based on social deprivation measures, such as entitlement to free school meals. Among these, the most important scheme in Northern Ireland is the Department of Education’s Extended Schools Programme, which is available to schools serving the most disadvantaged areas. Introduced in 2006 as part of the NI Executive’s ten-year Children and Young People’s Strategy and re-focused on improvement and underachievement following the development of the ‘Every School a Good School’ policy in 2009, it constitutes a key

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<sup>5</sup> Controlled schools are managed and funded by the Education Authority (EA) through school Boards of Governors (BoGs). Catholic Maintained schools are managed by BoGs nominated by trustees - mainly Roman Catholic - along with parents, teachers and EA representatives

source of funding for home-school liaison and parental engagement in deprived areas of Northern Ireland. Since 2012/13, clusters of schools working together under the scheme are allocated additional funding specifically for parental engagement programmes and services (Education Authority, 2019: 18). Currently, 459 schools receive this targeted uplift (Department of Education (NI), 2021b) – a little over 30% of all 1,480 schools and pre-school settings currently operating in Northern Ireland (Department of Education (NI), 2021c). Eligible schools have a high proportion of pupils who are entitled to Free School Meals or live in an area classified as disadvantaged.

The amount of Extended Schools funding allocated to each school depends on overall school size: it consists of a block allocation of £3000 plus a sliding scale, whereby the first 100 pupils are funded at £100 each, the next 100 pupils at £75 each, and so on. A further 15% uplift is available for schools that form part of a cluster with other local schools, and another 15% for clustered schools to spend specifically on family engagement (Department of Education (NI), 2018). While this means that small schools receive relatively more money per pupil, larger schools will have a larger overall Extended Schools allocation and are thus more likely to be in a position to employ an additional member of staff.

However, data on recent funding amounts suggest that for all but a few schools, a full-time member of staff funded exclusively through Extended Schools moneys would currently be out of reach: in 2021/22, the total sum of Extended Schools funding allocated to eligible schools ranged from £658 to £39,096 (median: £17,000), while the 15% uplift for family engagement activities ranged from £82 to £4,511 (median: £2,143) (Department of Education (NI), 2021b).

In 2019-20, the Department of Education furthermore maintained a number of funding programmes targeting socially deprived children, including the North Belfast Primary Principals Support Programme (£250,000), which funds short-term interventions to *“support (...) school/family linkages” and has allowed twenty-one schools in the area to “introduce parental engagement for the first time, while others are using it to enhance current provision”*; the West Belfast Sharing the Learning Programme (£200,000), which provides *“curriculum support for parents and carers, recognising them as the primary educators of their children”*; and the West Belfast Community Project (£80,000), a place-based Zone approach, which has worked with *“close to 1,000 families in a holistic wrap*

*around approach, supporting families through a process of weekly home visits”*

(Northern Ireland Audit Office 2021: 65, 66).

### Is the HSCL/ Parent Officer role full time or part-time?

In the Republic of Ireland, the HSCL coordinator role is full-time and is carried out by teachers who are appointed from a school’s existing staff and are released from all teaching duties (Conaty, no date: 14). The full-time requirement is intended to help avoid potential conflicts of interest and to ensure the necessary flexibility to meet the requirements of the role (Department of Education and Skills, 2019).

No data could be found in relation to the employment terms of Parent Officers in Northern Ireland, but as there is no single defined role in this jurisdiction, the terms of employment are likely to be diverse.

### What is the training for the HSCL/ Parent Officer role?

HSCL coordinators in the Republic of Ireland must be *“qualified, experienced teachers”* (Archer & Shortt, 2003: 42). Induction training and CPD are also provided (Tusla, 2018).

No data could be found in relation to training of Parent Officers in Northern Ireland, but as there is no single defined role in this jurisdiction, professional backgrounds and training are likely to be diverse. Anecdotally, we are aware that in a number of schools, the Parent Officer role is exercised by a member of the local community, rather than a teacher.

### What is the job description of the HSCL/ Parent Officer?

An induction booklet for HSCL coordinators states that their “primary role (···) is to work with the salient adult(s) in the child’s life, in order to improve educational outcomes for the child. The focus of the role is to improve the attendance, participation and retention of children in the Irish educational system, by providing both universal and targeted supports” (Tusla, 2018: 3). It describes *“building, developing and promoting partnerships between home, school and community”* as the coordinator’s *“critical role”* (Tusla, 2018: 7).

Work with parents is carried out via a range of avenues, including home visitation, running a parents’ room, and offering classes and courses for parents (Tusla 2018). Archer and Shortt (2003) furthermore list providing childcare facilities to support parents’ participation in events and training courses and training parents as home visitors, facilitators and classroom aides as aspects of the coordinator’s role.



A key aim of all activities with parents is to break down barriers and provide low-threshold access points for parents to interact with and become a part of school life. Activities also aim to develop parents' own educational achievement, in a bid to improve their ability to support their children's learning, create a home environment that values learning, and model positive behaviours that support learning.

Home visitation is arguably the most central element of the HSCL's job and should occupy one third of the HSCL's time (Archer and Shortt, 2003). A submission by the HSCL National Team (2009:2) to the National Economic and Social Forum on Literacy and Social Inclusion states that *"the coordinator visits homes to build bonds of respect and trust between home and school. The coordinator goes to the home to listen to parents, to learn about their lives, their children and their difficulties"*. The literature also stresses that home visits should be carried out *"with a purpose, but without an agenda"* (HSCL Coordinators, no date: 23). However, a 2017 survey of HSCL coordinators conducted by Weir et al. (2018: 20) found that, at the time, coordinators on average estimated that they spent only 21% of their time on this key aspect of their role (a reduction of 9.5 percentage points since 2001), and as little as 18% among coordinators based at primary schools – although time spent on meetings with parents outside of the home had increased over time. Overall, time spent working with parents had decreased over the years (Weir et al., 2018).

HSCL Coordinators also work with other teachers to develop their understanding of educational disadvantage and promote best practice (Department of Education and Skills, 2019) and liaise with different agencies and stakeholders.<sup>6</sup> A 2002 survey (Archer and Shortt, 2003: 58) found that HSCL coordinators spent about 66% of their time working directly with parents, including home visits, other contacts with individual parents, and group activities, such as courses and classes for parents. Approximately 15% of their time was spent working with other staff at their school and 10% working with individuals and agencies in the community.

No data could be found in relation to job descriptions of Parent Officers in Northern Ireland, but as there is no single defined role in this jurisdiction, job descriptions are likely to be diverse.

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<sup>6</sup> A full job description for the role of HSCL Coordinator is included in Department of Education and Skills (2009: Appendix F).

## Who is the HSCL/ Parent Officer's employer?

HSCLs in the Republic of Ireland are employed by their school and are paid by the Department of Education and Skills. Some HSCL coordinators have responsibility for more than one school, in which case they are employed by only one of the schools they serve, known as their “base school” (Archer & Shortt, 2003: 50). Coordinators can be shared between schools across sectors (primary and post-primary) or within a single sector (Department of Education and Skills, 2019).

No data on Parent Officer employment could be found in Northern Ireland. However, as school budgets are devolved, it stands to reason that schools directly employ any additional staff such as a Parent Officer.

## International Evidence

There is now a very large body of research on home-school relations (Castelli and Pepe, 2008) and related subjects and a comprehensive review of the empirical evidence is far beyond the scope of this paper. To further complicate matters, “parental engagement” and its related terms are often poorly defined in the literature (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003), which covers a wide range of behaviours, procedures, policies, and attitudes. For the purpose of this literature review, we shall focus on the evidence in support of practical ways in which schools engage with their pupils' families, and vice versa.

Parental involvement can have beneficial effects on many areas of home and school life (O’Hehir and Savelsberg, 2014; Emerson et al., 2012) and could thus be “*successful*” in many ways, even if it had no impact on achievement at all (Bull et al., 2008). For example, research has shown parental involvement programmes to successfully improve parental involvement, attitude and understanding of their role, and to have a positive impact on children’s mental health and behaviour (See and Gorard, 2015). However, as the goal of the HSCL scheme in the Republic of Ireland is to “improve educational outcomes for the students most at risk of poor attendance, participation and retention” (Department of Education (Republic of Ireland), 2019), and funding streams in Northern Ireland are also aimed at targeting educational disadvantage, we are restricting our focus on evidence in relation to impact on academic achievement, attendance and

retention. As we shall see, the evidence in this area is still patchy, with many studies suffering from various methodological problems.

## Quality of evidence

The impact of parental involvement on pupils' achievement is difficult to quantify due to the many factors that influence student outcomes and because successful schools typically combine several characteristics where parental engagement is but one among many "key ingredient[s] of an indivisible cocktail of factors promoting achievement" (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003: 62). Interventions designed to raise academic outcomes through parental involvement are often multiple-component programmes which combine classroom-based aspects with parent-focused elements, making it "hard to isolate the specific component effects" (See and Gorard, 2015: 256) and thus to judge whether any impact is due to the parental involvement or the classroom activities.

Because parental involvement – particularly at home – is difficult to standardise and is influenced by a range of factors, including social class, parental level of education, and material deprivation (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003), it is furthermore "impossible to 'tease apart' or isolate the relative impact of home and school" (Emerson et al., 2012: 8).

These problems are compounded by a lack of technically sound studies in the field. As Desforges and Abouchaar (2003: 69) point out in their seminal evidence review, *"the evidence of impact on pupils' achievement and attainment is patchy, ad hoc, mainly subjective and impossible to relate to the parent/teacher/child activities"*. Higgins and Katsipatakis (2015: 283) observe that much of the literature relies on *"correlational and non-experimental designs that help us understand what successful parents do, but not how to work in partnership to improve or develop the impact of what they could do"*. As a result, Bull et al. (2008: 10) conclude, there is *"little hard evidence"* that home-school partnerships contribute to improved learning outcomes for pupils – but neither is there any evidence that they don't!

## Does parental involvement matter?

There is disagreement among reviewers in the field whether existing research justifies claims that initiatives designed to increase parental involvement make any difference at all to learning outcomes. See and Gorard (2015: 260) argue that the evidence in the field is technically weak, hampering their ability to demonstrate clear impact, a complaint that is echoed throughout the literature. Because the strongest available evidence of positive impact comes from evaluations of multi-component interventions, they recommend that

parental involvement should only be promoted as “*part of a wider approach involving formal schooling as well*” (ibid.).

However, while they share the methodological concerns voiced elsewhere in the literature, Higgins and Katsipataki’s (2015) “*umbrella review*” of 13 meta-analyses concludes that parent involvement interventions can have positive effects on pupils’ achievement. Focusing on parental involvement in middle school, Hill and Tyson (2009) also find a statistically significant positive relationship between “general parental involvement” and academic achievement across 27 correlational studies, although these don’t imply a causal relationship. Emerson et al. (2012: 29, 30) summarise evidence from several studies that have shown parental involvement to positively impact on achievement, including:

- grades and test scores,
- enrolment in higher level programmes
- successful completion of classes,
- drop-out rates,
- graduation rates, and
- likelihood of commencing postsecondary education.

The most robust evidence is available in relation to the positive impact of family literacy, language, and – to a lesser extent – numeracy interventions, while there is little reliable data on other curriculum areas (Goodall et al., 2011). Axford et al. (2019) echoed this in their review of international evidence regarding parent engagement in children’s learning and stated that family literacy interventions were one of the most promising areas for intervention in early years settings.

### Engagement in learning is key

Nevertheless, there is a growing consensus in the literature that parental involvement matters. Its impact is, however, dependent on its context, as well as its focus: Bull et al. (2018: 15) stress that: “*parental involvement in schools is not sufficient to impact positively on student achievement: what is needed is parental engagement in learning*”. Drawing on Emerson et al. (2012), O’Hehir and Savelsberg (2014: 18) likewise stress that “*there is an important distinction between involving parents in schooling and engaging parents in learning. (...) [It] is the latter that has the greatest influence over academic achievement*”.

However, not all parental engagement with learning at home seems to be equally promising. According to Higgins and Katsipataki (2015), early literacy approaches have a comparatively large positive impact on progress, while parental support for homework is not supported by the evidence. Hill and Tyson (2009) elaborate that assisting with, supervising, or checking homework can have either positive or negative effects on achievement, but was overall negatively correlated with achievement in their review. This may reflect qualitative differences between different parents' homework support or simply a causal relationship where poor academic performance prompts greater parental involvement, suggesting that interventions that help parents develop effective homework support practices may still have a positive impact.

### Effective parental engagement operates through academic socialization

Some parental engagement occurs “naturally”, and Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) find that this type of involvement has the strongest impact on educational outcomes:

*“parental involvement in the form of ‘at-home good parenting’ has a significant positive effect on children’s achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation. (...) Other forms of parental involvement [e.g. volunteering in schools] do not appear to contribute to the scale of the impact of ‘at-home’ parenting”* (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003, p 4, 5). Hill and Tyson (2009: 11) also find the strongest correlations between achievement and “*academic socialization*”, defined as “*communicating parental expectations for education and its value or utility, linking school-work to current events, fostering educational and occupational aspirations, discussing learning strategies with children, and making preparations and plans for the future*” (ibid.: 5). “*Home-based involvement*”, defined as “*educationally enriching activities at home, making books and other educational materials available, and taking children to museums, libraries, the zoo, and other educational outlets*” (ibid.: 12) also produced a significant correlation when “*helping with homework*” was not included. Similarly, Axford et al (2019) argue that the link between parental involvement and children’s academic attainment is strongest when parental involvement is defined as parental expectations of their children’s academic success.

This effect operates through parenting practices that foster self-concepts and aspirations conducive to educational achievement: parents’ influence on their children’s beliefs and behaviours through expectations, aspiration and interest, combined with

behaviours that model beneficial attitudes and habits and demonstrate that school is important, are the most important factors in relation to achievement (O’Hehir and Savelsberg, 2014).

It is hardly surprising that this kind of “naturally occurring at-home good parenting” is unequally distributed across society and strongly related to social class, maternal level of education and psycho-social health, and material deprivation, among other factors, and it is not at all clear that “*naturally occurring*” and “*artificially induced*” parenting behaviours are equally effective (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

A key factor related to “*naturally-occurring*” parental involvement is parental role construction – whether parents “believe they should be involved in their child’s education”, as well as their “*sense of efficacy and belief in their ability to help their children is central to whether and how they become involved with their children’s schooling*” (Emerson et al., 2012: 11). Parental role construction impacts on whether, how, and how much parents engage with their child’s learning, and parents from socio-economically deprived backgrounds are less likely to feel confident and competent in this way than better-off parents. This is despite the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) finding that “*improved educational outcomes result from a genuine interest and active engagement from parents*” (Emerson et al., 2012: 18) and that specialist academic knowledge is not required to support children’s learning at home. Likewise, Houtenville and Conway (2008, discussed in Emerson et al. 2012: 30) found that “*parental effort (the combination of all kinds of engagement) has a large effect on student achievement*”.

However, some encouraging evidence suggests that parents can successfully be supported to develop parenting practices that are conducive to improved outcomes for children. Emerson et al. (2012: 38) suggest that advising parents on appropriate engagement and “*consistently communicat[ing] to parents the importance of daily discussions about what their children are learning and their own expectations and aspirations for them*” can help improve parental role construction and self-efficacy. Higgins and Katsipatakis (2015: 287) suggest that “*a programme of regular short (an hour or so) but focused workshops over a limited period (ten weeks or so) which boosts parents’ confidence and gives them practical activities they can undertake with their children in literacy or mathematics*” could be successful, based on the evidence covered in their umbrella review of meta-analyses.

A rare randomized controlled study, discussed in Desforges and Abouchaar's (2003) evidence review, gives credence to this claim: the programme, based at ten Sheffield schools, aimed to promote pre-school literacy development in areas of social need by helping parents support their children's literacy development at home through a 12–18 month pre-school programme. Impact was measured using a purpose-designed test. The intervention comprised "*home visits by teachers, provision of literacy resources, centre-based group activities, special events and postal communications*" (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003: 67), as well as access to an accredited Open College Network course for parents and opportunities in local provision. Programme children made greater progress than children in the control group, reflecting "*socio cultural change in family literacy produced through teacher-parent interaction and parent child interaction.*" (Hannon and Nutbrown, 2001, quoted in Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003: 68).

Interventions that support parents' ability to engage with their children's learning in the home are thus most likely to have a positive impact on students' achievement. For these to be successful, information needs to be "*clear, specific and targeted*" (Goodall et al., 2011: 5), and consist of "*written information containing simple, specific techniques for helping their children*" (Goodall et al., 2011: 63).

### The impact of parental involvement varies for different groups

Pupil age and deprivation, in combination, are a significant mediating factor, according to several studies. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003, 27) report two studies whose findings show that parental involvement generally has less influence on older pupils' achievement, and that socio-economic deprivation "*[works] against the effects of parental involvement in ways not evident with younger pupils*", although these findings are disputed by other studies. They also find that for older children, parental involvement has a stronger impact on retention and aspirations than on achievement. Higgings and Katsipataki (2015: 287), however, find "*some indication that older students are likely to benefit more, but (...) no indication that interventions targeting students with SEN will be of greater benefit to this group.*"

### Significant barriers need to be addressed

Attempts to raise levels and quality of parental engagement with children's education are hampered by a number of significant barriers, especially for the most vulnerable families. These are wide-ranging and may include logistical barriers (timing, transport, childcare etc.); barriers related to poverty, deprivation, and ill health; children's



behavioural problems; barriers set up by schools (e.g. staff attitudes, gendered programmes that don't appeal to fathers); as well as parental attitudes, values, beliefs, confidence, and fear of stigma (Goodall et al., 2011; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Solutions emphasize flexibility in relation to timing and location of engagement, choosing places and people with parents' comfort in mind (e.g. using other parents, rather than a teacher, as "*ambassadors*"), and visiting parents at home and in "other places where the community [meets] regularly" (Goodall et al., 2011: 36). Holistic approaches, such as full-service schools, may also offer a promising approach to address some of these barriers. However, the evidence is unclear whether such initiatives have a significant impact on achievement.

### Strategic planning and whole-school approach are essential

Several reviews stress that strategic planning and a whole-school approach to parent engagement are vital to successful schemes. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003: 70) report on evidence from several studies supporting the importance of "strategic planning which embeds parental involvement schemes in whole-school development plans". They argue that successful programmes must be based on a thorough needs assessment involving all stakeholders and include plans that "*conform to the general principles of management paying heed to role clarification, resource allocation, target setting, training, monitoring, evaluation and review*" (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003: 55). Effective leadership is highlighted by Goodall et al. (2011)

Embedding parental engagement into strategic plans also helps "engender a whole-school commitment to working with parents and families" (Emerson et al., 2012: 44). Such an approach is key to success, as "*attempts by schools to engage parents in their children's learning are unlikely to be successful if they represent a 'bolt-on' to mainstream activities*" (Goodall et al., 2011: 46). Emerson et al. (2012: 50) also note that "strong support from the principal and teachers for this work" is essential to its success (see also Goodall et al., 2011), and that it is also stress that it is "*important that all school staff are aware of parental engagement strategies and practices and are able to confidently interact with parents*" (ibid. 42).

## Summary

The observations and evidence discussed in this review can be summarised in the following key findings:

- HSCL policy and practice differs substantially between the two jurisdictions: while the HSCL coordinator in the Republic of Ireland has a clearly defined role, with a long history and embedded in a high-profile policy initiative at national level, the situation in Northern Ireland is much less formalised, and therefore likely much more diverse.
- In consequence, particulars of the HSCL scheme in the Republic of Ireland are easily accessible by reviewing policy documents and government statistics. Details of parental engagement practice in Northern Ireland are much harder to come by: while a number of funding streams encourage parental engagement, there is insufficient data to determine the extent to which schools act on this encouragement. In addition, there is very little government guidance and schools are free to develop their own approaches. There is insufficient data to examine what parental engagement in Northern Ireland looks like in practice. Empirical research “on the ground” is required to better understand the situation here.
- In both jurisdictions, funding for parental engagement is subject to eligibility criteria and is targeted to benefit pupils and families from disadvantaged social groups. This is in keeping with the overall aim to reduce educational disadvantage, which informs policies across the island of Ireland. However, in the Republic of Ireland, only urban schools have access to a HSCL coordinator, while the main funding streams in Northern Ireland don’t distinguish between rural and urban schools.
- The literature review focused on evidence in relation to impact of parental engagement on educational outcomes. A key constraint results from the fact that many studies in this field have significant methodological limitations, but the most robust evidence exists in relation to the positive impact of family literacy, language, and numeracy interventions.
- A key finding of the literature review is that effective parental engagement must be focused on learning – parental involvement in school activities that are not focused on academic learning has no impact on educational outcomes.

Furthermore, parental engagement has the greatest impact on achievement in the early years and primary school phase.

- Parental engagement that fosters self-concepts, aspirations, and habits conducive to educational achievement (“academic socialization”) has the greatest positive impact. Parental expectations, interest, and role-modelling are important elements of this type of parental engagement. Interventions that address parents’ own role construction and support their ability to engage with their children’s learning in the home can thus be successful.
- A wide range of barriers can hamper parental engagement. Flexibility, creativity, and a proactive approach are required to reduce barriers as much as possible. Full-service schools offer valuable services to the community, but it is unclear as yet whether they have an impact on educational achievement through parental engagement.
- Strategic planning and a whole-school approach are vital aspects of a successful approach to parental engagement. Delegating parental engagement to a single member of staff can be counter-productive if a whole-school commitment is lacking.

## Chapter 4: A Practice-based Perspective

*In this chapter, the key themes generated from the case study data and policy maker interviews will be presented to provide a detailed picture of the 'lived reality' of the Home-School Community Liaison Officer/Parent Officer in practice. The chapter will begin by considering those emergent themes relating to parental/family engagement more generally, before unpacking those salient findings relating to the HSCL/Parent Officer more specifically with a focus on: role and value, skills and attitudes, community context, indicators of success and issues relating to accountability*

### Parental Engagement

#### Background

The discourse on parental involvement across both jurisdictions was very positive. There was extensive evidence of how schools across both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland value parents and the link between home and school. Conversations highlighted a genuine desire for meaningful parental engagement and creating a culture of support around parental involvement. This was made explicit by a principal from the South who commented that *"parental involvement needs to be number one, and it needs to be prioritized if we are to succeed in any part of education with the children that we deal with."* (Primary, Principal, ROI). Similarly, a post primary school principal from the South detailed: *"Schools cannot operate in isolation. So, we really need support of parents/guardians and the students for it to be a success because without their buy in, no matter what takes place in school between 8.50 and 3.30 on a day, it's not going to be successful in helping the children to achieve to their full potential."* (PP, Principal, ROI). This was replicated in the North by a pre-school principal who stated that: *"It's a cornerstone of what we do, I mean, if we worked just with the children alone, [I think we] would be missing out... Because if they're not on board, that's when the challenges start. If there's a different narrative at home than there is at school, then there is a conflict. So there has to be that engagement with them."* (Nursery, Principal, NI).

#### Benefits

The benefits associated with parental engagement, not only for children, but for parents and the school in its entirety, were clearly indicated both North and South.

Such engagement:

- facilitates contact between parents e.g. “opportunity for.. parents to meet each other which is so important. Even swap a number so they have a little support network for themselves.” (Primary, HSCL, ROI)
- enables friendships between children: *“as an only child, you know, she lives and breathes school and her friends in school, so for her it's definitely a social thing as well, you know.”* (Primary, Parent, NI)
- develops that necessary link between home and school: *“I think it's just that conduit, you know, it's a permanent conduit that you're good at forwards and backwards flow of information between the parents and the school”* (Nursery, Principal, NI), *which is “absolutely vital, for so many reasons, attendance, behaviour.”* (Primary, Teacher, ROI).
- provides a medium for purposeful conversations between parents with their children: *“And, you know, ... they're having all these big events, like, my hubby can come in... Yeah. And that's the wee boy there you were talking to her, and, you know, it all comes together. So it's, it has definitely a positive impact, without a doubt. And that's what you know, it definitely rubs off then on the child. As well, you know, as you can chat about everything that happens in the home.”* (Primary, Parent, NI)
- allows children to show off their school world: *“It's nice for the children too, I think, you know, if you're coming in to see their wee world, because it is a lot of hours in the day that they are here, and to see how proud they are at themselves, you know, it's sort of sharing that wellbeing, I suppose, as well.”* (Primary, Parent, NI).

## Meaning

Another important issue that we wanted to explore with the school principals, HSCLs/Parent Officers and teachers in particular, was the meaning that they attributed to parental engagement in practice.

HSCLs/Parent Officers stressed how they understood parental engagement as simply being there as a support for parents:

*“And some of the things that come out of here are just heartbreakingly sore. But we want to be there for them. So it's really important that we're available. I mean, what [name of PO] said is true. Her door is always open. Now we might go “Oh my Goodness, [what's that now]?”, but we sort it, you know, we're here for the folks. That's what it is. That's what it's all about.”* (Primary, PO, NI)

*"I think it's being there for the parents, knowing that the parents have someone that they can trust ...building a good relationship with the parents, that if they have anything they want to offload, that they can trust you, that they can come to you and know that it's in confidence and know that you'll do the best that you can to help them in any way you can." (Nursery PO, NI).*

For some principals, however, parental engagement seemed more about encouraging parents to help out and arrange school activities, to engage in fundraising events, to get other parents on board:

*"I suppose number one, parental engagement, is parents getting their children up and out and into school, that's/ because that's what it's all about in the end. But it's also about parents, making sure the children's homework is done that they have a lunch in their bag. Anything that's supporting their children, I suppose is parental engagement, you know." (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI)*

For other principals, parental education literally meant educating parents i.e. challenging misinformation from social media that parents often rely on:

*"The messages that they're getting are in social media, which are not always accurate, or positive or morally correct...No, we have to change that attitude ..... a lot of the time is contradicting what they're hearing and watching. And it's like it's destroying their brains." (Nursery, Principal, NI).*

Or actually developing parents' own abilities:

*"first and foremost, your children have to be happy and settled to learn. So, we have to share with the parents techniques to get them to be happy and settled. So, the calm plan at the very beginning of the year is one of the main things that we share with them, you know, this is what we use, and we want you to use it at home, and to be enforced, and it won't work unless we have that." (Nursery, Principal, NI).*

*"that the parents are actually coming in themselves and doing courses and kind of increasing their own self confidence and that." (Primary, Pre-school, HSCL, ROI)*

Yet, the most common response, from principals, teachers and Parent Officers/HSCLs was that parental engagement should be all about working together as a team in the children's best interest:

*"parental engagement is the most important way of ensuring you get the best for the child. Because if you have parents on board, then they can work more closely,*

*and they're more easy to communicate with and get the best possible outcome for the generic child."* [Primary, Principal, NI]

*"Well, parental engagement in education to me means that the parents are on board with the kids, they're working together, they are supporting their kids through their education."* (PP, HSCL, ROI)

*"Parental engagement, I suppose for me, predominantly it's working together, the more we can get them engaged, the more we have them. We're all working together for their child."* (Primary, Principal, ROI)

*"We would very much try and have the parents involved... you'd have the triangle, you'd have the staff, parents and the pupils all interlinked as well. And trying to make sure that everybody's in the same boat as such, where everybody's working towards the same goals. And it's not a teacher... or a parent ... or a child ... but everybody's all trying to do what's best for the children at the end of the day."* (Primary, Teacher, NI).

## Impact of COVID-19 on parent engagement

The COVID-19 pandemic is believed to have had a major impact on the contact between parents and schools, as reported by teachers in both ROI and NI. However, whilst teachers reported a physical distance with parents: *"COVID has kept us in the building, you know, there's been a distance between us and parents"* (Primary, Teacher, NI), they also suggested that the pandemic had increased communication via telephone and electronic means: *"we've probably had a lot more contact with parents than we would have on a day to day basis over the pandemic because A, B, myself, C and D were making phone calls, how's it going? Are you alive, what are you doing?"* (Primary, Teacher, ROI). Teachers in both jurisdictions commented on how parents enjoyed schools' activities and inputs via technology during the COVID pandemic, particularly as they: *"find it reassuring that there was someone there that they could speak to about how they would teach their child"* (Primary, Principal, NI) and they noted the importance of maintaining this improved contact through technology: *"we have made sure to try, to the best of our ability, to maintain those practices that we found beneficial at the onset of home-schooling and the pandemic."* (PP, Principal, ROI)

One of the perceived impacts of COVID on the contact between schools and parents was on community events. A primary school in NI discussed how COVID had prevented a community breakfast they would normally host to encourage parents and the wider

community into their school. However, they still managed to develop links with the community by setting up trails in the school grounds, a pumpkin trail at Hallowe'en and a Narnia trail: *"we're trying to bring people from the local community in. So, these trails have been a good way of doing that. And because they were outdoors, people were happy to come to them during COVID times."* An HSCL from ROI reiterated how they were going to reintroduce their community events: *"The nature walks to ... , that was for parents and children. But at the moment is just for children because we're still not really out of COVID. But that'll start up for parents as well'.* Some parent/community events continued during lockdown through Zoom, although uptake rates were poor: *"I think people were just zoomed out at that stage."* (Primary, Pre-school, HSCL, ROI).

Many parents, particularly those from primary and pre-school in both NI and ROI, spoke of parental appreciation for the efforts schools made both during the COVID lockdowns and when schools reopened: *'a.....mother and toddler group, every Thursday morning. So, it's just trying to get younger families into the school. And I think we were kind of one of the first to start up again, after COVID'* (Primary, Parent, NI). Parents also expressed how important it was for them and their children that schools were in contact on a daily basis. They particularly mentioned live activities such as the Big Bedtime Read that one primary school did every evening and some live workouts that one teacher did with older primary aged children and schools were reassured by the positive feedback: *"there was a good communication and you could see that on our social media feed or in the Seesaw responses that staff were getting as well."* (Primary, Principal, NI)

### Schools recognising the impact of COVID on children and families

Teachers from right across the different phases, realised the impact of COVID on children: *"they don't know how to form friendships or even what a good relationship looks like, you know, with an adult"* (PP, Teacher, NI); *"parents who have things going on in their own lives, they might just push the child's work to the side"* (Primary, Teacher, NI) and *"when she said, we live in a flat, we don't have a garden, we were locked down. So right away you understand"* (Nursery, PO, NI). Post primary principals and teachers highlighted the negative impact of COVID on pupil attendance at schools once schools reopened: *"real challenges from COVID with the boys, there's disengagement that we haven't seen for a long time"* (PP, Principal, NI) and they highlighted the crucial role that parents play in this area: *"they are involved around soft areas around attendance about just encouraging people back"* (PP, Teacher, ROI). There was also recognition by staff



and HSCLs on how many parents found lockdown with their children very challenging: *“all of the HSCLs were inundated with phone calls from parents who just were not coping”* (Primary, Pre-school, HSCL, ROI). Indeed, according to the policymakers both North and South: *“HSCLs were needed more than ever during the pandemic”* (ROI policymaker) as *“COVID exacerbated the need for support more than ever.”* (NI policymaker)

### Moving on from COVID

Schools recognise the challenges in re-connecting with parents as they move forwards from the COVID restrictions: *“we have teachers who have, because of two lockdowns, who are still at the stage where they're not confident in talking to parents”* (Primary, Principal, NI). However, particularly in the sectors working with younger children, they are adopting a positive attitude: *“we're gradually finding new ways to bring them back in”* and *‘we are really, really delighted with the, with the bounce back if you like’* (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI).

### Enablers to Parental Engagement

Principals, teachers, HSCLs/parent officers and parents highlighted a range of enablers to parental engagement. These are structured around five main themes: community needs, starting early, funding, practicalities and qualities.

#### Community needs

- Adapting provision to local needs: *“every class for every, situation in Ireland could be different ... you know, culture and everything. So, it's important, I think that it's great to have a little bit of freedom to create the course that the need is there for.”* (Primary, Principal, ROI)
- Protecting parents' and children's dignity: *“I mean the pride in our community, you have to be so sensitive about their own pride and self-worth.”* (PP, PO, NI)
- Building trust: *“And then of course Traveller parents going back had bad experiences of education. So, like they have a wall up with the schools. So ... is really like the middle person in that and breaking down that wall.”* (Primary, Teacher, ROI)

## Funding

- Flexible, unrestricted funding: *"we have some unrestricted funds, you know, from charities, because LMS doesn't extend to let you pay for that sort of stuff."* (PP, Principal, NI)
- Long-term funding: *"And if we're going to try and change that it takes resources and time and it takes them consistently. It has to be something that's long term."* (PP, Principal, ROI)

## Starting early

- Address underachievement from the start: *"So we try to front load our resources into our first and second years to establish really good links and routines at the start."* (PP, Principal, ROI)
- Develop partnership from the start: *"We like we target mainly our junior infant preschoolers coming in from the outside to get them engaged with those in a in a partnership."* (Primary, Principal, ROI)
- Starting early: *"I get to meet those parents right at the very beginning of their educational journey. And that's quite special, because you do tend to be nearly a point of contact sometimes, as the person that they're going to seek out sometimes it's just worth noting that. It's quite important then who you have in P1."* (Primary, Principal, NI)

## Practical considerations

- Engaging target parents: *"We reached families that we wouldn't ordinarily have reached like that. It was lovely."* (Primary, Parent, NI).
- Regular contact: *"So I think personal one on ones, you know, ... I don't mean, just the one, you know, just periodically throughout the year when teachers can meet the parents, so they could see where the kids are coming from, and what's going on, and to build a rapport with the parent and the teacher."* (PP, Parent, NI)
- Good-news phone calls: *"...we do phone call Thursday, and everybody, everybody in the school's required to make three positive phone calls home, you know, all of those things are, to me are positive facilitators for parents to feel they can you know, they can approach us."* (PP, Principal, NI)
- Responding quickly: *"And it's about, it's about being quick to respond. And that very much the message I give to the pastoral team says, you know, we need to, we need to go back to parents quickly. And, you know, parents sitting at home worrying, that*

*can turn something into a big deal that doesn't need to be a big deal."* (PP, Principal, NI)

- Being persistent: *"some things might not work, but it's just really trying and constantly being in contact."* (Primary, Teacher, NI)
- Open Door Policy: *"Yes, I have an open door policy. So that's part of building up the good relations. So, unless I'm in a meeting already, I will see a parent when they arrive or immediately readdress when I can meet with them. Parents get disengaged, if they're turned away or they can't immediately share their concern."* (Primary, Principal, NI)
- Good communication: *"Maybe you might call them soft skills, conversations with parents and guardians, because the barriers to education are huge in the socio economic, disadvantaged areas."* (PP, Principal, ROI)
- Listening: *"Listening. Listening as active listening, not just 'yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah...'"* (Primary, Principal, NI)
- Child-centred approach: *"I think the overarching value is that kind of child-centred/ Your child is not at home with you, but he's at home with us."* [Nursery, Parent, NI).
- Convenient and flexible times: *"and the timings of things are important. So, you know, having consultations, or a parent meeting that stretches over, you know, a period of time that allows flexibility for parents that are working or not."* (PP, Principal, NI)

## Qualities

- Honesty: *"So I am a great believer in being very honest with the teachers and letting them know how the kids view them, and how their, you know, teaching skills affect the kids, and what the kids are going through."* (PP, Parent, NI)
- Being understanding: *"And sometimes you just have to sit and listen and be a listening ear ... there are things going on in all our homes ... maybe a mother's having difficulty at home or whatever. And you just, we all need to be welcoming with this."* (Primary, Teacher, ROI)
- Being more than just a school: *"the people are coming to see that this isn't just a school, it's so much more. There's so much more."* (Primary, Parent, NI)
- A safe environment: *"It was just such a lovely afternoon, even though it was in the school, it was a safe environment. You know, even for children, they were there in a safe environment."* (Primary, Parent, NI)

- Family school feel: *"Like it is like a community we know everybody knows everybody now. You know, you can stand in the car park and there's always somebody you can talk to. It is like a community, close-knit community."* (Primary, Parent, NI).
- Being the good cop: *"So what we're trying to do is just to create that wee oasis here for the parents and the children and a listening ear and a friendly hook, and you know, we're here for you, we're listening to you and we're trying to respond to you"* (Nursery, Principal, NI).

## Barriers to Parental Engagement

Principals, teachers and HSCLs highlighted a range of barriers to parental engagement. These included:

### Communication

- Lack of access to digital communication: *"the parents we want to target aren't obviously on devices."* (PP Principal, ROI)
- Challenges in using digital communication: *"everyone has to be set up on their phones and some of our parents just aren't capable of doing that."* (Primary Principal, NI)
- Misunderstandings through written communication: "Long emails don't work. Because the literacy isn't there, the will to read to the end is not there." (Primary, Pre-School, Principal, ROI)

### Parental competence

- Levels of parental literacy: *"Believe it or not, a lot of our parents can't read. They are from social areas of deprivation, so sometimes a phone call if it's something that you really want to get across, or visual."* (Primary, Teacher, NI)
- Lack of confidence: *"some parents would be shy about maybe I don't know, if this is for me."* (Primary, Teacher, ROI)
- Lack of knowledge re. SEN: *"Especially with regard to special educational needs, because sometimes they haven't had any understanding that their child may have a delay or need additional help in some form."* (Primary, Principal, NI)

### Community context

- Pressures at home: *"Poverty is a barrier, because people are just trying to survive"* (PP Principal, NI); and *"maybe they feel like they don't want to add any*

*extra pressure to them. Because they've enough to deal with rather than giving them other activities or roles to take part in.”* (Primary, Teacher, NI).

- Parental pride: *“ Their pride in that they couldn't read the newsletters. Pride in that they have become single parents, pride that they were with social services. So that took a lot of work.”* (Primary, Teacher, NI)
- Parental attitudes to school. Principals, teachers and HSCLs commented on some of the negative attitudes that some parents held towards education: *“I think that societally there is a diminished respect or value for education, and I think that that's more prevalent in the community that we serve’* (PP Principal, NI); *‘they didn't quite get all the opportunities for themselves, [and] they might not hold the same value.”* (Primary, Pre-school HSCL, ROI)
- Parents’ own experiences of school. This issue was raised by principals, teachers and HSCLs as impacting parental engagement at all stages of education from Early Years to Post Primary: *“I think one of the biggest things I find with parents is you know, this, they never liked school and that target group parents are more than likely people that never liked school or had a really bad experience at school.”* (PP, Principal, ROI)
- A refusal to parent: *“Some parents are unwilling to take responsibility for their own children.”* (PP, Principal, NI)

### Physical constraints

- Lack of space. The issue of space for parental engagement activities was raised by teachers and principals. Parents also commented: *“We had a family room, which was a lovely [big suite and] whatever, it was lovely. And then it's now been changed into the nurture group.”* (PP, Parent, NI)
- Lack of funding: *“So I suppose it'll all come down to funding resources. And that is the lifelong struggle of education is really.”* (PP, Principal, ROI)
- Location of the school: *“We're physically geographically remote from the community. So, parents can't walk or don't generally walk in the door, walk in the gates they come up in taxis or drive up or whatever, take the bus up. So, I think that's a barrier.”* (PP Principal, NI)

## Parental Engagement Policy

The inclusion of parental engagement at school policy level appeared to be different in the two jurisdictions. Principals in school in NI discussed how they did not have a formal policy on parental engagement. Rather, aspects on parental engagement would appear in other policies such as the Positive Discipline Policy, the Extended Schools Programme action plans and also within the School Development Plan. There was a perception that practice was more important than policy: *"It's in there in practice, which is much better than if it had been sitting in a policy and not being put into practice"* (PP, Principal, NI). However, in ROI, there is a DEIS Action Plan which has specific actions relating to parental involvement: *'Oh, yeah, that's in it alright. It's very much in our DEIS plan'* (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI).

## Home-School Community Liaison Coordinator/Parent Officer Role and Value

It was evident in ROI that the position of HSCL was considered central to the success of parental engagement, *'So if we didn't have homeschool, parental involvement wouldn't be made possible. There needs to be dedicated people there, continuously building the relationship with them. And if we didn't have homeschool there would be no other people.'* (Primary, Principal, ROI). Such thinking is reinforced in the following phrases: the HSCL *'bridged the gap'* (PP, Teacher, ROI), *'intrinsic to the school'* (Primary, Teacher, ROI) and *'that they couldn't cope in school'* (Primary, Teacher, ROI) without the individual in question, highlighting how integral the role of HSCL is to teachers in the Republic of Ireland. The value attributed to such a role was echoed by a principal in Northern Ireland, who commented that the Parent Officer is *'hugely important'* with high levels of awareness in the school community: *'everybody knows who she is and what she does, and she will constantly get people speaking to her'* (PP, Principal, NI). This highlights how valuable the role is to schools in the North, with a parent commenting that having a dedicated Parent Officer acted *'almost like a safety net'* (Primary, Parent, NI), being available to support them if any need arose. Indeed, the value of the HSCL scheme is summed up in the words of the policymaker in the South: *"Principals love it, parents love it and HSCLs love it. It is a real jewel in the crown."* (ROI policymaker).

## Changing Mindsets

It was evident that, according to teachers, historically, relations between home and school were often strained, with many parents retaining negative memories of their own

schooling: *"I suppose [there] was a very negative view towards schools for years, and I think breaking that down is ...vitally, vitally important. I think just to get that stigma, the parents were afraid to come in"* (Primary, Teacher, ROI). Challenging this discourse is a key aim of teachers in the South and the role of the HSCL in breaking down such barriers was clearly articulated by the policymaker in the South: *"...acting as an agent of change"* (ROI policymaker). This was echoed in the North with attempts being made to change mindsets, address issues and open the doors of schools so that parents learn to value education and educational success *"I was just continually plugging away you know, getting them to value education... So getting them to value and see where they can go with this."* (PP, Vice-Principal, NI).

## Addressing Deprivation

The role of the HSCL in addressing deprivation for families was also discussed by teachers, principals and policymakers. Depending on the need of particular families it was evident that the HSCL offered various types of supports to families: *"And if there was a school trip coming home and the parent came and said that they couldn't afford it, I'd go to {the coordinator} and she would usually help with it"* (Primary, Teacher, ROI). In line with the DEIS plan (of which HSCLs receive a minimum of 10% of the school budget to spend on HSCL activity) each school, the coordinators supported many families with the costs of education, through schemes such as the *'confirmation loan scheme'* (Primary, Teacher, ROI) school lunches, school uniforms and the book rental scheme. The HSCL coordinator was considered an essential element in ensuring that the DEIS targets were achieved by teachers, with parental involvement underpinning each schools' DEIS plan:

*"parental involvement has been such a major part in the DEIS plan as well, and, you know, linking in there just in terms of providing... seeing that through, it's been basically the Home-School Liaison Coordinator, who's actually kind of asserting that the targets are reached."* (Primary, Teacher, ROI).

In the North, the Parent Officer helped source and offer financial support to families through food parcels, fuel cards, items of school uniform, meat packages and Christmas toy collections offering targeted support where it was needed. This proactive approach towards deprivation has created a sense of understanding towards families and their level of need. It is this level of trust and friendship that the HSCL/Parent Officer is able to build up with all of their parents, something that was considered invaluable by teachers who commented: *'the friendship with the parents, and how would you measure that, but you can see it, you know, they know them by name, and they light up when they*

*see [the HSCL Coordinator], you know, that can't be measured. Or even if you say to the children, that [the HSCL Coordinator] would ring, they know who we you're talking about.'* (PP, Teacher, ROI).

This level of trust feeds into the success of the scheme as a whole, as according to teachers it can make parents less likely to be afraid when in difficulty or unsure of themselves. For parents with literacy difficulties, the HSCL coordinator can become the conduit for engagement with outside agencies also, ensuring that the community element of the scheme is fore fronted *"that's the person [the HSCL coordinator] you go to, for this piece of information. And the parents know that, and they'll ring up and say, well, even things outside of school, how do I apply for this? Who do I go to?"* (Primary, Teacher ROI).

In the North, the role of the Parent Officer offered a sense of reassurance to parents *'And they were also explaining about the curriculum and the school day and just sort of made me feel it was great because I understood without having to phone the school constantly'* (PP, Parent, NI). It can also help families when difficulties arise as a strong relationship has been built up through the Parent Officer with the school. As one parent outlined, having a direct link with the school offers a sense of support, and allows them to be open with the school when needed. As a teacher in the North outlined, often it is that contact from parents which says *'Listen, this is happening at home at the minute, behavior might just not be, as you expect, can you just keep a wee eye and let me know if anything's happening?'* (Primary, Teacher, NI).

## Supporting Teachers

Teachers spoke about valuing parental engagement, but being stymied by curricular pressures and intense workload. Having a member of staff who prioritizes engagement ensured that they *could focus on teaching and learning within the classroom.'* (Primary, Teacher, ROI). With the focus of the HSCL coordinator on parental engagement, terms such as *'mediator', 'link'* and *'connection'* frequented the conversations amongst all school staff. *"She's definitely the mediator between the parents and the school for us, in that the teachers are so busy, and they're in their classes from 10 to nine on and, you know, when the parents comes and wants something, it's very hard to drag a teacher out"* (Primary, Teacher, ROI). Again, this was echoed in the North: *"I think as well just sometimes as teachers, you're spinning plates, at times, you've that many different wee jobs that you have to do and if you had a specific person to focus on parents and talking to the parents, then it would relieve a bit of pressure off just the general classroom teachers and those roles. So I think yeah, that would be something that could be looked forward to"* (Primary, Teacher, NI).



From a parent's perspective, having a Parent Officer who provides insight into general classroom routines also helped alleviate stresses and triggers for families. Parents commented that, while previously they would have allowed issues to escalate; having a Parent Officer enabled for a sense of understanding to develop: *"I think that's the crux of it, that parent group just stops anything escalating. And I think where you get your answers straight away, and you're not festering, sitting, nearly having an agenda against teachers, going that's my son, how dare you! And it's easy to do that"* (PP, Parent, NI). In the South, similar comments were expressed by a principal: *"in the main having the HSCL means that you can tease out a lot of things and sort them out before they become big issues... It takes out the aggro."* (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI)

## Understanding disadvantage

Teasing things out and gaining perspective was also commented on by a HSCL coordinator who suggested that he/she can help teachers understand the different backgrounds of each family they engage with: *"because when I was a class teacher, I thought I knew what DEIS was. I didn't. And that's why HSCL, it's really good that it's rotated. Because I would go on a home visit and be like, okay, that explains why that child is behaving that way. And when as a class teacher, you don't have that insight at all"* (Primary, Pre-school, HSCL, ROI). Getting teachers to see *'the other side of the coin'* (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI) ensures that a more inclusive perspective on education evolves. This can help diffuse issues and create a sense of unity amongst the school community. As a principal in the South elaborated *'you know, it's great that they're here at all, and if we could just try and just put the homework aside for a little while and concentrate on them just being here'* (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI). She attested that one of the consequences of the scheme is that teachers gain a high level of awareness of difference and disadvantage *"You know, it definitely gives you that understanding of what the barriers are for people and the challenges that people/ teachers who come from a completely different culture, it might be only just out the road, but they've no idea, no concept."* (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI). According to the policymakers both in the North and South, such an issue is paramount, if the cycle of disadvantage is ever to be broken. A major barrier to tackling educational deprivation is teachers *"not understanding the myriad of challenges our educationally disadvantaged children and families encounter"* (ROI policymakers) and *"having unrealistic expectations"* (ibid) and on occasions *"being judgmental"* (ibid) as a result. *"Schools will only benefit if teaching staff understand the challenges a young [disadvantaged] person is facing"* (NI policymaker), and the role of the HSCL/Parent Officer can be a real *"game changer"* (ROI policymaker) in this field as *"you need to see it to be it"* (ROI policymaker) *"to bring about this culture of change"* (NI policymaker).

## Collaboration and Flexibility

There was agreement by teachers and principals that the role of the HSCL is invaluable to schools: *“It’s absolutely vital, for so many reasons, attendance, behaviour”* (Primary, Teacher, ROI). There was also acknowledgement that some newer staff might not have as much awareness about the role since the HSCL/Parent Officer is not always in the school building as they could be out supporting families in the home. Principals highlighted the importance of having a collaborative school culture and teamwork between all staff, including the HSCL/Parent Officer: *“there needs to be such synergy between the pastoral and the curricular work of the school”* (PP, Principal, NI). This collaboration is important for the role of the HSCL/Parent Officer *“so they might pick up parents that are more vulnerable, more isolated, with particular needs”* (PP, Principal, NI).

Alongside the ability to collaborate with other school staff, principals recognised the need for flexibility in the role of the HSCL: *“to have collaboration and respect and flexibility, people who are prepared to be flexible”* (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI). One Principal noted the value of a weekly meeting with the HSCL: *“we would try and meet once a week so that she could set out what she’s thinking of”* (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI). However, there was awareness that weekly plans can be made but these can change depending on issues that arise with families and children in schools. Principals discussed their work with the HSCL as a *“close working relationship”* and *“a high trust model”* (PP, Principal, ROI) where spreadsheets and timetables were not the most important issue, since principals were aware of their hard work and commitment to their role with families.

## Types of Activities

Principals, teachers, HSCLs and parents across all phases and both jurisdictions identified a range of experiences that were provided by HSCLs/Parent Officers as a means to develop positive and purposeful home-school partnerships. These stemmed from a variety of informal events to foster healthy relationships between families and school, to a range of more formal activities to familiarize parents with the school, to upskill parents about issues relating to curriculum and pedagogy and to provide feedback to parents about their child/ren more generally:

- Informal events: cookery workshops, charity events, flower arranging sessions, exercise and workout classes, coffee mornings, play days and toddler groups,

gardening events, walking groups, family events (e.g. Hallowe'en trails, Santa's grotto) and baking competitions to name but a few.

- Familiarisation events: school tours and open evenings, induction mornings, welcome meetings, welcome packs, assemblies and services, sports' days:

*"We run the Get Ready with Teddy programme with our preschool children. So we invite the parents in, we give them a pack, and then we give them four workshops. So we're kind of trying to get them on board with us from the get go." (Primary, Principal, ROI)*

- Home visits: *"getting out to the homes, doing home visits, ...the parents always having to come into the school."* (Primary, Teacher, ROI)
- Learning-focused events: literacy and numeracy sessions, reading courses, big time read, cuddle and read, Incredible Years, Maths classes and courses leading to formal qualifications for parents themselves:

*"Ok? Well, I mean, we've had reading evenings we've had phonics evenings. You've heard about ... for the little ones... organised that maths evening where we talked about decomposition and how things have changed. We do it as a response to need. Now things like reading I run every year because we have a lot of new parents and they haven't a baldy notion about how to go about it. And they're scared to do it because they don't want to do something that I'm not doing. But yeah, it's a response to need to be honest with you." (Primary, PO, NI)*

*"And so we have two types of courses. We have ones from ... Education and Training Board. And then I have other courses where they're parents-led, grandparents or local businesses and Genesis coming in. So for the ... Education and Training ones very successful computer courses, level three and level four QQi, they will do an exam they will get a certificate and it's a recognised qualification. So that was incredibly popular. We've also had glass painting, and it was through [Name of Education and Training Board]." (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI).*

- Using parents for support: fundraising events, using parents as volunteers for trips, making toys for play sessions etc., parent-led courses, parents' council and engaging parents as professionals:

*"They're very quick to ask you to help which is lovely. ...if you're available and can go I think it's lovely ...there was a WhatsApp group set up for P6 rugby or something like that. And if you were available, you could help out."* (Primary, Parent, NI)

*"We were talking about maybe getting parents involved in a wee making things for playing. [We do] a lot of play-based learning. So having parents involved in making wee things for the children to enjoy. And they'll enjoy because their parents have been involved in creating things for them to enjoy, like a wee outdoor learning area."* (Primary, Teacher, NI)

*"It's great getting a parent led course...that's brilliant. And again, it kind of breaks down another barrier... there's something about having the parents doing the course."* (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI).

*"And like she was able to say, I've heard that your husband does this for a living, could he check that? You know, this kind of thing. So everyone's kind of involved."* [Nursery, Parent, NI]

- Support for parents e.g. parent groups, parents' room, mental health outlets and full service models:

*"... you ... just talk it is very nice and very informal, it is just generally a chance for you in the middle of that chat you can discuss quite a serious information but comes out lovely, you know, without any hassle, you know, it's very natural."* [PP, Parent, NI]

*"So you had this room here, that at the time wasn't being used to the extent that it is now. So we were able to organise a coffee morning for parents on a weekly basis. If they want/ they organised it themselves, we left out the coffee and biscuits, they help themselves, brought it in, just had a chat, they brought the babies in the pram or sat them on their knee, sat for maybe an hour, an hour and a half, and then put everything back in the kitchen. It was just a nice way for them to connect with each other."* (Nursery, PO, NI)

*" Yeah, that's section between 1.40 and 2.40, ... there was about 10 that were there. ... they were waiting for their child, but then others heard about it as well [and just came along] Oh, I'll come over and have a chat. .. it's kind of seen as just a space where they can just relax."* (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI)

*"Okay, well, there's a room, there's a room that/ a health suite is what it's called... We use that now for nurture class. But there is a parent room with sofas looks like a living room."* [PP, Principal, NI)

- Different modes of communication between home and parents: home to school diaries, emails, phone calls, letters, notes, telephone calls, flyers, leaflets, booklets, photographs via Seesaw, websites, text messages, WhatsApp messages, social media Apps:

*"we have a parent app, which is an easy way for parents to get information from us and to track their son's attendance, progress, achievement, behaviour, all that kind of thing."* (PP, Principal, NI)

## Skills and Attitudes of the HSCL

The skills and attributes of the HSCL worker are key to the operation and indeed the success of this initiative in all school settings, and as the ROI policymaker stated: "Every coordinator brings about their unique skillset." A number of the interviewees commented on the inherent qualities of the HSCL coordinator, for example their personalities and abilities, in particular, the HSCLs/Parent Officer's innate capacity to deal with a wide variety of difficult and challenging issues, all at the same time. Respondents commented on the practical approach taken by many of the HSCLs and that this was frequently evidenced through the thoughtful and reflective way in which they engaged with their work

*"But it's just the practicableness and how hard she works within the hours and without the hours."* (Primary, Teacher, ROI)

Teachers and school principals alike commented on the need for HSCLs/Parent Officers to be very flexible in their approach and this was demonstrated by the need for them to be available and at the same time undertake their work with a sense of humour *"and you know to be approachable, and I think as well you know the two guys have a great sense of humour"* (Primary, Teacher, ROI). The skillset required to successfully deliver the role of the HSCL is wide and varied, for example respondents suggested it required those involved to be hardworking, dedicated and committed to the tasks involved. *"... in terms of the amount of work that they cover, and the fact they're so so approachable"* (Primary, Teacher, ROI). Respondents, North and South, commented on the capacity of HSCLs/Parent Officers to anticipate problems, and to devise suitable solutions to address them, and in fact it was even suggested that the type of work undertaken by a HSCL was often so complex that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to write a

suitable job description for them! The importance of being able to establish and maintain appropriate relationships was identified as being of key importance by respondents in both regions. In addition, the need to be genuine and trustworthy was highlighted as important, *“so you need someone who has got that proper ethos in there to take on that role”* (Primary, Principal, NI). HSCLs are aware of the procedures to be followed, they are creative individuals, and they have the ability to be good communicators, this was a universally held view. It is important for HSCLs/Parent Officers to know the pupils they work with as well as their families while at the same time being able to treat each one equally, fairly and in a discrete manner *“you have to be so sensitive about their own pride and self-worth and that you/ [HSCL’s name] just has that perfection where they know she can draw alongside them, that she is trustworthy and she’s not running and telling the neighbour.”* (PP, PO, NI)

There was a general acceptance or understanding that the HSCL/Parent Officer, whether working in the North or South, and indeed irrespective of school type or phase involved, were warm, empathic and caring individuals but yet experts who were able to establish and maintain an appropriate professional distance.

However, there is one significant difference between the situation in the North and South: in Northern Ireland several Parent Officers tend to come from the local community in which the schools are located whereas in the Republic of Ireland, HSCLs are qualified teachers who are employed as part of the staff, but are funded by the Department of Education to come out of teaching for a period of five years to fulfil the important role. Interviewees in the Southern system, appeared, in the main, to defend such an approach: *“having the HSCL as a teacher is very important and brings with it significant advantages”* (ROI policymaker). Reasons articulated for having the HSCL as someone with teaching experience include:

- Understanding of needs: *“In terms of SEN as well, I think it’s really important to SEBD [Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties] and behaviours and understanding that when you’re going knocking on a door, because if you have no experience of what [a child like that] in front of you might be, then you’re kind of you’re like a step down the ladder.”* (PP, Teacher, ROI)
- Ability to advise teachers and parents: *“And I think it’s because she has that experience in the classroom. She understands the children, that she can give advice to me as a teacher, and parents and to, to children.”* (Primary, Teacher, ROI)

- Knowing the school: *"I think it should actually be a teacher... just because you, you know, the children, and you already might have a relationship with a lot of parents already, which I did when I was going in."* (Primary, Pre-school, HSCL, ROI).
- Not easily fooled: *"And I think actually with being teachers and being qualified, you know, ..... and with experience the two girls have, they're well able to read people, you know, the way that some parents might be kind of not exactly giving it to you as it is and being able to read that situation."* (Primary, Teacher, ROI)
- Status and clout: "But even in regard to parents, your classes for parents. I think that, you know, you do need to have a professional, I think it has more status when it is a teacher." (Primary, Teacher, ROI)
- Knowing the families: "first of all, you know, they have lots of experience, you know, in terms of they know, the children, they know, their backgrounds, before they ever start to do the job. And I think that's crucial in terms of the actual development of it. The fact that, you know, they're going to parents that they possibly could have taught siblings as well, makes it a little bit easier." (Primary, Teacher, ROI)
- Understanding of teaching and school dynamics: "you definitely need a teacher who knows how a classroom runs, who knows how a school runs, that what you think is going to happen at nine o'clock on Monday morning, when you come in, might not happen at all, you know, there's always an incident, there's always something and they understand that. And then explain that to parents. You know," (Primary, Teacher, ROI)
- Trust from teaching staff: "I think having the word teacher in it is really important. Because it's the teacher who has the connection with the staff, ... that's what makes the difference. That's what helps them to say, Okay, should we give it a go? We'll try it, whatever." (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI)
- Professional and life experience: "I think a homeschool [coordinator] needs to and I suppose I'm saying this because I did it so I know firsthand. You need to have life experience? And I think you need to be very firm in what you believe education should be in a classroom setting as well, rather than not having any experience in a classroom and then going into this whole new role. No, I do think

you need to have experience of being a teacher, before you would embark on."  
(Primary, Principal, ROI)

Interviewees from Northern Ireland, were not as convinced that a teacher was definitely necessary as in some cases *"their professional role might prevent a parent from opening up about what their life is really like"* (Nursery, PO, NI). An individual from the community with whom families can identify was considered to be most important as long as a 'professional' distance could be maintained:

*"Yes, I think yes, a community worker is best. And it needs to be the right type of person, I come from the community, so I kinda know the area, ... I think you need to be in the community, but at the same time that wee bit back, you need to have that wee bit of distance. So that keeps it professional as well, so that there's nothing crossing over, but at the same time, ... they'll meet me in Tesco, hi [name of Parent Officer], here, what's happening now or whatever, you know, I've had the odd parent come to the door and say, you know, who lives near me and say, Listen, you know, can you help me here or do such and such whatever, so that's fine, that's fine. You know, I'm grand with that, so I think it just takes you to be that sort of person."* (PP, PO, NI)

Yet, according to the NI policymaker, whether they are a teacher or a community worker: *"Finding that person who is the right fit for the community is invaluable but is part of the challenge."* (NI Policymaker)

Irrespective of the school system or the nature of employment there would appear to be a commonality in the different characteristics required to be an HSCL Officer so that they are enabled to fulfil their role effectively and efficiently. Such characteristics were identified as being fundamentally important to the successful operation of the scheme whether North or South. These characteristics included the need to be trustworthy, genuine, creative, and forward-thinking, and demanded a *"certain type of person"* (Primary, Teacher, NI). In addition, it was considered important to be a good communicator, and respectful, whilst at the same time having the ability to know each family and each child, and the importance of being discreet. This was the case for all HSCL/Parent Officers irrespective of jurisdiction. In addition, it was deemed important for HSCL workers to be warm, empathic and caring, non-judgemental, open, approachable, and welcoming individuals. It is abundantly clear that such a role is



challenging and demanding irrespective of who the HSCL worker is or where they work, and, as a result, a special skillset is required. The key message that becomes ever apparent from those who are working in a HSCL role, the various school personnel who they work alongside, and most importantly the young people, and their families that they seek to serve, both North and South, is the commitment they display, the dedication that they demonstrate, and the work they do to strengthen engagement, and enhance the educational experience and achievement of the young people. The importance of treating others with respect and as equal, irrespective of role undertaken was stressed: *"Everybody's valued? . . . Everybody's equal. And it matters."* (Primary, PO, NI).

## Community Context

A key theme to emerge from the project data focused upon the community context in which the HSCL/Parent Officer is employed. Increasing number of refugees and immigrant families resulting in a more transient and diverse population seemed to be the familiar backdrop in which HSCLs/Parent Officers engaged:

*"You know, and as I said, since March, we have 25 children arrive into our schools who have no English who have come in the days and weeks prior to them appearing in our school to the country with no English. Totally lost, really, you know, we need the link, there is always going to be that link. We need more, not less. We need more. You know?"* (Primary, Teacher, ROI).

*"Honestly, people in other schools don't believe me when I say it's different every week. But we're that close to town, there can be quite a revolving population at you know, certain people who would be passing through very close to the Women's Refuge. So we'd have children coming and going from there. And we'd have people/housing is a big issue at the moment for people so that there are people moving in, moving out, depending on their housing situation. Yeah."* (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI).

High levels of deprivation also tend to be an issue in terms of poor housing, poor food quality, lack of green spaces, increased obesity, a lot of social need, unemployment, suicide, ill health, poverty, isolation, mental ill health, trauma, drug misuse, domestic violence, crime and gangs, young or single families all of which result in poor parenting capacity which in turn requires increased support from the school context, in particular, the HSCL/Parent Officer, as a means of mitigating the potential negative impact on the children and their education:

*"Yeah. And as time goes on, over the years I have been here, I have seen those needs, becoming much more exacerbated and ... as a consequence, then the needs of the children become greater as well. You know, and it may be reflected in their behaviour, it may be reflected in their diets, ...there's lots and lots of issues that we would support."* (Nursery, Principal, NI)

*"But it is a community that has a legacy of, you know, political conflict, sectarianism, and then the mental health consequences, mental ill health consequences of, you know, bombings, shootings. And I suppose alongside that there's also the mental ill health legacy of social deprivation, because the community has really eroded."* (PP, Principal NI)

*"and just where they live may not be the safest area. So they're kind of/ for them, they know school is a safe place. And they're very appreciative that we link in with them, because they know their child when they come in here is being looked after and is safe."* (Primary, Pre-school, HSCL, ROI).

*"Some parents are unwilling to take responsibility for their own children. That is, you know, I find that a real struggle, you know, because they'll say, ah, he won't do this. Well, what can you do now? And I was kind of, well, what/ you're the parent, you know, you know better than anybody, you know, you have to take responsibility. Let's put in a couple of wee things in motion to see if/ and carry them out."* (PP, PO, NI)

*"Educational disadvantage, would be a huge thing..."* (Primary, Pre-school, HSCL, ROI).

*"And from our side of things like our school is in an area of social deprivation from a lot of our parents, or a lot of our children would be on free school meals, and a lot of them would be coming from single parent families and things."* (Primary, Teacher, NI)

Levels of Special Educational Needs also appear to be ever on the increase within such schools, particularly in Northern settings:

*"We also have high levels of SEN. So we have 129 pupils statemented, which is coming on 10% of our population, the average for Northern Ireland is about 3% ...I would, I would say we've also a huge proportion of pupils undiagnosed."* (PP, Principal, NI)

*"Yeah, a lot of our disabilities may be caused through drugs. There's a study going at the minute just to see the number of children who are presenting a lot of these kind of [unintelligible], you know, having strokes and the impact that that's having on children being born, and the use of cocaine and the increased use of cocaine and the effect on the children that we are getting year on year because you're seeing, you know, how we get so many children with special needs."* (Nursery, Principal, NI)

Often, families can feel very isolated in such communities where there is frequently a lack of support networks and therefore the role of the HSCL/Parent Officer can be *"an absolute godsend"* as summed up in the words of a Northern parent (Nursery, Parent, NI).

### Indicators of Success

Knowing whether the work undertaken by the HSCL/Parent Officer has been successful, is certainly of interest, not only to school principals but also to policy makers themselves who have invested heavily in such a programme of work, particularly in the Republic of Ireland. A variety of indicators of success were identified by the interviewees. Interestingly, teachers and HSCLs in the Republic of Ireland, seemed particularly interested in the softer benefits associated with such a role. Although they recognized that *"up to a point it can be measured, around/ you can tick off the DEIS plan targets, so you can."* (Primary, Teacher, ROI) they appeared more concerned with the softer, non measureable results such as ensuring that everyone was happy: *"that you know, the parents are happy the kids are happy. the staff are happy. I suppose...everything works well."* (PP, HSCL, ROI) As articulated by a primary teacher in ROI:

*"Yeah, I think [it came across there that] there is a tacit knowledge of something that's [good], that you just can't really put your finger on, but that's the person you go to, for this piece of information. And the parents know that, and they'll ring up and say, well, even things outside of school, how do I apply for this? Who do I go to? So that's, that's where the, that's very hard to measure. But that's a very important rule."* (Primary, Teacher, ROI)

Likewise, parents coming into school and returning as well as opening their doors for home visits and the sheer uptake of offers, was something that HSCLs/Parent Officers recognised as an indicator of their success:

*"signing up for courses and coming to courses."* (Primary, Pre-school, HSCL, ROI)

*"and see if they come back? Obviously, that's good feedback if they return." (PP, HSCL, ROI)*

*"I think it's really the uptake of the parents, you know, if the parental involvement wasn't working, parents wouldn't be involved. You know, but our parents, year on year, the numbers taking part in different things and wanting to be involved, you know, it's, it's at a higher level." [Nursery, PO, NI]*

*"I have target parents coming onto courses. And actually, just this year, she signed up for a one day course. And now she signed up for the four week cookery course with her child. So it's actually getting those target parents signing up for things. I'm blown away every time it happens. She signed up, you know, so that is/ and even the read and succeed. I have two target parents down there, one where I know her own literacy levels, she needed help filling out the application form first. But for her to come and to stay, to come from the second week, that's when you know, you're doing good, when they actually come back." (Primary, Pre-school, HSCL, ROI).*

Principals in Northern Ireland, particularly in the post primary context, highlighted the impact of the HSCL/parent officer role also in terms of enhanced academic outcomes and pupil success:

*"It's vital, you know, and I say this to the parents, the very first time we meet them in the summer term of P7, before they come to us, and then repeatedly as we meet them up through the school, we/ they are essential in their son's success. Parental involvement is a huge protective factor for a young person." (PP, Principal, NI)*

*"Yes, you know, I said in 2006, not quite one and five boys got five GCSEs, now 90% of the boys get five GCSEs. And if you're a pupil with a statement of educational need, in Northern Ireland, you have about a 13% chance of getting three A levels. And pupils here in sixth form with statements, 72% of them get their three A levels. And when you think about the proportion of statements we have, that's not a small number of boys." (PP, Principal, NI)*

Increased attendance rates were considered as another indicator of success identified both by senior leaders in schools and by HSCLs/Parent Officers both North and South:

*"we're looking at our attendance figures and, and reduced incidence of behavior...So that's what we hope to get out of it ...the attendance because then once they're here, we can work with anything, you know, we can get them over the*

*line for their external exams, we can, you know, help with whatever counselling issues they need. So that would be a huge part for us." (PP, Vice-Principal, NI)*

*"So that family, that mum, she, she had worked with that homeschool liaison before she became you know, mentoring and principal. So they have that link with the school. They know that we're not threatening. And she actually had her children at 100% attendance. Yeah. So I think that's a tangible thing that parents are signing up for courses and children are in school. Yeah." (Primary, Pre-school, HSCL, ROI)*

Opening the door to home visits was perceived as another indicator for success, particularly by HSCLs as summed up in the following comment:

*"Do you know when a parent actually invites you in, it's like, Yes!!! I'm in! It's such a brilliant thing, because it's just such a massive compliment you have if you're invited in you have broken down all the barriers, because they are happy to welcome you into their home. And it's brilliant." (Primary, Pre-school, HSCL ROI).*

## Accountability and Feedback

In terms of accountability and feedback, the principals, particularly in the South, were of the opinion that the work of the HSCL is evident, even without formal reporting:

*"I know for a fact that is total accountability, in that they never get a minute, God, they are the hardest working two in the school, they don't even get their lunch break some of the days. And I know I like I mean, I think their accountability is evident when you see the parental engagement that we have within [name of school] primary school, you know." (Primary, Principal, ROI)*

They appeared to work on a model of trust:

*"You know, I think we operate on a high trust model, I am not asking our homeschool to have a spreadsheet saying where I was nine o'clock 10 o'clock, 11 o'clock. But you know, I know that our homeschool liaison is extremely competent, and that if we need her to help us, she's able to help us." (PP, Principal, ROI)*

*And close working relationships:*

*"Well, the same thing, we are meeting every week. So therefore, I'm very aware of what's happening. And this kind of a school, you have to, you know, you have to be aware of what everybody's doing at some level." (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI)*

There is a detailed annual report, however, that must be completed for quality assurance purposes to Tusla:

*"So for Tusla, I think they're now called TESS, I do a one-to-one contact form. So for any contact I've done with parents, I write it down you know, it's all kind of coders and why I met them and just what happens in that, and after I do/ they have the, their planning." (Primary, Pre-school, HSCL, ROI)*

And from time to time, there might be some form of feedback to the Board of Management:

*"So we have a member of/ a key member of our staff speak at every board of management meeting to give them an insight into how the school actually runs. So our last board we had our literacy coordinator, numeracy coordinator, ASD coordinator, all of that. And then the last other last one, [names of HSCLs] did a presentation on homeschool and how you know, they what they bring to our school and like to get their presentation." (Primary, Principal, ROI)*

*"And the HSCL would bring a report, I suppose from/ not every meeting now, but certainly a report on what what's been going on in for her and for parents. And that's always very interesting, and it keeps it keeps her visibility, keeps the visibility there." (Primary, Pre-school, Principal, ROI).*

In Northern Ireland however, accountability appears to be evidenced more specifically in terms of a paper trail:

*"..the accountability mechanism for the whole thing lies with me, where we write annual action plans, and an annual report. So, the coordinator will submit to me in June, the action plans for the following year. And in September, they write an annual report, which is a sizable document, it's about 30 pages reviewing the previous year, and it's all outcomes based so it'll be [name of parent officer] work will be in there, and it'll tell me, you know, how many parents she's worked with? How many visits she did, you know, blahdy, blah, all that kind of thing, all connected to pupil outcomes. Yeah, that's most of the report. Most of the annual report is about headline figures of the stats." (PP, Principal, NI)*

*"I would do the extended school reports for the school and the cluster. So, it's just writing up then as well how our action plans have/ how they've all gone through the year." [Nursery, PO, NI]*

*"We would have to have a clear set of expectations laid out just to ensure that those expectations are met ..... you would monitor that on a regular basis." (Primary, Principal, NI)*

## The HSCL/Parent Officer in Action

Information from the observations conducted across the different settings have been collated together to formulate two cameos, representing ‘typical’ days in the life of an HSCL or parent officer.

### A day in the life of an HSCL coordinator in ROI

The role of the HSCL coordinator is an exciting yet challenging role. As many of the coordinators interviewed commented ‘*no two days are ever the same.*’ (Primary, HSCL, , ROI). The coordinators mentioned that each day begins with a plan, but such is the nature of the role the plan can be defunct before the school day commences.

Coordinators always aim to be in the school yard before school commences, so that parents ‘*don't feel kind of intimidated coming in*’ and that ‘*they have somebody welcoming them coming in.*’ (Primary, Pre-school, HSCL, ROI). This ability to empathise and understand the hesitation and apprehension felt by certain groups of parents was evident across all conversations with coordinators. Morning time is a prime time in their daily schedule, often parents need reassurance as unexpected occurrences may have happened overnight which need to be addressed. These may be as simple as sorting out a lost uniform or clarifying homework; but they can also involve dealings with Juvenile Liaison Officers (JLOs) from the Gardaí or family support workers who engage directly with some target families.

Such is the transient nature of many of the families in these schools that often new families arrive at school gates in the morning looking to be enrolled. Currently many of these families are coming from Ukrainian support hubs, where many families are staying. But there are also Irish Traveller families, mothers and children from women’s refuge centres and an international transient community. In these instances, the HSCL coordinator must directly engage with the families, assessing their needs, ensuring that they are adequately supported as they begin school. As one teacher stated, ‘*we’ve had 25 newcomer children with no English... 25 sets of parents’ arrive since March 2022.*’ (Primary, Teacher, ROI). She clarified that without the HSCLs support for newcomer families they would have been ‘snowed under.’ The HSCLs ability to link in with parents, provide support and become a personal contact for all families is immeasurable. This holistic support is key to ensuring families experience positive engagement between home and school.

Once the school gates are open, the day can begin in earnest for the HSCL coordinator. Often HSCL coordinators run classes in the mornings. These classes can focus on formal learning for parents (for example computer classes, literacy classes, further education classes) or informal classes where the focus is on social engagement and friendship (for example, flower arranging, yoga, mindfulness). Sometimes, these classes have a specific focus on parenting, cooking or budgeting which are key issues for many of the target families which HSCL coordinators work with. Parents are invited to these classes by the HSCL coordinator, and often HSCL coordinators make many home visits to target families before they take part in a class in the school. As one coordinator mentioned, some target parents have their own literacy issues; when they sign up for courses, they often need help filling in the form. To have them engage and attend literacy courses is immense, and the positive spin off of these courses can help parents recognise and value education – which has long term beneficial outcomes for children’s development.

Home visits are central to a HSCL coordinators daily activities; calling to homes on both prearranged visits and incidental visits. Incidental visits are important for building relationships. Initially they are usually doorstep visits where families are anxious, fearful and afraid of judgement. These visits, while difficult, are informal and usually focus on positive elements of school – attempting to build trust and confidence with the family. Depending on the size and the location of the school a HSCL coordinator would aim to complete between 5-10 home visits per week. This can increase if there are issues within the community or conversely, it can decrease if there are events occurring in the school where target parents are present. In urban settings visiting families in their homes increases the visibility of the coordinator in the community. Often coordinators enter housing complexes (flats) and spend time meeting, greeting and chatting with other parents informally as they make house to house calls. These informal on the street conversations can generate as much positive effects as formal meetings as issues can be teased out informally, relationships built and barriers broken.

Alongside all of this, HSCL coordinators must ensure that DEIS targets are monitored and achieved. Targets around retention can play a feature in a coordinator’s daily routines. HSCL coordinators engage with pre-schools and secondary schools discussing target families, putting in support mechanisms and ensuring that successful transitions occur. Linking in with outside agencies, such as local community groups, the HSCL coordinator may spend some of their day advocating for family support; community



engagement programmes or collaborating on events across local communities (such as One Book, One Community).

As it comes to the end of the day, the HSCL visits the school yard again, ensuring that he/she has a visible presence around the school. Again, parents can approach and engage with the HSCL coordinator addressing any issues which may have arisen during the day. Such is the nature of the population that both mornings and afternoons can be hectic – with a myriad of complex challenges awaiting the coordinator each day.

Finally, the HSCL coordinator attempts to meet with the school staff at the end of the day. Usually, the HSCL uses after school time to check in with teachers, to see if there are any concerns or worries arising. Teachers may have noticed during the day that a child is upset, off form or anxious. If this is the case, the HSCL coordinator can prioritise that family for a visit the following day, ensuring that no child or family is overlooked.

### A day in the life of the Parent Officer in NI

In Northern Ireland the PO occupies a unique position in that they are a school employee but tend not to be a teaching member of staff, but in many ways, this can be advantageous as it enables them to provide a very powerful and indeed important “bridge” between the school and the children they work with, and ultimately the parents of the young people. In Northern Ireland, the PO could best be described as an effective advocate for the children and young people, the one who links the school to the community, and indeed the community with school. In many cases the POs are the “go to person” for both school staff and the families of the pupils attending the school. The PO is someone who occupies a rather unique position because they are seen to be neutral and independent of both school and family, someone who is deeply interested in the pupils and their families with a very clear understanding of the many challenges faced by both while being cognisant of the many factors that impact upon the operation and function of a school.

No two days are the same for the PO and in fact their plans can change without notice or warning as they frequently must respond to issues, and even emergencies, as they arise. As a result, the work of the PO can be best summarised within two main roles, typically the PO works in the school with the pupils, and they also work with the pupils and their families in the community.

In the school setting POs provide a welcoming and engaging service by being an important point of contact for the pupils. For example, POs organise and run induction activities which aim to ease the transitional journey of pupils from home to school or from one school to another. POs facilitate visits to, and around the school for both the pupils and their parents, such visits are an attempt to reduce the stress of moving into a new and unknown environment. The PO becomes a 'point of contact' and in many ways provide a 'safety reference' for the pupil as they move into their new surroundings. However, the PO quickly moves beyond the process of welcoming to the provision of a range of induction activities, such activities seek to provide the context for a positive teaching and learning experience. *"I do the welcome programme in the nursery as well, I could do the welcome programme with the parents there. So that they could see how it operates, what sort of activities you do. And then they can go home and replicate it at home, and it strengthens everything"* (Nursery, PO, NI). POs move to a position of providing ongoing support for the pupils while at the same time seeking to build up and strengthen their independence by reducing their anxiety and increasing their resilience. Furthermore, such support is also available to the parents of the pupils and the parents mentioned that this support also helped to reduce their anxiety as well!

In the community the work of the PO can be best summarised under the three main headings of home visits, parent group activities and courses, and support.

An important role fulfilled by the PO is that of making visits to the homes of the families of the children who attend the school, this is an important and crucial task undertaken by the PO. Such visits provide invaluable opportunities for the PO and the families to get to know each and to build up a trust and a respect for one another. In addition, one of the PO reported that visits undertaken by the PO are very important because they enable us *"... to link in with other providers. So sometimes we might go out and there may be financial difficulties there. So, we would work with the [local] health centre that will have loads of other contacts that we can put the parents in contact with, be it to do with housing, maybe some of their benefits have been cut, or there's something else financially within the household that we can help sort that out. Parents felt that school did a really fantastic job during lockdown. And they really often had to say thank you, which I thought was really nice, because they realise how hard it was for staff as well"* (PP, PO, NI).

In addition, POs organise a range of parental group activities and courses, generally in response to parental need or demand for example healthy eating, cooking on a budget, dealing with issues as finance, alcohol, drugs, and gambling. These parental groups provide valuable opportunities for parents to meet other parents with similar worries, anxieties, and concerns. Along with the PO they discuss the things that matter to them, they are given the opportunity to share these worries and concerns in a non-threatening environment, and to celebrate success, where appropriate. *"And as I think that's the crux of it, that parent group just stops anything escalat[ing]. And I think where you get your answers straight away, and you're not festering, sitting, nearly having an agenda against teachers, going that my son, how dare you! And it's easy to do that. So it is, so?"* (PP, Parent, NI). In addition, the POs provide courses which revolve around those areas that matter to the parents, such as developing and enhancing their parenting skills, and the skills required to help and support their child in different ways, including academic-related issues.

POs also provide a wide range of support for the families they engage with, in particular those who can best be described as being quite vulnerable and this can include the provision of food parcels, or school uniforms, such practical issues can have a negative impact upon the educational experience of any young person and prevent them from attending or engaging in school. POs through their engagement and contact can. *"... see people at their most vulnerable, I'm thinking of [name of family] and you taking groceries to him. You know, you go into that home every week with a food parcel, his mom's out of work and [name of PO] and her husband actually then went out every week and delivered the shopping to the door"* (PP, PO, NI]

One of the parents supported by a PO commented that *"during lockdown and stuff, I was getting phone calls on a regular basis asking how [child's name] was, asking even how I was, you know"* (PP, Parent, NI). One of the teachers commenting on the role played by a PO said *"... they'll offload to her and then you're able to say to the parents, now, this is the way I would have dealt with them. You know, if somebody comes in and says she can't get them into bed"* (Nursery, Teacher, NI).

Positive relationships are essential to success of this initiative, and in particular a relationship which is built on trust, one the PO suggested that they got *"... great satisfaction out of is knowing that they trust us you know that has taken time to build up and it takes time with every you know, every new year group that come in, you know, they are a wee bit wary of you and you know, whatever, but once they have a month or two in*

*there, and then the feel oh, that's okay, all right"* (PP, PO, NI). In the same way positive relationships are important to the parents as well *"I think it's really the uptake of the parents, you know, if the parental involvement wasn't working, parents wouldn't be involved. You know, but our parents year on year, the numbers taking part in different things and wanting to be involved, you know, it's, it's at a higher level"* (Nursery, PO, NI).

The role of the PO is to support pupils educationally and personally, and there is a general understanding that the educational success is only possible if personal issues are addressed. The anxieties of the parents can adversely impact the experience of their child, and conversely the reverse is also true. Fundamentally the PO provides an important conduit for the flow of important information between each of the key partners involved namely the pupil, parent, school, a range of external agencies, and the community as they seek to enhance the educational experience of the young people they serve.

## Summary

- Parental involvement is highly valued by schools in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland from pre-school to post-primary.
- Numerous benefits were attributed to parental engagement, not only for children, but also for families and the school and the community more widely.
- Principals, teachers and parent officers/HSCLs (both North and South) principally saw parental engagement as being all about working as a team with parents in the children's best interests.
- The COVID pandemic was seen to exacerbate the need more than ever for support, and in so doing, actually heightened contact between home and school. Yet impact on some children is negatively visible.
- Key enablers to parental engagement were principally perceived as being there for the parents when needed, supporting them with whatever is possible and giving parents positive messages about their children too.
- Barriers to parental engagement centred around parental pride, issues around communication and literacy competence to pressures at home and negative attitudes towards school more generally.

- Evidence suggested that HSCL/Parent Officer both North and South was considered central to the success of parental engagement in the particular schools.
- Roles attributed to the HSCL/Parent Officer included changing parental mindsets towards the importance and value of school, addressing issues of deprivation, understanding disadvantage and being there as a support for families at all times.
- Types of parental engagement stemmed from a range of informal events e.g. cookery classes, play days and toddler groups to more learning-focused activities to develop parents' own competence in areas of interest and need as well as using parents as a support for other parents and indeed school activities more generally.
- While all HSCLs and Parent Officers were believed to bring with them "their own unique skillset", all stakeholders agreed that they tended to be a certain type of person – sense of humour, approachable, very caring, extremely hard working with great communication skills where nothing ever seemed to be too much trouble.
- Stakeholders in ROI were of the opinion that a teacher was best for the role of HSCL, but in NI, someone who lives and understands the parents' community context was considered key.
- The community context of the schools where HSCLs and Parent Officers were employed tended to have high levels of deprivation and educational disadvantage, increased numbers of refugees and immigrant families as well as heightened levels of SEN.
- Teachers and HSCLs/POs seemed more interested in the softer benefits associated with the role: "*that you know, the parents are happy, the kids are happy, the staff are happy. I suppose...everything works well*", whereas principals, particularly in the post primary context, highlighted the impact of the HSCL/Parent Officer role also in terms of enhanced academic outcomes and pupil success.
- In terms of accountability and feedback, the principals, particularly in the South, were of the opinion that the work of the HSCL is evident without having to engage in formal reporting, although a detailed annual report must be completed to TUSLA. In Northern Ireland, accountability appears to be evidenced more specifically in terms of a paper trail.

- A day in the life of both a HSCL/Parent Officer, whether it be in NI or the ROI, is anything but easy and requires much hard work and effort. Yet the benefits of such involvement are second to none.

## Chapter 5: A Principal's Perspective

*In this chapter, the findings from a short online questionnaire which targeted principals and senior leaders of pre-schools, primary and post primary school will be presented. The survey was distributed via social media platforms e.g. Facebook and Twitter, as well as emailing convenience samples of schools directly both in NI and ROI, as a means of garnering a wider response rate and triangulating some of the issues that were raised as part of the case studies themselves.*

### Sample characteristics

In total, there were 371 valid responses to the principal survey, with 64% of respondents based in ROI and 36% from NI. Table 4 summarises the main characteristics of the respondents and their schools. In both jurisdictions, over half of responses came from the primary sector. A smaller proportion of responses came from the preschool sector and the post-primary sector.

The majority of responses from both NI and ROI came from those with a leadership position. In most cases, this was the school principal (or early years leaders or managers in the case of preschools), or assistant or vice principals. In ROI, 16% of responses came from the HSCL. Where 'other' roles were specified (4%), these included the school chaplain, guidance counsellor, special educational needs coordinator, teacher or early year's educator. In the sample as a whole, over half of respondents (54%) had been in post for at least 6 years, and two-thirds (66%) had achieved postgraduate level of education.

The proportion of schools in rural or urban settings was very similar between the two jurisdictions, with a relatively even distribution of schools in each of the location categories. The majority of schools were co-educational.

Reflecting the profile of primary schools in the ROI, the majority of primary schools had a Catholic ethos (87%). Most post-primary schools represented in the sample were either Catholic (50%) or inter-denominational (26%), with smaller proportions from the Church of Ireland community (4%) or non-denominational (4%). In NI, almost half of primary school responses were from the controlled sector (49%) and 38% were from the maintained sector. The integrated sector represented 11% of responses and 3% were

from Irish medium schools. For NI post-primary schools, 35% of responses were from the controlled sector, 4% each from the maintained and integrated sectors, and 44% from the voluntary sector.

	<b>NI (n = 134)</b>	<b>ROI (n = 237)</b>
<b>Respondent role</b>		
Principal	78%	68%
Assistant/vice principal	8%	5%
Home-school community liaison	-	16%
Early years leader/manager	10%	7%
Other	4%	4%
<b>Length of time in current role</b>		
Less than 1 year	5%	11%
1-2 years	6%	17%
3-5 years	25%	24%
6-8 years	22%	12%
9 years or more	43%	36%
<b>Respondent highest qualification</b>		
QQI level 5/6 or equivalent	4%	2%
Undergraduate degree	27%	31%
PG diploma or Master's degree	64%	65%
Doctoral degree	1%	3%
Other	5%	-
<b>School sector</b>		
Preschool	26%	14%
Primary	57%	63%
Post-primary	17%	23%
<b>School location</b>		
Village (up to 1,000 people)	28%	25%
Town (1,000 to 10,000 people)	30%	29%
Large town (over 10,000 people)	19%	18%
City (over 100,000 people)	23%	29%
<b>School gender mix</b>		
Co-educational	93%	87%
Boys only	5%	6%
Girls only	2%	7%

Table 4. Summary of respondent characteristics

## School disadvantaged status

Schools were asked about whether they received any funding through national programmes aimed at supporting schools serving communities with high levels of disadvantage (referred to 'Extended Schools funding' in NI, and 'DEIS status' in ROI).



In NI, 43% (n = 58) of respondents stated that their school was in receipt of extended schools funding, and 23 of these schools (40% of schools receiving extended schools funding) were receiving additional funding for family liaison at part of the extended schools programme.

Among responses from the ROI, just over half of the sample (53%; n = 125) reported that their school has DEIS status. Of these, 59% (n = 74) were DEIS band 1 schools and a further 20% (n = 20) were DEIS band 2, meaning that they had access to a range of additional supports including Home School Community Liaison Services.

## Home-school links: role within school

Across the sample as a whole, 57% of respondents (n = 211) said their school did not have a member of staff with responsibility for parental involvement or home-school links. The proportion was slightly higher in NI (67%) compared to ROI (51%). Within NI, of those respondents whose school did have a member of staff with responsibility for parental involvement/home-school links (n = 44), half (50%) of these schools were in receipt of Extended Schools funding.

In ROI, all primary schools with DEIS Urban band 1 or band 2 (n = 91) and all DEIS post primary schools employed a HSCL or were in the process of recruiting one. Of the schools without access to the HSCL funding (DEIS Rural primary schools and non-DEIS schools, n = 138), only 19% of respondents reported that their school had a member of staff with responsibility for parental involvement/home-school links. When asked a follow-up, open-ended question about why there was no such dedicated role within their school, many respondents (from both NI and ROI) indicated that this was because all staff in the school were responsible for parental involvement and home-school links. Respondents frequently commented that class teachers would liaise regularly with parents of children in their own classes, and that overall responsibility for parental involvement was undertaken as part of the principal's role.

## Home-school links role: funding

Responses from ROI indicated that funding for the role primarily came from the Department of Education through the DEIS programme (79% of schools in ROI with a dedicated role). Other reported sources of funding were through the Tusla Education

Support Service (4%) or special initiatives. Some respondents stated that the role was built into a post of responsibility (1%) or other role within the school (4%).

In NI, the majority of respondents stated that there was no specific funding for the role and that it was built into existing roles (45%). The most frequent reported source of funding was the Extended Schools programme (23%). Other sources cited were LMS (Local Management of Schools; 2%), Department of Communities (1%) and special initiatives (2%).

## Home-school links role: employment conditions

Of those schools that have a member of staff responsible for parental involvement/home-school links (n = 160), this person tended to be a member of teaching staff (83%). In ROI, this person was a member of teaching staff in 88% of schools, compared to 70% of schools in NI<sup>7</sup>.

Participants reported a variety of titles given to this role. In NI, titles used to refer to this post included 'community involvement coordinator', 'extended schools' coordinator', 'family support coordinator', 'parent coordinator', 'parent engagement officer', 'parent liaison officer' and 'pastoral care coordinator', although in 19% of cases, the role had no specific title.

In ROI, the majority of respondents indicated that this dedicated role was called the 'Home School Community Liaison Coordinator', and other titles used included 'parent worker', 'parent association liaison', 'DEIS coordinator', 'community link', 'project worker', 'PTA link teacher' and 'transitions manager'.

A large proportion of the sample (64%) reported that this role was in place for more than 10 years (see Figure 1). In ROI, the role was more likely to be permanent (89%) compared to NI (56%), and was more likely to be full-time (77%) in ROI compared to NI (55%) as detailed in Table 5.

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that in these instances in NI where the Parent Officer is deemed to be a member of teaching staff, they generally take on this role in addition to their normal teaching duties with no additional payment. However in ROI, the HSCL is removed from all normal teaching duties to focus solely on the role of HSCL but is still paid a full teacher salary which tends to be in a range from €38,000 – €74,000.

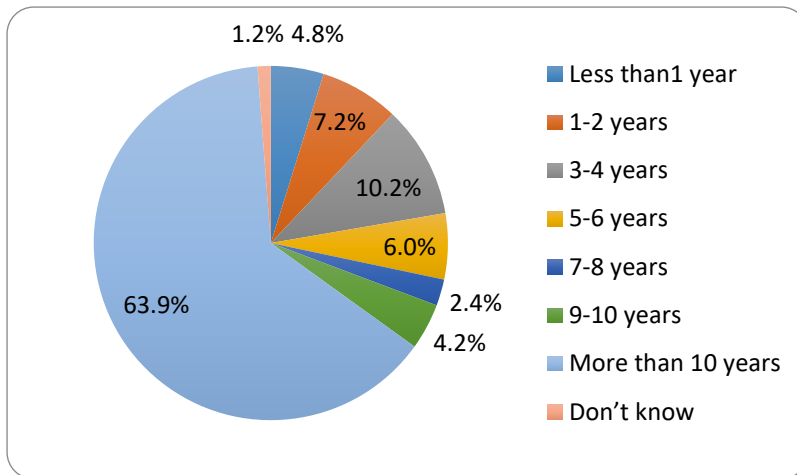


FIGURE 1: DURATION OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT/HOME-SCHOOL LINK ROLE (N=166)

	NI (n = 44)	ROI (n = 116)
<b>Contract</b>		
Permanent	56%	89%
Temporary	44%	11%
<b>Hours</b>		
Full-time	55%	77%
Part-time	45%	23%

Table 5: Employment conditions

## Benefits of home-school liaisons

In terms of appreciating the value of such a role, a large majority of respondents (89%) reported that they do see the value in a home-school liaison type role.

### Function, value, and benefits of the home-school liaison-type role

Within the survey, respondents had the opportunity to provide further information on their perceived value and benefits of the home-school liaison-type role. A very small number of respondents did not recognise any additional benefits to this role beyond their existing practice:

*“No additional benefits, that is to say I don't feel we would be communicating any less with parents without this role.” (Primary, Principal, NI)*

However, the majority of the survey respondents provided rich insights into the function, role and benefits they feel the role brings to their school community.

## Bridging school and home

Numerous respondents, who felt the role connected the school with the home and the wider community, recognised the ‘bridging’-type nature of the role.

*“Anything that will assist parents and build the partnership with school and home.” (PP, Principal, NI)*

*“The role has huge benefits in promoting a positive relationship between the parent and the school.” (Primary, Principal, ROI)*

*“My family care worker is trying to be creative by offering for example - photography projects and gardening with the children. This has been such a help to the families’ sense of well-being. This in turn benefits the child and strengthens communities. We serve the local community and working in warm partnership with parents enables families to flourish. Children love knowing school and home are ‘on the same page.’ (Pre-school, Principal, NI).*

Some respondents recognised not only the value of engaging parents in their child’s education but the importance of building parents’ capacity and confidence to do so.

*“Parental involvement is key as parents are children’s primary care givers.” (Lead Educator in Early Years Setting, ROI).*

*“Builds confidence for parents to take part in children’s learning and to liaise with the staff.” (Pre-school, Principal, NI)*

*“Parents need to feel welcome and valued. Too many settings keep parents at arm’s length. This is a mistake.” (Pre-school, Principal, NI)*

## Designated role

The benefits of having a designated person to liaise with families in their community, whether teacher or community worker, were emphasised as a means of building trustworthy relationships with all concerned.

*“This role allows for a single point of contact who is trusted by parents.” (Primary, Principal, NI)*

*“There is value in a home school link as the staff member responsible would build up a relationship with families over time and there would be a level of consistency in approach when dealing with issues that may arise.”* (Primary, Principal, ROI)

*“The HSCL teacher is in a unique position where his/her focus is entirely on building links with parents and supporting parents to help their children get the most out of school ... So much of the work of the HSCL teacher is hidden and involves being a support, closing the gap, supporting understanding and communication.”* (Primary, Principal, ROI)

Indeed, some respondents were of the opinion that someone other than a school principal or indeed a practising class teacher would be best for this role as a means of alleviating intimidation or potential barriers that may inhibit parents from enjoying a positive relationship with the school.

*“The class teacher or the principal may have been seen as threatening so someone not in a teaching or leadership role may be more approachable for parents in need etc.”* (Primary, Principal, NI).

*“It is a great way to involve parents with their child’s school life. It is great to have a less formal link for target families who may otherwise feel intimidated. Positive impact on school completion.”* (Primary, Principal, ROI).

Additionally, by acting as a key point of contact, maintaining home-school links and managing the social and emotional needs of the children, it was recognised that the role alleviated pressure from principals and teaching staff allowing them to focus on teaching and school leadership.

*“As Principal I have to act as a mediator to parental disputes, social worker when things are difficult at home and a shoulder to cry on if there are emotional needs. This is part of my role however this could be something that is taken from me to allow for more time to manage teaching and learning.”* (Primary School Principal, NI)

## Reducing barriers to learning

Many of the respondents commented on the scope for the role to gain a better understanding of the child’s wider environment and context:

*"It is vital we know what issues children are faced with outside of school, to ensure their time spent in school is fully supported and properly managed. Parents appreciate when school is prepared to go the extra mile to support their child. Strong communication ensures the child has the best school experience possible."* (Primary, Principal, NI)

As such, this provided space and scope to address potential barriers to learning. For example, some commented on the role's capacity to manage issues such as 'high absenteeism' and poor school engagement.

*"There is a value with such a role when attendance and engagement is low."* (Primary, Principal, ROI)

Other respondents commented on the child-centred and multi-faceted nature of the role and the beneficial impact of their acting as a gatekeeper role to outside agencies.

*"Ability to act as a link outside agencies with the school."* (PP, Principal, NI)

Indeed, some respondents highlighted instances whereby the HSCL, through their home visits, highlighted additional supports required within the home environment, particularly in areas of much social need.

*"Our coordinator ... can complete home visits which has been eye-opening and led to us supporting re housing, poverty, child protection, attendance. He has also supported refugee families and Newcomer children. Our coordinator essentially fulfils the roles of EWO and social services when these agencies cannot act in a timely manner to support our children. ... We rely heavily on his support in school and outside agencies rely on his support when they are under-resourced."* (Primary, Principal, NI)

Furthermore, it was also felt that the home-school liaison role was particularly beneficial when integrating children from various different backgrounds and cultures.

*"We do have children from different cultures and backgrounds; it would be great to have someone who had the time and opportunity to take full advantage of the cultural richness of our children's environment, and also offer support to families where needed".* (Primary, Principal, ROI)

In addressing these potential barriers to learning, it was suggested that the HSCL/Parent Officer role can enhance the child's schooling experience and potentially educational outcomes:

*“Improves educational outcomes for the child by engaging with the salient adults in the child's life. Invaluable in building relationships and removing barriers to educational access.” (PP, HSCL, ROI)*

## Summary

- The principal survey presents data from 371 respondents (64% from ROI and 36% from NI). Over half of responses came from the primary school sector, with fewer responses from the pre-school and post-primary sectors.
- A large proportion of the sample (57%) reported that their school did not have a member of staff with responsibility for parental involvement or home-school links. The proportion was slightly higher in NI (67%) compared to ROI (51%).
- In ROI, all primary schools with DEIS Urban band 1 or band 2 (n = 91) and all DEIS post primary schools had an HSCL or were in the process of recruiting one.
- With regards to funding, in ROI funding for the role primarily came from the Department of Education through the DEIS programme (79% of schools in ROI with a dedicated role). In NI, the majority of respondents stated that there was no specific funding for the role, and where funding was available, the most frequently reported was the Extended Schools programme (23%).
- Respondents demonstrated clear recognition of the benefits afforded by the involvement of a HSCL/PO-type role. These benefits tended to focus around issues such as: the capacity of the HSCL to bridge the gap between home and school; the value of having a designated teacher to liaise with parents and, as such, allow the teachers and principals more time to focus on teaching/ leadership; and the capacity for such a role to reduce many of the barriers to learning experienced by children and young people.

## Chapter 6: Key Findings

*In this chapter, drawing on the evidence gleaned from the scoping review, qualitative case studies and policy interviews as well as the questionnaire survey, key findings will be presented, namely, the HSCL/PO as policy, the HSCL/PO as practice, the HSCL/PO as value and the HSCL/PO as diminishing educational disadvantage. The chapter will conclude by identifying a small number of recommendations as a way forward.*

### Introduction

This principally qualitative study set out to gain a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the role of the HSCL/Parent Officer in two jurisdictions i.e. Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and across three school phases namely, pre-school, primary and post-primary. A key aim of the project was to discern more fully the potential of the HSCL/Parent Officer in terms of addressing educational disadvantage across the island of Ireland.

While, as expected, the study has raised some stark contrasts from a policy perspective due to the sheer level of funding invested in such a role in the ROI, interesting insights from a practice and value-based perspective is revealed in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, with a particular focus on diminishing educational disadvantage through building bridges between home and school.

### HSCL/PO as policy

The findings from this study, in particular the scoping study, policy maker interviews and questionnaire survey, have reinforced how the Home-School Liaison scheme in ROI is a highly developed government funded initiative where all DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity) Urban primary schools and all DEIS post-primary schools have access to a full-time HSCL Co-ordinator in practice. The HSCL is a qualified teacher who is already employed within the school but released from all teaching duties, but still in receipt of a teacher's salary, to focus solely on parental engagement. The scheme is well funded and is very well received by schools in the South, described as being “*unique in Europe*” and a real “*jewel in the crown*” (ROI Policymaker).



However, in the NI context, the role of the Parent Officer, appears much more ad hoc in nature, where there is little government intervention in terms of direct funding and stream-lining, and such a role tends to be at the discretion of individual principals in terms of the need they prioritise at a school level. The key source of funding for such a role in NI appears to be sourced principally through the Extended Schools Programme, a funding initiative which is targeted at those schools serving the most disadvantaged communities. The schools eligible for such funding are determined on a year-by-year basis and are identified in accordance to the proportion of their pupils which are entitled to Free School Meals (FSM) or live in an area classified as disadvantaged. Although it is not specified that such monies should support the role of a Parent Officer in practice, it is indicated by the Department of Education (2017) that the funding “*allows those schools serving the most disadvantaged areas to offer a wide range of services or activities outside of the normal school day to help meet the learning and development needs of pupils, their families and local communities*” (unpaginated). As a result of the extent of and the temporary status of such funding, Parent Officers, it seems, according to a NI pre-school principal, if employed by schools, can only be employed on a temporary basis and part-time nature, unless they can support such a role by dint of other Government funding initiatives such as Targeting Social Need or through their own school budget.

Yet, it is important to note, that the Extended Schools Programme in Northern Ireland serves both urban and rural communities as it is dependent on level of need rather than geographical location. Likewise, such funding is open to all school phases, including pre-school. Yet, in the Republic of Ireland, despite the extent of the HSCL scheme, as it stands, it currently excludes rural primary schools and pre-schools whether urban or rural. Although, according to the ROI policy maker, TUSLA/TESS and Parent Plus are currently carrying out a number of Early Years Pilots in several Primary Schools and that HSCLs are encouraged to work with parents whose children are transitioning into the primary school from pre-school, the HSCL scheme does not formally extend to pre-school as it stands. Indeed, the significance of home-school liaison beginning as early as possible was clearly articulated by several primary school and pre-school principals both North and South as well as both the policymaker in NI and the ROI who emphasised the importance of early intervention and the needs to get parents on board as early as possible before any bad habits are developed, while simultaneously ensuring that they avail of pre-school provision for their child as well as supporting families through the

whole pre-school school to primary transition. Furthermore, the existing evidence-base relating to what works in the field of home-school liaison identifies parental engagement as having the greatest impact in the early years and primary school phase (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003)

## HSCL/PO as practice

Despite the disparities in HSCL/PO funded provision both North and South, there seemed to be an agreed consensus both in NI and ROI as well as across key school phases (pre-school, primary and post-primary) as to what the skillset of the individual who carried out such a role required. Everyone seemed to be in agreement that the role was “*anything but easy*” (PP, principal, ROI), and although there was recognition given to the fact that each HSCL/PO would bring with them “their own unique skillset”, all school stakeholders were of the opinion that a range of definite skills and qualities were required. These included personable and emotional characteristics such as being warm, sensitive, caring, approachable and empathetic, alongside social qualities i.e. being able to form relationships with others as well as some professional type skills such as being genuine, trustworthy and a good communicator. Being able to maintain a calm and unflappable persona, alongside being able to anticipate and solve problems also were deemed as essential on the part of any HSCL/PO. In this way, it could be argued that the skillset required of an effective HSCL/Parent Officer could be summed up as a ‘professional’ buddy – someone who is genuine and always there with a helping hand in times of trouble, but who knows the ‘correct’ advice to give and is genuine and trustworthy in their approach at all times.

In addition, while the nature and content of such activities may have differed across the school phases to meet with the parents’ needs e.g. play days as compared with coffee mornings, and sessions around supporting your child to read as compared with sessions on drug and alcohol addiction, the type of activities engaged in also appeared quite similar across both jurisdictions. These ranged from relaxed events to nurture healthy relationships between teachers and parents as well as between parents themselves, to more structured activities to familiarize parents with the school and to provide them with feedback about their own children as well as upskilling them on a variety of issues to help them support their children with their education at home. Indeed, the range of

activities alluded to tend to meet with what the evidence base has identified as best practice: where the impetus behind such activities undertaken with parents, in the main, tend to be focused on fostering self-concepts, aspirations, and habits conducive to educational achievement (“*academic socialization*”).

One particular area of contention that arose, principally between those interviewees in the South as compared to the North centred around the notion of ‘teacher’ versus ‘community worker’ as HSCL or Parent Officer. Generally speaking, in the ROI, interviewees, including the ROI policymaker, were in agreement that a teacher was best for such a role, principally due to their existing knowledge of the school, staff and pupils, their understanding of teaching as well as their ability to focus attention on educational outcomes and their overall level of professionalism. In contrast, other school stakeholders, mainly from NI, were of the opinion that someone who lives in the community, understands the community and is considered to be a member of that community may be less intimidating and in turn more successful in terms of breaking down barriers. It is important to note, not by way of undermining the role of a community worker as PO, but some of these responses, particularly from teaching staff in Northern Ireland, may have been coloured by the fact that they were being expected to carry out the role of PO (or indeed share the load with another member of staff) in addition to their teaching duties. This came through, in particular, in the questionnaire survey, where some respondents indicated that, they were, not only undertaking the PO role in addition to their everyday teaching duties, but also without any further monetary reward. Therefore, having a designated role undertaken by an additional individual, may have been seen as particularly advantageous.

Nevertheless, as clearly articulated by the NI policymaker, whether teacher or community worker, it is “*Finding that person who is the right fit for the community is invaluable.*”

## HSCL/PO as value

A culture of support for parental involvement was in evidence across all schools involved in this study and associated stakeholders (principals, senior leaders, teachers, HSCLs, parents and policymakers), irrespective of jurisdiction or school phase, and was deemed to be of significant value, not only to parents and schools, but in particular, for the children involved. This thinking was also reiterated in the wider survey responses, where

a large majority of the respondents were in favour of such a role. Central to its success, across the island of Ireland, was the position of the HSCL/Parent Officer which was described as ‘*intrinsic to the school*’ (Primary, Teacher, ROI), “*hugely important*” (PP, Principal, NI) and “*couldn’t cope without them*” (Primary, Teacher, ROI). Having an individual in the school, particularly in a paid capacity, whose role focused entirely on parental involvement was considered by principals and teachers as a real support, alleviating those everyday pressures that take up so much time to resolve – “*it takes out the aggro*”. Parents also seemed to appreciate having someone at hand that they could speak to when required as a means of sorting things out before they become “*big issues*”. In this way, it could be argued that the principal importance of having an HSCL/PO in practice was associated with those softer benefits of keeping everyone happy and in so doing, enabling the school and school life to run smoothly.

In addition, in terms of the children, having an HSCL/PO was considered also intrinsic to reducing barriers to learning, where strong communication between home and school ensured “*the best school experience possible*” that a child could potentially have. Indeed, the input invested by HSCLs and POs was recognised by principals in both jurisdictions as being associated with increased attendance and enhanced academic outcomes i.e. pupils’ overall success, particularly at a post primary level.

Having an HSCL/PO was considered integral to schools both North and South and the ‘holistic’ role they play and the “extreme hard work” invested on their part appeared to be valued by everyone concerned as summed up by the ROI policymaker: “*Principals love it, parents love it and HSCLs love it*” (ROI policymaker), “*And it matters.*” (Primary, PO, NI). Indeed, the only criticism made was that “*we need more [of their time] not less.*” (Primary, Teacher, ROI)

## HSCL/PO as Diminishing Educational Disadvantage

Yet, whether in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland, whether in pre-school, primary or post-primary, the most important value attributed to the HSCL/Parent Officer was in terms of their role in building bridges to diminish educational disadvantage. The impetus behind the funding streams to support such a role, whether in the Republic of Ireland (DEIS) or Northern Ireland (e.g. Extended Schools Programme) focussed on targeting social need and providing equality of opportunity and the part played by the

HSCLs/PO in this study was clearly in evidence. The common context in which all of the case study HSCLs and Parent Officers was employed was significantly deprived where poor housing, unemployment, mental ill health, poverty, crime and domestic violence was the norm. Increasing numbers of refugee and newcomer families were also in evidence and levels of special educational needs were on an unprecedented rise. As a result, the findings from this study indicate that the HSCL/Parent Officer provides that “direct link” or indeed acts as a ‘safety net’ to enable parents to deal with the myriad of financial constraints and emotional challenges they encounter on a regular basis, a support mechanism which was considered so “*vital, vital*” by the families concerned.

Yet, breaking down barriers and changing mindsets in an effort to address parents’ own negative recollections towards schooling and in turn realise the potential of the school was integral to the efforts of the HSCL/PO. Winning over the goodwill of parents who have tended to associate schooling with negativity, was anything but easy, but the findings from this study have showcased, that investing in a definite role or individual whose core goal is to build bridges between home and school for the benefit of the children concerned can really make a difference to the lives of all concerned.

As clearly articulated by the ROI policymaker, if children are coming to school hungry, tired and extremely anxious about something that has gone on that morning or even the night before, how can anyone expect them to be open to learning in the same way as the child coming from a much more favourable home experience. Encouraging all teachers to fully appreciate the challenges of disadvantage instead of being “*judgemental*” and having “*unrealistic expectations*” for such children is paramount in tackling educational disadvantage as a whole and it is the HSCL/PO, according to the findings of this study, who acts as the “*game changer*” (ROI, Policymaker), building effective bridges between home and school and in so doing, affording all children, irrespective of their background, the opportunity to reach their full educational potential.

## Conclusion

This principally qualitative study set out to examine the role of the HSCL/Parent Officer in practice across pre-school, primary and post-primary in two jurisdictions, namely Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. While the findings highlight key disparities

between the political landscape of both contexts in terms of monies invested, parameters of role and the support structures available, the ‘lived’ reality of the HSCL/ PO in practice, whether in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland, whether in pre-school, primary or post-primary, appeared somewhat similar, according to the findings of this study, in terms of the skillset required, the types of activities undertaken and the core focus of the role.

The findings have shown that being a HSCL or Parent Officer is hugely demanding and highly challenging, whether full-time or part-time, whether a teacher or community worker, whether in receipt of additional payment or not. The part they play in helping to create a “*culture of change*” (NI Policymaker) and in ensuring that the “*cycle of education disadvantage*” (NI Policymaker) is severed has been attributed much value by all concerned i.e. policymakers, principals, senior leaders, teachers and parents. While releasing a teacher to concentrate fully on this role, as in ROI, was deemed ‘gold standard’, in the case of Northern Ireland, having a designated individual who supports and focuses on the needs of the community is key.

Being a parent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is anything but easy, and families faced with economic hardship and/or low socio-economic status have so many stresses and triggers to contend with, that having the role of an HSCL or Parent Officer in a school, has surely been shown in this study, to make a difference. This study has highlighted that investing in an HSCL/Parent Officer really does matter and the time is ripe for all policymakers and educators, particularly in Northern Ireland, where policies are less well-developed and the practice of having a Parent Officer in schools is much more diverse, to take this role much more seriously and invest in such a role across the entire education sector. While in the ROI, despite all the good work done so far, it is time to include all those DEIS children who live in rural communities and who attend pre-schools as all children and their families deserve better.

And finally, this study, although small-scale in nature, has gone some way to showcase that ‘professional’ BUDDIES can definitely build bridges between home and school and, in turn, can contribute significantly to diminishing educational disadvantage in practice.

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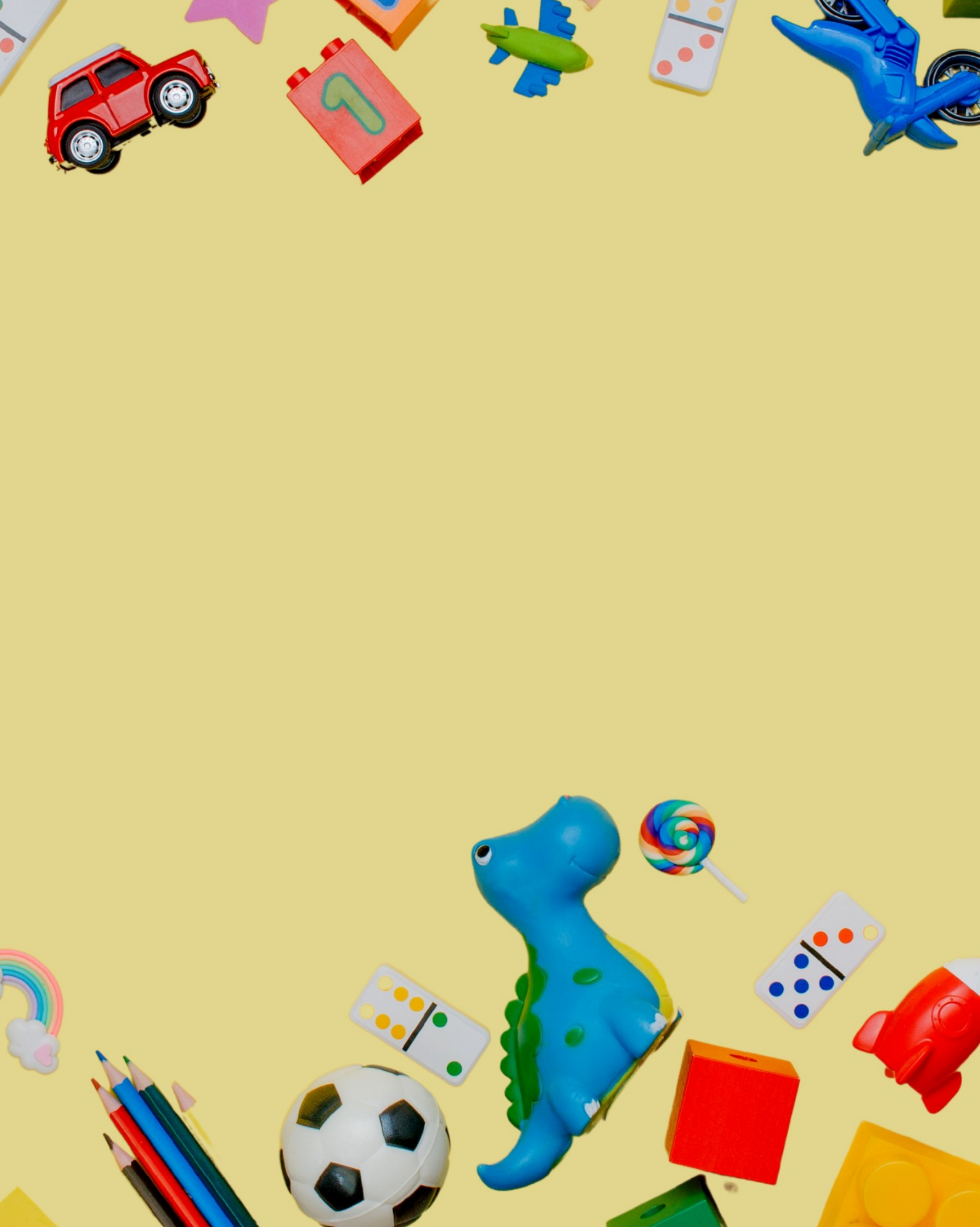
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