

## **Parental participation in primary schools; the views of parents and children**

Yetunde O. John-Akinola and Saoirse Nic Gabhainn<sup>1</sup>, Health Promotion Research Centre,  
National University of Ireland Galway, Galway, Ireland

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<sup>1</sup>Contact: [Saoirse.nicgabhainn@nuigalway.ie](mailto:Saoirse.nicgabhainn@nuigalway.ie)

### **ABSTRACT**

#### ***Purpose***

Parental participation is important for strengthening and sustaining the concept of school health promotion but little is written on the processes involved. The purpose of this study was to assess Irish parents' and pupils' views on how parents take part, or would like to take part, in school life.

#### ***Design/Methodology/Approach***

The sample was recruited from nine primary schools, three Health Promoting Schools and six matched schools. Pupils aged 9-13 years in the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class groups participated in the study. Parents of all participating pupils were also invited to take part in the study. Data were collected by self-completion questionnaire, comprising three closed and one open question.

#### ***Findings***

A total of 218 parents and 231 pupils participated. There was general agreement between parents and pupils on parental participation in school. Overall 40.6% of parents and 43.2% of pupils reported that parents frequently take part in school activities. A majority of both parents (79.5%) and pupils (83.6%), agreed that parents were encouraged to talk about things that concern their child in school, while 73.5% of parents and 65.6% of pupils reported that they were made to feel a part of child's school. Qualitative data from parents and pupils suggested similar ways in

which parents can best take part in school. Some respondents suggested how schools could engage with parents but most responses provided examples of how parents could act directly to take part in school life. These direct actions included doing, helping with and watching school activities such as sports, tours, music and cake sales.

***Originality/Value***

The findings illustrate the similarity of views of parents and pupils concerning parents' participation in school life and suggest that children may have the potential to represent the voice of their parents in school when considering how to improve parental participation in schools.

***Key words:*** Parental participation, Health Promoting Schools, primary schools, Ireland

***Type of paper:*** Research paper

## INTRODUCTION

Health Promotion in schools, particularly in Europe, is largely informed and guided by the Health Promoting School (HPS) movement (Senior, 2012). Although there are multiple models of HPS (Barnekow *et al.*, 2006), developed in line with health promotion theory and practice and the political and administrative realities within countries or territories, some dimensions appear universal. One such defining dimension is an emphasis on the school as existing within a wider community, and advocates for positive attention to be given to relationships between the school and the community, and particularly with the parents of pupils (Senior, 2012). The participation of parents in HPS is one of the four key pillars of the model of HPS adopted in Ireland in 1996 (Lahiff, 2000; Jensen and Simovska, 2002) and is acknowledged as central to the development of successful school health promotion (Nic Gabhainn *et al.*, 2010). Despite some examples of good practice in this area (Lahiff and Nic Gabhainn, 1997; Nic Gabhainn and Kelleher, 1998), there is a general dearth of understanding regarding how such participation can be encouraged and supported and specifically what the view of educational stakeholders such as children and parents are about parental participation. This paper investigates views on parental participation among parents and children in Irish primary schools.

### *Parental Engagement, Involvement and Participation*

There are language and conceptual issues around the role of parents in schools that require more attention. Parental engagement with schools has been described in a variety of ways, each representing different views on what the given term encompasses. Epstein (2011) referred to parents' involvement in the context of '*school-family partnerships*'. Others have referred to

*'parental school involvement'* (Hill and Taylor, 2004), *'parent-school relationship'* (Feuerstein, 2000), and *'home-school links'* (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). Some authors have developed typologies of parental engagement based on the types of activities involved (e.g. Dimock *et al.*, 1996; Anderson and Minke, 2007), or parent's beliefs system (Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 2005).

In some contexts terms such as 'parental involvement', 'parental engagement' and 'parental participation' have been used inter-changeably, but in other cases the terms have been clearly defined, although the definitions given are not consistent. Whatever the name parents' engagement in school might be referred to, it has been highlighted that it is important for the two systems - home and school - within which children function, to work in partnership with the aim of improving children's lives (Graue *et al.*, 2001). In this paper, the term 'parental participation' is used to refer to a broad set of activities where schools make it possible for parents to take an active role in the life of the school and parents volunteer to take part in school activities and events. Where other terms were used in the literature reviewed the original nomenclature has been retained.

### *Parents taking part in school life*

Various types of parental participation in schools have previously been documented. These include; communication with child's teachers and by attendance at parent-teacher meetings (Feuerstein, 2000; Hill and Taylor, 2004; Lee and Bowen, 2006), attending school presentations by pupils (Lee and Bowen, 2006), attending school events (Hill and Taylor, 2004) or activities related to other altruistic activities in the school (e.g. volunteering at school) (Feuerstein, 2000; Hill and Taylor, 2004; Lee and Bowen, 2006). Parents can also be a member

of a parents association; for example, all the schools that formed part of the Irish Network of HPS had parents' representatives in their schools usually referred to as parents association. These groups, which are usually well planned and structured, have created the opportunity for schools to link up with parents, and also encourage parents to be involved in school activities and training programmes organised by schools for parents (Lahiff, 2000). Parent involvement can also be by way of reading activities at home with child (e.g. van Steensel *et al.*, 2011; Silinskas *et al.*, 2013) assisting child with homework (e.g. Hill and Taylor, 2004; Lee and Bowen, 2006), or communicating with child about learning experiences at school (Lee and Bowen, 2006).

Nevertheless the participation of parents in schools can sometimes be difficult and challenging. For example, some parents are not enthusiastic about working with schools while some others are incapable of doing so; work-time balance for instance could create a hindrance to parental participation in school life (e.g. Dimock *et al.*, 1996; Ingram *et al.*, 2007; Harris and Goodall, 2008), for others language issues or parental beliefs act as barriers (Horby and Lafaele, 2011). Within school health promotion these issues related to barriers to parental participation in school have been previously recognised and discussed (Garcia-Dominic, 2010), but no universal guidance is guaranteed success.

### *Impact of Parental Participation*

Developing good connections between schools and parents can contribute to promoting school activities and improve home-school relationships (St. Leger *et al.*, 2010; Senior, 2012). It has also been suggested that interactions between families, communities, and schools could impact

on children's development (El Nokali *et al.*, 2010), school achievement, and improvement of school programmes (Sheldon and Van Voorhis, 2004) thus engendering a positive holistic environment that could support children's development and learning (Mattingly *et al.*, 2002).

Models of child development have highlighted the essential part that parents play in their child's education, and research on parents' involvement in school, and the relationship between schools and parents, has argued that it is essential for promoting school achievement (e.g. Mattingly *et al.*, 2002). Numerous studies have documented a link between parental involvement with children's education and academic achievement or improvement in student learning (e.g. Fan and Chen, 2001; Barnard, 2004; Lee and Bowen, 2006; Topor *et al.*, 2010), an increase in school attendance (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon, 2007); and the development of children's social competences (Kohl *et al.*, 2000).

Parents' engagement in school or their child's education may also have a positive impact on school-related outcomes (Hill and Taylor, 2004; Anderson and Minke, 2007), such as improvement in children's attitudes to school and academic performance (e.g. Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994; Feuerstein, 2000; Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; Anderson and Minke, 2007), and inclination to devote more attentiveness, energy and concentration to learning (Gonzalez-DeHass *et al.*, 2005). It has been suggested that when children are motivated to succeed in learning by their parents or guardians, they are stimulated, and thus give more attention to their academic progress (Ingram *et al.*, 2007). Pupils assume more accountability for their education when parents are involved (Gonzalez-DeHass *et al.*, 2005), and this can potentially increase children's interest in achieving high standards in their education. Parents' involvement in school has also been related to decreases in the number of high school dropouts, and increases in timely completion of school and completion of the highest grade levels (Barnard, 2004). However, while various associations and links have been reported, there

remains a dearth of causal evidence regarding the extent to which parental involvement has enhanced pupils' learning (Mattingly *et al.*, 2002).

One outstanding issue is the question of how schools and parents can make the connection to help children reach their potential (e.g. Cowan *et al.*, 2004). Incompatibility and unrelatedness between the school and home can have an influence on the learning process and behaviour patterns among school pupils (Harris and Goodall, 2008). Therefore, the physical and psychosocial environment and 'feel' of the school has to be welcoming for parents (Michael *et al.*, 2007) in order to create an atmosphere conducive to participation. It has been argued that it is crucial for pupils and parents to have a sense of ownership and commitment to school life and that this can go a long way in determining a successful outcome for the HPS programme (St Leger *et al.*, 2010). For example, an eighteen-month pilot study was conducted in Hong Kong among primary school pupils, as part of a Healthy School agenda, which aimed to promote a healthy eating environment in the school. In that study, the participation of parents, alongside teachers, in the planning and implementation of the programme was considered a contributory component to a successful execution of the project (Lee, *et al.*, 2010). Similarly, Lahiff (2000) argued that best results can be expected when parents participate actively in facilitating the promotion of the health and well-being of their children. This suggests that the relationship between the school and the home, and especially with the parents of children who are learning, has important implications for both the education and the well-being of children (e.g. Hirsto, 2010).

## *Rationale*

Despite these developments in the area of parents' participation in school, there remain many hurdles that need to be crossed to improve parents' role in school settings. While parental involvement and participation is seen as generally positive, and it has been argued that school-home relationships should be supported (Mattingly *et al.*, 2002; Cowan *et al.*, 2004), there remains incomplete information about the extent of parental participation in schools. There is a need to explore and understand how parents would like to engage in their children's learning (Anderson and Minke, 2007), and in the broader life of the school. Thus, there is an extant need to document both existing parental participation and their possible future participation in schools. This paper aims to address this by presenting data from parents' views on their current participation in schools and their suggestions for future participation in the schools of their children.

As children have the right to express their views on all matters that affect them (UN, 1989; Department of Health and Children, 2000), a question also arises as to whether children would want their parents to participate in school life, and if so, how? The second aim of this paper is to document the views of children on the participation of their parents in school life.

Gathering data from parents can prove very challenging, and there are some unsuccessful examples of trying to recruit parents as research participants through schools or via their children (e.g. Heinrichs *et al.*, 2005; Nic Gabhainn *et al.*, 2010). In this regard, and as previously argued by Vyverman and Vettenburg (2009) the appropriateness of asking children questions about their parents' participation in school is a valid question. The third aim of this paper is to investigate the extent to which parents and children agree on the issue of parental participation in schools.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Introduction*

In order to address the three aims outlined above, data for this study were collected across nine primary schools. The data collection process involved parents filling in a short, four-item, questionnaire to document their perspectives on how they take part or would like to take part in school life. The questionnaire was developed following a preliminary study in which a participative methodology was employed to investigate parents and children's understandings of participation in school life (Authors, 2014). The preliminary study was conducted explicitly to facilitate understanding of what educational stakeholders (e.g. parents and children) understood participation to be, and to feed in to later investigations on this topic. The four questions included in the questionnaire for the current study were based on the main categories that emerged from the analysis of parents' understandings of participation in school life; and how they thought that parents could be encouraged to participate in school life. Taking this approach helped to ensure that the key issues could be investigated in an efficient and parent-friendly manner using a short-questionnaire which parents found easy and quick to complete. As described further below, pupils also completed a similar questionnaire with analogous questions about their parents' participation in school life.

### *Sampling design and technique*

This was a matched cohort study. Lists of primary schools in County Galway were obtained. Three HPS across the County were selected for the study (one with only male pupils, one with only female pupils and one co-educational); the HPS were identified by the Health Promotion Department of the Health Services Executive (West). The three HPS were matched by gender and location (i.e. urban/rural) against six other primary schools in the County, which were

randomly selected from the Department of Education primary school list. Thus a total of nine schools participated. In all schools pupils aged 9-13 years in the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class groups participated in the study. Parents of all participating pupils were also invited to take part in the study via a letter sent home to them with their child.

### *Consent*

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the National University of Ireland, Galway Research Ethics Committee. Consent was obtained from the schools, parents or guardians and pupils to administer the questionnaires. The parents or guardians and all pupils were informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

### *Data collection*

Introduction letters, information sheets, consent forms and a questionnaire for parents or guardians were sent home with pupils. Either parent was considered eligible to complete the questionnaire. Parents were requested to return their consent forms, consent for their child (A section for parents or guardians to append their signature was included in the consent forms) and parents' questionnaire to the class teacher. Only pupils whose parents or guardians gave consent, and who themselves also consented to participate, were given the pupils questionnaire for completion. The confidentiality of the data they provided was assured and all data were anonymous.

All questions were piloted before data collection. Pupils completed their questionnaires in school and parents' questionnaires were sent home to parents via their children. The questionnaire for parents and pupils included closed-ended and an open-ended question on parents' participation in school.

Parents were invited to respond to the following sentences with the response options ‘always’, ‘often’, ‘sometimes’ and ‘never’: ‘I am involved in school activities’, ‘I am made to feel a part of my child’s school’ and ‘I am encouraged to talk about things that concern my child in the school’. Below those questions was the text: ‘Please write on the lines below how best you would like to take part in your child’s school’.

Pupils were invited to respond to the following sentences with the response options ‘always’, ‘often’, ‘sometimes’ and ‘never’: ‘My parents are involved in our school activities’, ‘My parents are made to feel a part of our school’, and ‘My parents are encouraged to talk about things that concern me in our school’. Below those questions was the text: ‘Please write on the lines below how you would like your parents to take part in your school’

#### *Data analysis*

The quantitative data were coded and entered into SPSS version 20. The qualitative data, comprising the responses to the open-ended question for both parents (n=218) and pupils (n=231) were imported into Microsoft Excel for coding. A conventional approach to content analysis was used to analyse the data, which was informed by Alasuutari *et al.* (2008) and May (2011) and followed the procedures outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). Categories that were related to the context of parents’ participation in school were developed from parents and pupils’ data.

Analysis for both the pupils and parents’ responses to the open ended question involved three stages of coding; from which various themes emerged from the data. The themes were given definitions, and were subsequently categorised into variables that represented actions that could be carried out by either Parents or Schools. Some parents and children gave multiple responses,

and thus the numbers in each category, or sub-category, do not necessarily sum to the total number of respondents.

### Stage one coding

For the first stage of coding, pupils and parents' data were treated separately. However given that many of the same themes emerged, some codes were shared between the two datasets. The major themes focused on actions that could be carried out directly by schools or by parents. These included how parents had participated in school life in the past, statements about whether the respondents were happy with the current participation of parents in school life and schools inviting parents to be involved in school.

At this stage, sixteen codes were generated for pupils and fifteen for parents. For both parents and pupils, the largest single response code was 'active' actions for parents (parents 32.1%; pupils 38.5%). A range of other coded responses emerged including 'happy with level of involvement in school', 'school invite parents to engage', 'school give parents information', 'school organise events to engage parents', 'teachers to improve communication with parents', 'examples of how parents had participated in school', 'examples of how parents had supported child' and 'parents do not get involved in school'.

### Stage two coding

At the second stage of coding, the codes generated during the first stage were reviewed to further refine and specify themes. Some were expanded and merged, while others were divided and contracted; following this process there were eleven themes drawn from the pupils' data and nine from the parents. Definitions of all themes were developed at this stage (see Table 3).

### Stage three coding

At the third and final stage, sub-categories were developed from the 'active actions for parents' theme (see Table 3). These were responses from parents and pupils that focused on specific actions expected of parents. Ten sub-categories emerged from pupils' responses and nine sub-categories came from parents' responses (Table 4).

#### *Check for reliability of data coding*

The consistency of the data coding was assessed by inter-rater reliability. Ten percent each of the parents and pupils' qualitative data statements were randomly selected using a random number generator. An independent colleague was invited and given these data, and asked to determine which theme or sub-category each response falls into. The percentage of agreement between the researcher and the independent colleague was calculated to determine the rate of agreement. The coding had an 87% (pupils' data) and 85% (parents' data) inter-rater reliability rate.

## **FINDINGS**

#### *Data Presentation*

All data are presented separately for parents and pupils under three main subheadings; demographic results, extent of parents' participation in school life and views on parents participation in school.

The data on the extent of parents participation in school life are presented in percentages by gender and school type (HPS or NHPS), with differences tested by Pearson's Chi Square.

The qualitative data are summarised and illustrated by direct quotes from participants. All quotes are appended by the gender and school type of the participant. Where a term used requires explanation this is given within the quote in square brackets.

A total of 231 pupils and 218 parents across nine schools participated, reflecting a response rate of 57.2% for parents and 75.6% for pupils (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

Demographic variable	Parents ( <i>n</i> = 218) <i>n</i> (%)	Pupils ( <i>n</i> = 231) <i>n</i> (%)
<i>Age/age of pupil</i>		
9	6 (2.8)	12 (5.2)
10	62 (29.1)	74 (32)
11	88 (41.3)	92 (39.8)
12	53 (24.9)	49 (21.2)
13	49 (21.2)	4 (1.7)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	59 (27.8)	124 (53.7)
Female	153 (72.2)	107 (46.3)
<i>School type</i>		
Health Promoting School (HPS)	80 (36.7)	86 (37.2)
Non-Health Promoting School (NHPS)	138 (63.3)	145 (62.8)

### *Extent of parents' participation in school life*

#### Participation in school activities

##### Parents

Less than half of parents (40.6%; 37.9% mothers and 44.8% fathers) reported that they were 'always or often' involved in school activities; while 14.3% (14.0% mothers and 12.1% fathers) reported that they had 'never' been involved in school activities (Table 2). The percentage of parents who were 'always or often' involved in school activities in designated HPS (41.8%) was slightly higher than those in NHPS (39.9%). The observed differences were not statistically significant.

## Pupils

Similarly, less than half (43.2%) of pupils reported that their parents were ‘always or often’ involved in school activities while 18.5% reported that they ‘never’ were. Girls and those attending HPS schools reported higher levels of parental participation (Table 2) but the differences were not statistically significant.

Table 2. Parents and pupils views of parents’ involvement in school, overall and by gender and HPS status

	Parents					Pupils				
	All parents (%)	Fathers (%)	Mothers (%)	HPS (%)	Non-HPS (%)	All pupils (%)	Boys (%)	Girls (%)	HPS (%)	Non-HPS (%)
<i>Involved in school activities</i>						Multi-level List				
Always/often	40.6	44.8	37.9	41.8	39.9	43.2	39.8	47.1	41.0	44.4
Sometimes	45.2	43.1	47.7	44.3	45.7	38.3	40.7	35.6	41.0	36.8
Never	14.3	12.1	14.0	13.9	14.5	18.5	19.5	17.3	18.1	18.8
<i>Feel part of school</i>										
Always/often	73.5	70.7	75.5	72.2	74.3	65.6	66.7	64.4	56.6	70.8
Sometimes	21.9	22.4	21.2	24.1	20.6	26.9	27.6	26.0	34.9	22.2
Never	4.7	6.9	3.3	3.8	5.1	7.5	5.7	9.6	8.4	6.9
<i>Encouraged to talk about things that concern child in school</i>										
Always/often	79.5	74.1	82.1	79.5	79.6	83.6	78.9	89.3	86.6	81.9
Sometimes	14.4	19.0	13.2	11.5	16.1	12.8	16.3	8.7	9.8	14.6
Never	6.0	6.9	4.6	9.0	4.4	3.5	4.9	1.9	3.7	3.5

## Made to feel part of school

### Parents

The majority of parents (73.5%) reported that they were ‘always or often’ made to feel a part of school while only 4.7% reported that they had ‘never’ been made to feel a part of school. The percentages for fathers (70.7%), mothers (75.5%), HPS (72.2%) and NHPS (74.3%) were similar (Table 2). The observed differences were not statistically significant.

## Pupils

Many (65.6%) pupils reported that their parents were 'always or often' made to feel a part of school while only 7.5% reported 'never'. Slightly more boys (66.7%) than girls (64.4%) were likely to report that parents were 'always or often' involved in school activities. The majority of pupils in NHPS (70.8%) reported that their parents were 'always or often' made to feel a part of school while more than half of pupils in designated HPS (56.6%) reported the same (Table 2). None of these differences were statistically significant.

## Encouraged to talk about things that concern child in school

### Parents

The majority of parents (79.5%) reported that they were 'always or often' encouraged to talk about things that concern their child in school while only 6% reported that this 'never' happened. This encouragement was reported more frequently by mothers (82.1%) than by fathers (74.1%). Similar findings were reported for designated HPS (79.5%) and NHPS (79.6%) (Table 2). The observed differences were not statistically significant.

### Pupils

Similarly, the majority of pupils (83.6%) reported that their parents were 'always or often' encouraged to talk about things that concern them in school while only 3.5% responded that this 'never' happened. Girls (89.3%) were more likely than boys (78.9%) to report that parents were 'always or often' encouraged to talk about things that concern them in school. The majority of pupils in both HPS (86.6%) and NHPS (81.9%) reported that their parents were 'always or often' encouraged to talk about things that concern them in school (Table 2). Again, there were no statistically significant differences between groups.

### *Views on parental participation in school*

More than half of parents (58.7%) and the majority of pupils (69.3%) volunteered written answers to the open questions. Overall the answers given by parents and pupils were more similar than different to one another, though there were some important distinctions. Some views were based on direct actions to be carried out by parents and others suggested less direct actions, or actions to be carried out by schools.

### Parental participation in school; emergent themes

#### Parents

Some parents did not directly propose actions for parents' participation in school life. Nine (7.0%) reported that they were happy with the level of their participation in school (Table 3) and do not want any changes. Sixteen (12.5%) suggested actions that could be taken by the school to keep parents active in school life; most of these stated that the school should keep parents informed of school events or activities by sending or giving information about school to parents through information leaflets or newsletters, some suggested that the school should invite parents to take part in school or organise events to engage parents in school and one parent that school should engage pupils.

Table 3. Emergent themes on parental participation in school, views of pupils and parents

Theme	Shared	Pupils <i>n</i> (%)	Parents <i>n</i> (%)
Active actions for parents	Sort ✓	89 (55.6)	70 (54.7)
Happy with level of involvement in school	✓	18 (11.3)	9 (7.0)
Parents do not get involved in school	✓	16 (10.0)	9 (7.0)
School invite parents to engage	✓	7 (4.4)	16 (12.5)
Examples of how parents had participated in school	✓	7 (4.4)	4 (3.1)
Teachers to improve communication with parents		–	12 (9.4)
Examples of how parents had supported child		6 (3.7)	–
Non-specific responses	✓	4 (2.5)	6 (4.7)
Don't know	✓	5 (3.1)	1 (0.8)
Don't mind		5 (3.1)	–
Feel safe		2 (1.3)	–
Not clear	✓	1 (0.6)	1 (0.8)
Total		<i>n</i> = 160	<i>n</i> = 128

**Notes:** ✓, shared, similar views between parents and pupils; Pupils (*n* = 160) and parents (*n* = 128), number of pupils and parents who volunteered answers to the open question

Twelve (9.4%) parents suggested actions that could be taken directly by teachers to improve on parents' participation in school life; they highlighted that teachers should improve communication with them. The most common response was through regular parent-teacher meetings (e.g. '2-3 times per school year'). It was mentioned that this could help create an open-door system to their child's teacher and the school.

Four (3.1%) parents reported on how they had participated in school life by giving examples, which included; '*been involved in activities and going to school meetings finding out how they are doing*' (NHPS, Mother), '*we are presently taking part in child's schooling by activities such as 'maths for fun', Parents Association, etc. This not only means we get a feel for the school, but also for our child's friends, his teacher and how the school is run*' (NHPS, Mother), and '*already a member of Parents' council*' (NHPS, Mother).

Six parents (4.7%) did not give any specific description of how they would like to be involved in child's school; they indicated things like '*always*' (NHPS, Father), '*In a general way, if there is anything we can do to make life better, we'll be happy to take part*' (NHPS, Father),

*'whenever needed now and then'* (HPS, Mother), *'in any way'* (HPS, Mother) or *'any active participation'* (NHPS, Mother).

On the contrary, nine parents (7.0%) reported that they cannot take part in school (see Table 3); seven stated that due to pressure of work commitments they cannot take part in school activities; *'I wish I had more time to take part in my child's education. but my occupation does not allow this to be the case'* (HPS, Father); *'I would have loved to be more involved in my child's school but the timing/I work evenings and most things are done in the evenings'* (NHPS, Mother); one parent reported that she cannot take part due to work and also has a language barrier (NHPS, Mother).

#### Pupils

As with parents, some pupils did not directly suggest actions for parents' participation in school life. Eighteen (11.3%) pupils reported that they were happy with the level of their parents' participation in school (Table 3). Seven (4.4%) proposed actions that could be taken by the school to engage parents actively in school life; most of these suggested that the school could invite parents or organise events and activities to engage parents and two said they thought their school could send or give more information about the school to their parents by sending letters home with children or through telephone or text messages.

Four (2.5%) pupils gave no particular description of how they would like their parents to be involved in school; they responded by reporting things like *'always'*, *'sometimes'* or *'ok sometimes'* but five (3.1%) reported they did not mind how or when their parents take part in school, and they can take part when they like to or in any activities when they can.

Seven (4.4%) pupils gave examples of how their parent(s) had participated in school life; they stated that their parents had taken part in various school activities; *'My parents did the clean-*

*up in the school; My mum made costumes for a play*' (HPS, Girl), *'My dad took part in a shared reading programme 2 years ago*' (NHPS, Boy), *'My parents take part in my school; My mum and dad organised a 10K walk [charity event] for the school'* (HPS, Girl). In addition, six (3.7%) pupils gave examples of how their parents had supported them in school more generally, for example by talking to them about school and encouraging them to take part in sports and other activities.

On the other hand, sixteen (10.0%) pupils indicated that they did not want their parents to get involved in the school (two because it would embarrass them), while five (3.1%) pupils stated *'don't know'*. The remaining two (1.3%) comments were non-specific; pupils reported that having their parents involved in school would make them feel happy and safe.

A comparison between the qualitative responses of parents and pupils revealed that they had similar views on most responses not directly suggesting active actions for parents' participation in school. However, parents were more likely to point out the role of teachers and schools to improve parental participation in school life while pupils were more inclined to be happy with the level of parents' participation in school, state how parents had participated in school, and report that parents do not get involved in school.

Mothers suggested more frequently than fathers that schools should invite parents to get involved in school, while fathers reported more frequently than mothers that parents did not get involved in school life. Respondents from HPS schools reported more frequently than those from NHPS schools that they were happy with the level of participation of parents in their school and less frequently that parents did not get involved in school life. Pupils from HPS schools gave relatively more examples of how parents participated in their schools than did pupils from NHPS schools.

Parents who were positive about their participation in school (i.e. those who reported that they were ‘always or often’ made to feel part of their child’s school, encouraged to talk about things that concern their child in school or are involved in school activities) more often provided suggestions that were categorised into schools inviting parents to get involved than did parents who were more negative about their participation. Pupils who reported that their parents ‘always or often’ are made to feel part of their school more frequently reported that they were happy with the level of participation of their parents in the school and gave examples of how their parents participated in school life. On the other hand, pupils who reported that their parents were ‘never’ encouraged to talk about things that concern their child in school and those who were ‘never’ involved in school activities more frequently proposed active actions that parents could take to get involved in school life than did those pupils who were more positive about their parent’s participation.

#### Suggested direct actions for parents’ participation in school

##### Parents

Overall, 70 parents (54.7%) suggested direct actions on how they would like to take part in school life. The most common action proposed was that parents would like to take part in school by being actively involved in ‘doing’ school activities, which included ‘helping’ with school activities or ‘viewing/watching’ school activities; this was reported by 51.4% of the 70 parents (see Table 4). Fourteen parents (20%) indicated that they would like to take part in sports/games like physical education (P.E.), ten (14%) reported that they would like to take part in different school activities including baking, cake sale, book sale, arts, music and other extra-curricular activities, seven parents (10%) would like to go on school tours and three (4%) would like to participate in fundraising for the school and two (2.8%) in concerts/fun days.

Examples included: ‘*Help out when requested by teacher at activities and sports*’ (HPS, Father); ‘*Help out at busy times like concerts, fundays etc.*’ (NHPS, Mother); ‘*To be allowed view more activities*’ (NHPS, Mother), ‘*By helping out whenever to fund raise and promote our school in the local community*’ (HPS, Father), ‘*School tours, open night*’ (NHPS, Mother), ‘*More fun with sports related*’ (NHPS, Father), ‘*I would like to participate in the school tours*’ (NHPS Mother), ‘*Cake sale, sports day, school meetings*’ (NHPS, Mother).

Table 4. Sub-categories developed from active actions for parents, views of pupils and parents

Sub-category	Shared	Pupils <i>n</i> (%)	Parents <i>n</i> (%)
Parents take part by doing or joining activities	✓	35 (39.3)	36 (51.4)
Parents help with class work or learning in class	✓	11 (12.4)	9 (12.9)
Parents attend and watch activities, events or games		10 (11.2)	–
Take part in school activities – non-specific		–	7 (10)
Parents help with organising school activities		9 (10.1)	–
Parents take part in decision-making in school		–	4 (5.7)
Parents be part of school committees	✓	7 (7.9)	5 (7.1)
Parents take part in school – general	✓	4 (4.5)	5 (7.1)
Parents help children (e.g. with homework)	✓	4 (4.5)	3 (4.3)
Building relationships between parents and teachers <sup>a</sup>		4 (4.5)	–
Other	✓	3 (3.4)	6 (8.6)
Parents give support to children	✓	2 (2.2)	4 (5.7)
Total		<i>n</i> = 89	<i>n</i> = 70

**Notes:** ✓, shared, similar views between parents and pupils. <sup>a</sup>Parents to take the initiative

In addition, seven parents (10%) stated that they would like to get involved in school activities but did not describe any particular one (see Table 4). Five (7.1%) reported that they would like to be involved in everything or anything in the school; for example ‘*I would help in anyway necessary if I was needed in whatever the task may be*’ (NHPS, Mother).

Nine parents (12.9%) indicated their interest in contributing to learning in the classroom (see Table 4). They stated that they would like to help by interacting with their child’s class through

reading, maths for fun, and supporting teachers when needed; *'More interaction in class work and getting involved whenever possible'* (NHPS, Mother); *'more shared reading, maths etc. where parents come in and interact with your child is a great way of taking part in child's school'* (NHPS, Father); *'helping in areas such as shared reading, sports days; supporting teachers when needed'* (HPS, Mother).

Five parents (7.1%) indicated that they would like to be part of the parents' association and attend meetings; *'attendance at meetings, volunteering'* (NHPS, Mother); *'by being part of a parents' association'* (NHPS, Mother).

Four parents (5.7%) gave examples of how they can support or help their child, for example by, getting child more involved in school activities, encouraging child in school and being there for the child; three (4.3%) indicated that they could help with their children's homework; *'helping him with homework and get him more involved in school activities'* (NHPS, Mother); *'taking an interest in homework, helping my child and others'* (NHPS, Father); *'always encourage my child in his school life'* (NHPS, Father); *'just being for him where he needs me'* (HPS, Father).

Four parents (5.7%) reported that they would like to be involved in the school by taking part in decision-making processes especially as it concerns curriculum formulation and financial issues (see Table 4); *'being included in major decisions such as curriculum changes'* (HPS, Mother); *'in having a say in decisions that concern my child such as support needs and monetary issues'* (HPS, Mother); *'more involvement with the curriculum formulation'* (HPS, Father); *'monetary obligations that has no direct impact on studies'* (HPS, Mother).

Other examples of how parents would like to take part in child's school included *'would like to encourage a parent/student garden'* (HPS, Mother); *'to come and play games with her'* (NHPS, Mother); and *'listening to what happens and try and solve it'* (HPS, Mother).

## Pupils

In total, 89 (55.6%) pupils proposed direct ways that parents could take part in school life. Similar to parents, the most common suggestion was through participation in school activities. Thirty five of these pupils (39.3%) suggested that their parents could take part in school by doing school activities with them (see Table 4); thirteen (14.6%) indicated that their parents could take part by going on school tours; ten pupils (11.2%) suggested that parents could take part in sports and games, twelve (13%) proposed that parents could take part in activities like arts, baking, music, raffle or something fun. Nine (10.1%) suggested that parents could help organise or set up school activities or events while ten pupils (11.2%) said that parents could take part in school by coming to watch school activities and events or sports and matches (see Table 4); thus indicating that watching school activity was considered by pupils as taking part in school. Examples included '*I would like them to be able to watch more of our activities*' (HPS, Girl), '*I think our parents should go on our school tours with us*' (HPS, Girl), '*If they could take part in the sports day would make me feel happy*' (HPS, Girl), '*To do more activities, discos and play lots of sports*' (HPS, Boy). In addition, four pupils (4.5%) did not describe how parents could take part in school but to take part in everything or some things; they suggested things like '*I would like them to come in more and help out the school in general*' (NHPS, Girl); '*be part of everything they can*' (NHPS, Girl); '*join in some things*' (NHPS, Girl).

Eleven pupils (12.4%) said that parents could take part in school by helping with school or class work; '*sometimes come in and help the teachers*' (NHPS, Girl); '*I would like my parents to help us learn in school*' (NHPS, Boy); '*shared reading*' (NHPS, Boy) or '*reading*' (HPS, Boy); '*I would like my dad to teach us about lenses of glasses*' (HPS, Boy); '*help teachers, like being an SNA [Special Needs Assistant]*' (NHPS, Boy).

Seven pupils (7.9%) indicated that they would like their parents to be part of parents' association, be on school committees or have a say in school; '*I would like my parents to be part of the Parents' Council*' (NHPS, Boy); '*to take part in committees*' (HPS, Boy); '*they could help by taking part in the parents' association*' (HPS, Boy); '*I think they should have a say in things that we do, except in sporting events*' (HPS, Girl).

Four pupils (4.5%) suggested that parents could help them with homework while two (2.2%) indicated that parents could help their children by providing support for them (see Table 3); '*help me*' (NHPS, Boy), '*they can help me a bit more on homework*' (NHPS, Girl), '*supporting me at school at any time they can*' (NHPS, Girl); one pupil stated '*I would like my parents to be my teacher and my friend*' (HPS, Boy). One pupil stated '*I would like them to get me off homework*' (HPS, Boy).

Contrary to the views of of parents that teachers could improve communication with parents, pupils had a somewhat divergent opinion; four (4.5%) pupils suggested that parents could get more involved in school by building relationships with teachers through more communication or mutual communication. They responded; '*I would like my parents to write emails to the school*' (NHPS, Boy); '*I would like my parents to know the teachers better*' (HPS, Girl); '*to come in and talk to the teacher about stuff that she does not like*' (NHPS, Boy) and '*I would like my teacher and my parents to talk a bit more*' (NHPS, Boy).

There were three (3.4%) further suggestions on how parents could take part in child's school. This included '*by getting the Principal to make longer P.E.s [sessions of Physical Education]*' (NHPS, Girl); '*to come to school very often and to come and collect me*' (NHPS, Boy).

Overall, there were similar opinions from both parents and pupils on direct actions for parents' participation in school. A few divergent suggestions indicated that parents would like to take part in decision-making in school while pupils were more inclined to suggest that parents could

build relationships with teachers, help to organise school activities, and come and watch school activities or events.

## **DISCUSSION**

Findings from this study suggest that when asked in the same way, there was broad similarity between the views of parents and pupils on parents' participation in school life, and the various ways through which parents could participate in school life. The majority of parents and pupils from these Irish primary schools reported that parents were made to feel a part of school and were encouraged to talk about things that concern the child in school. Conversely, less than half of both parents and pupils stated that parents were always or often involved in school activities. Parents and pupils proposed more similar than diverse views regarding the best ways parents can be involved in school life. These findings illustrate a level of coherence between parents and pupils on issues related to parents' participation in school life, and suggest that children's opinions are relevant to matters that have to do with parents' participation in school.

These data illustrate the willingness and readiness of parents to participate in various school activities, and reveal that pupils were also inclined to be positive about their parents' participation in school life; a perspective previously documented in Flanders by Vyverman and Vettenburg (2009). Many parents indicated their desire to actively participate in school tours, sports and games with their children; this was corroborated by findings from children. Pupils would like their parents to take an active part in their every day school life, including play, sports, learning, activities and events. The importance of parents giving support to their children in nurturing their confidence and the psychosocial environment within which the children spend many hours of their day was also proposed. This study revealed that a greater

number of parents and pupils made more suggestions on how parents could directly become actively involved in school but fewer suggestions on how school could engage parents in school; this implies that both parents and pupils placed more emphasis on parents taking the initiative to get involved in, or connect with, the school rather than the school engaging parents.

Previous authors have highlighted the importance of parents' involvement in advancing the educational achievement and learning of children (e.g. Fan and Chen, 2001; Barnard, 2004; Lee and Bowen, 2006; Doucet, 2011). In the current study both children and parents suggested that parents could be involved in the learning process in the school, and that parents could help teachers with classroom learning or help children directly. It has been suggested that direct invitations from pupils to parents could encourage parental engagement but the implicit participation of parents in their child's learning, by volunteering to contribute to teaching or school work, may also emerge from parents' perception of children's educational need (Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 2005).

Both parents and pupils proposed that parents' participation in the school could include helping children with homework, or rendering educational and emotional support to children at home. These suggestion echo those proposed by Epstein in her 'Framework for Parental Involvement' (e.g. Epstein, 1995; 2011). It has been argued that a substantial part of pupils' academic achievement is attributed to parental support in home learning (Harris and Goodall, 2008); this is consistent with findings that suggest that parents' involvement in education, which includes assisting child with homework is positively related to pupil academic achievement (Mattingly *et al.*, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 2005; Van Voorhis, 2011). It may also be essential for descriptions of parents' involvement to comprise features of both home and school (Anderson and Minke, 2007).

As shown in this study, parent-teacher communication may be relevant to both parents and pupils to improve on parental participation in school (e.g. Epstein, 2011). There was some divergence of opinion on how communication could be improved between parents and teachers; pupils indicated that their parents should build relationship with their teachers while on the other hand parents suggested that teachers should take the initiative in reaching out to them, by improving on communicating with them. Previous studies have proposed that teachers' inviting parents to take part could contribute to increased parental involvement in school (Feuerstein, 2000; Epstein and Van Voorhis, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 2005). It has also been suggested that the involvement of parents in their child's school, for example, by networking with teachers or other school staff, can be a way of parents showing support for their child in school (Sheldon, 2002). The significance of the role parents play when they communicate with their child's school has been highlighted (Feuerstein, 2000). Findings from this study also highlighted that 'language' could impede parental communication and subsequently engagement in school. It has been suggested that inability to speak or write in English or poor literacy may represent a difficulty for parents' participation in communication activities in the school (Ingram *et al.*, 2007). Schools could mediate in cultural differences by organising language classes or events to assist parents in enhancing their language skills. Improvement in the quality and frequency of meetings between parents and teachers also emerged as a suggestion from this study.

The participation of parents in school formal operations (Byrne and Smyth, 2010) like contributing to decision making in the school (for instance, in curriculum development, or being a member of the Parents Council, which is a representative organisation for parents groups) was highlighted by some parents. However, children were more concerned with their parents being a part of the Parents' Association at their own school. This apparent disparity

may be a function of pupils' poor knowledge of the formal mechanisms within schools and parents' organisations.

Although some parents and children did not give a clear definition of how they would want to actively take part in school life, their responses, for example '*in everything*', '*generally*', and '*any way necessary*', identified parents and pupils' willingness for parents to participate in school. Also, some parents emphasised that although they run a busy schedule, they would like to be involved in their child's school life. Although, it has been suggested that the structure of work could influence parent involvement at school (Sheldon, 2002), the findings of this study imply that parents are very willing to take part in school in various ways; thus suggesting that schools could identify ways in which parents, even those who are fully employed or otherwise engaged, can be involved in school directly or indirectly; or that they could make more effort to work around the work-time schedule of parents in order to efficiently maximise parental participation in school (Harris and Goodall, 2008).

Respondents from HPS gave relatively more examples of how parents had taken part in their schools than those from NHPS. They reported more frequently that they were happy with how their parents participate in school and less frequently that parents should not participate in school. These findings corroborate and emphasise the goals of the HPS, which encourages parental participation in school, and underscores the importance of positive relationships between the school and the community. This study identified that only a few of the parents who did not report positive participation in their child's school made suggestions on how parents may actively participate in school. However, many parents who reported positive participation in their child's school mentioned possible actions for parents' participation in school. It has been proposed that the extent or frequency of parents' involvement in their child's school may be influenced by their '*motivational beliefs for involvement*', that is, if they perceive that their contribution at their child's school would be valued and appreciated, and

parents' contextual life characteristics (Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 2005). Taken together these both suggest that it might be useful to investigate further why parents who did not report positive participation in their child's school feel that way and to gather their views on motivational factors that could stimulate their participation in school life. On the other hand, pupils who did not report the positive participation of their parents in school more frequently suggested actions for parents' participation in school than those pupils who reported a more positive participation of parents; this may indicate that pupils could be encouraged to inspire parents' participation in school.

## **STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS**

The study participants represented both parents and pupils of different genders and school types (i.e. HPS and NHPS, urban and rural, mixed gender and single sex schools); this engendered a heterogeneous response to the study questions. Although there was no direct concordance between each pupil and parent participant, in each of the participating schools the parents who were invited to take part in the study were parents of pupils in the participating class groups and thus were situated within the same school and same wider community. The absolute numbers responding and the response rates achieved also add to the confidence that can be placed in the data collected.

While the overall response rates are acceptable, the valid response rate for parents may indeed be higher than 57.2% as it is possible that some pupils did not give the parental questionnaire to their parents. The question arises as to whether the parents who completed and returned their questionnaires were parents who were more involved in school already or if inability to read or write created a barrier to some parents' response; the survey used for the study was in written

form and self-administered. The non-responding pupils are those who were absent or for whom parental consent was not obtained, and these may disproportionately include minority groups or children living with social or health disadvantages. It is also important to note that most (72.2%) of the parental respondents were mothers rather than fathers, and thus there is most likely a resulting bias in the data collected and findings reported which may well be more relevant to mothers and those interested in improving the participation of mothers in school life. Nevertheless no systematic differences between mothers and fathers were identified and that almost 30% of responding parents were fathers is of note given the historic lack of paternal involvement in Irish primary schools.

The responses from this study were limited to short answers to open-ended survey (quantitative) questions; a more in-depth qualitative approach could have yielded greater understanding of the practical steps parents or schools could take to increase parents' active participation in school life. However, that would incur a substantially increased respondent burden and it would have proved very challenging to engage so many parents and pupils across a broad range of primary education settings.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study documents that Irish parents and children have a positive view on parental participation in school, and has highlighted various instances of parents' existing and potential participation in school from the perspectives of both parents and pupils. These examples could be of practical use for schools in promoting parental participation in school life, and could prove useful to those involved in promoting health education and health promotion in schools, and most specifically to those involved in training teachers and school Principals on how to address this dimension of becoming a HPS.

These data suggest that actions are required by multiple stakeholders in order to improve parental participation; this includes educational support services, schools and parents themselves. The examples provided could inform the provision of school support systems for increased parental participation in school (like the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) support service, which include the provision of in-service training, in school meetings or whole school seminars (SPHE Support Service, 2009). It could also be of potential use for policy interest on developing guidelines or strategies for parental participation in school.

In addition and as proposed by parents and children in this study, schools could explore more feasible partnerships with parents by encouraging actual participation of parents in every day school life including school activities and events. Parents could be invited to support teachers in the learning process in the classroom and schools could also provide assistance to parents to improve their engagement with child's homework. All these actions for parents' participation in school have potential benefits for promoting the interactions and connections between educational stakeholders, including parents and pupils both within and outside the school environment.

The findings from this study have illustrated the broad similarity of views of parents and pupils regarding parents' participation in school life. This suggests that in contexts where it is excessively challenging to gather data from parents directly, it might be valuable to consult with children to make suggestions with regard to parents' participation in school, albeit with the proviso that there is some divergence in their views.

Possible implementation of the proposed active actions for parents' participation in school could be useful to inform interventions on parents' participation in school. Nevertheless, gaps remain in our knowledge and understanding and it would be interesting to explore the views of younger and older children on parents' participation in school, in comparison to the age group

assessed in this study. Investigating parents and children's ideas on dealing with the barriers that hinder parental participation in school could also be beneficial, especially examining how best to engage with parents who have busy schedules but are willing to be involved in school life. In order to ensure the applicability of the findings presented here, it would be particularly useful to investigate whether the views presented here from parents and pupils are coherent with the views of teachers and school managements.

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### **About the authors**

Yetunde O. John-Akinola, BSc MPH, is a PhD Student in Health Promotion, School of Health Sciences, National University of Ireland Galway. She has Degrees in Physiology and Health Promotion and Education from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Her research interests include school health promotion and health promoting schools, children's participation, and adolescent and young people's health.

Dr Saoirse Nic Gabhainn, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in Health Promotion, School of Health Sciences, National University of Ireland Galway. She has Degrees in Psychology and Health Promotion from the National University of Ireland and the University of Nottingham, UK. Her research interests include child health and well-being, adolescent risk behaviour, health promoting schools and child participation in the research process. Dr Saoirse Nic Gabhainn is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [saoirse.nicgabhainn@nuigalway.ie](mailto:saoirse.nicgabhainn@nuigalway.ie)