

**Family Literacy:  
Developing a framework for practice**

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## Declaration:

I hereby declare that the material is entirely my own work and has not been submitted as an exercise or degree at this or any other higher education establishment. The author alone has undertaken this work unless otherwise stated.

Lána McCarthy

June 2017

## Abstract

### Family Literacy: A framework for practice by Lána McCarthy.

This study explores the experience of participants involved in three family literacy programmes in Ballymun, Dublin delivered by youngballymun. It looks at the concept of family literacy programmes and their role in combatting educational disadvantage in areas of socio-economic need. Family literacy programmes in Ballymun are delivered through a partnership approach between schools and youngballymun.

This qualitative research used a constructivist grounded theory approach. Data was generated and analysed through a systematic process of coding, categorisation and the development of core themes grounded in the participants' lived experiences of the programmes. The first research element was a questionnaire followed by ten qualitative interviews, which explored with the Home School Community Liaison Teachers (HSCL), and participants of the family literacy programmes their reasons for attending, their experience of the programmes and any changes in practice as a direct result from the programmes.

Five significant themes emerged. The first theme is "Barriers to participation" which describes a range of different reasons why parents can find it difficult to participate in family literacy programmes. The second theme "Overcoming barriers to participation" describes the approach recommended for teachers to engage parents from areas designated as disadvantaged. The third theme "Teaching-learning environment" describes the elements recommended to create a fun learning environment for participants. The fourth theme "Cultural shifts between home and school" describes the changes in participants' relationship with the school and their children as a result of attending the programmes. The fifth and final theme is "Transformational learning" which describes the changes in participants' lives as a result of their participation on the programmes.

These themes were developed into a family literacy framework for Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) teachers and family literacy teachers. The framework, summarised through the acronym SPACES, clearly describes key concepts needed to engage, retain, develop and support parents development of their children's literacy skills. The findings of this research demonstrate that family literacy programmes can bridge the gap between parents' knowledge and know how and the learning that occurs in the family literacy programmes can support parents, children, schools, and society.

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## Explanation of Terms

**Parental engagement (PE):** describes parents' involvement in their child's education, in school, at home or in the community.

**Evidence-based:** A programme, service or intervention that has consistently been shown to produce positive results by independent research studies that have been conducted to a particular degree of scientific quality.

**Evidence-informed practice:** A practice based on the integration of experience, judgement and expertise with the best available external evidence from systematic research.

**Families:** are used to denote intergenerational relationships where care is involved.

**Parent:** is used to describe those who have main responsibility for the child and is therefore not restricted to biological parents.

**Balanced literacy framework:** comprises the evidence based practice of a balanced literacy framework, i.e reading fluency, reading comprehension, writing genres and vocabulary development.

**The three Family Literacy Programmes:** under investigation are the Story Sacks programme, the Incredible Book Club and the Breakfast Buddies programme.

## Conventions

**Writing this thesis I have used a number of conventions which I will now highlight to the reader:**

The referencing system applied to this document is Harvard Anglia 2008

The organisation youngballymun is spelt with a lower case 'y' and is used throughout this document.

As per the authors preference 'bell hooks' is written with lower case letters.



## Abbreviations

DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Science
ETB	Education Training Board
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
GTM	Grounded theory method
HSCCL	Home School Community Liaison
ITABE	Intensive Tuition In Adult Basic Education
NALA	National Adult literacy Agency
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NIACE	National Institute of Continuing Adult Education
NLS	New Literacy Studies
NPC	National Parents Council Primary
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills.
ORIM Framework	Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction, Models.
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
VEC	Vocational Education Committee

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Literacy is a key component for children in unlocking their potential as lifelong learners. It opens doorways to participation both in the community and wider society. Literacy skills inform life choices and life potential. Without them, life opportunities and choices can be seriously hindered. Families who have literacy difficulties, unfortunately, face the increased certainty of the prospect of unemployment and poverty throughout their lives. When parents find literacy challenging, it is hard for them to support their children with their literacy skills. The 2012 Adult Skills Survey (NALA, 2013) shows the extent of the literacy problem among adults in Ireland with one in six adults having a significant literacy difficulty. Adults with literacy difficulties are more likely to become long-term unemployed, caught in the poverty trap and less likely to be involved in their community (OECD, 2011).

However, not all adults have literacy difficulties; some are just not aware of their role as the child's first teacher and are often put off by teachers' expertise. This is confirmed by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003, p.5),

"Differences between parents in their level of involvement are associated with social class, poverty, health and also with parental perception of their role and their levels of confidence in fulfilling it. Some parents are put off by feeling put down by schools and teachers".

For some parents, their knowledge of family literacy practice is based on their own childhood experience, parents always want to help their children but are sometimes unsure of exactly what to do and how to do it.

"Parents of every socioeconomic class and educational level have expectations for their children to be successful in school but often do not know how to assist with schoolwork or foster a positive attitude toward learning" (Epstein, 1991, p.266).

Family literacy programmes can bridge the gap in parents' knowledge and know-how, open doorways to new learning and transformed perspectives for both parents and children. Ferlazzo & Hammond (2009) claim that family engagement produces better results for students, families, schools and communities because it develops a relationship building process. UNESCO (2009) found that family literacy programmes were effective in improving child literacy and improving parent support skills. Family literacy

programmes have a range of additional benefits to the family, including improved social and cultural capital, and improved self-confidence (Swain et al., 2009). In light of the above, the aim of this research proposal is to develop a family literacy framework underpinned by best practices that will provide structure and guidelines to community and school partnerships involved in implementing parental engagement and family literacy programmes in areas identified with specific literacy needs. This framework will be informed by the authentic voices of participants attending the family literacy programmes in Ballymun.

In chapter 1 of this thesis the local context to this research and the balanced literacy framework, a framework that underpins the content of the family literacy programmes is discussed. The overall philosophy, principles and objectives of youngballymun family literacy initiatives is reviewed. This is followed by a description of the three family literacy programmes and how they are delivered in Ballymun, This discussion will include a few key elements of the programmes that are unique to their design, for example hugging books and free literacy resources.

### **The beginning**

In January 1999 I began volunteer tutor training with the local literacy service, and by 2005 I was teaching groups of literacy students and had become the Intensive Tuition In Adult Basic Education (ITABE) co-ordinator and the family literacy co-ordinator. In August 2010 I was employed by youngballymun in the role of Family and Community Literacy Development Officer. To fulfil this role I adapted and designed the three family literacy programmes under investigation for this research; the Story Sacks Programme, The Incredible Book Club and the Breakfast Buddies Programme. This allowed me to increase the focus, quality and time spent by families in supporting their children's literacy development using a balanced literacy framework.

## **Local context**

This research is set in the Ballymun area, a small geographical area in north Dublin. There are eleven primary schools in Ballymun, each one designated as disadvantaged in the Irish Government's plan for "Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools" (DEIS). Ballymun has a history of social, economic and educational disadvantage; the intergenerational cycle of educational disadvantage is prevalent among children and families in the area. Lack of parental education capital is a barrier to educational achievement for children in Ballymun. In a needs analysis study (McKeown & Haase, 2006), it was reported that two thirds of Ballymun mothers were vulnerable to poverty. Sources state that barriers to participation for parents in family literacy programmes can be dispositional and people from areas of socio-economic disadvantage, like Ballymun, are less likely to get involved in adult literacy or adult education classes (NALA, 2010; Gorard & Smith, 2007). The cultural capital of parents in Ballymun is of enduring disadvantage and poverty, making it difficult for parents struggling with the effects of poverty to prioritise the reading of a book or developing children's literacy skills. School, not the home, is often viewed as the place where learning happens (Lupton, 2006). Family literacy programmes that can address the barriers to engagement can bridge the gap in parents' knowledge and know-how.

## **youngballymun**

youngballymun is a complex community change initiative, jointly resourced by the Atlantic Philanthropies and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The Atlantic Philanthropies were founded by entrepreneur Chuck Feeney, who decided in 1982 to devote his wealth to the service of humanity. A champion of Giving While Living, Feeney has long maintained that people of wealth should use it to better the world during their lifetimes ([www.atlanticphilanthropies.org](http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org)).

youngballymun was set up in 2007 to drive the implementation of a series of evidence-based services and strategies for children and families in the community of Ballymun. youngballymun was set up as a Prevention and

Early Intervention Strategy that aims to improve the quality of life of children and families in Ballymun, through comprehensive programmes of intervention. It was designed as a systemic change strategy targeted at enhancing the learning and wellbeing outcomes of children and young people. youngballymun supports the delivery of a series of integrated services for children, young people and families across the lifecycle in an area of high social deprivation.

youngballymun's services, have been subject to independent evaluation, outcomes were tracked and monitored on an ongoing basis by the evaluation manager Dr. Gemma Cox. In 2016 youngballymun pioneered the innovative Performance Story Report approach to evaluating complex community change initiatives. All of the evaluation reports for youngballymun are available online at [www.youngballymun.org](http://www.youngballymun.org).

youngballymun and its service design partners developed the Write Minded Literacy Service to improve the literacy attainment of children and young people in Ballymun, through targeted literacy and language support, engaging with parents and by delivering teacher training. It aimed to develop strategies to integrate literacy practices in community organisations delivering out of school and after school services to young people. In response to the literacy needs of Ballymun children, a series of family literacy programmes was designed and adapted using a balanced literacy framework to engage and support parents to develop their children's literacy skills. In using this framework the evidence of what works in child literacy development was made accessible to parents. The balanced literacy framework is based on a synthesis of educational research (National Reading Panel Report, 2000).The framework focuses attention on what needs to be taught and on ensuring that children receive sufficient amounts of teaching in each area ([www.youngballymun.org](http://www.youngballymun.org)).

### **Balanced literacy framework**

The balanced literacy framework, as used by youngballymun, has been developed by Professor Timothy Shanahan, member of the US National

Reading Panel and Chair of the National Early Literacy Panel (National Reading Panel Report, 2000). These panels were established to review and synthesise research about the development of children’s literacy and effective reading instruction. The US National Reading Panel (2000) has found that instruction in three of the framework categories - word knowledge (including phonics, phonemic awareness, and word meaning), fluency, and comprehension - made a clear difference in reading achievement for elementary and secondary level students, and the fourth category of the framework - writing has been shown to be effective in previous research syntheses (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991).

The balanced literacy framework maps out the four domains of literacy teaching that require attention – reading comprehension, reading fluency, writing and word knowledge (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Balanced literacy framework**

The balanced literacy framework is not a curriculum with a set of required teaching materials. It is up to the teacher to design the content of the programme using the four elements of the framework, namely reading comprehension, reading fluency, writing and oral language. Current literacy research supports the use of balanced literacy frameworks in primary school provision (Eurydice, 2011; Pressley 2006). Skills and strategies in the classroom utilising a balanced literacy framework are of great importance for children in DEIS schools as its implementation requires a minimum block of 90 minutes of literacy instruction throughout the school day. A balanced literacy framework encompasses reading, writing,

communication and oral language, it recognises that young children engage actively, to construct meaning and make sense of the world ([www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)).

In using this framework in the design of the family literacy programmes, the evidence of what works in child literacy development was made accessible to parents. This developed parental capacity to support their children's literacy development. The youngballymun philosophy underpinning these literacy initiatives are:

- Parents are the experts and primary educators of their child, raising awareness of the important role of parents.
- Engaging with parents delivers positive outcomes for children.
- A good relationship between parents and their children is associated with a range of social, educational and psychological benefits.
- Engaging with parents as early as possible in the life of their child has the greatest potential to contribute to good outcomes.
- All youngballymun family literacy programmes use a strengths-based approach, recognising parents' life experience, identifying strengths, building skills, knowledge and the capacity of parents.
- All youngballymun family literacy programmes maintain responsiveness to family needs, varying family structures, diverse cultural and ethnic beliefs and practices and linguistic differences.

Parents working together with their children to support literacy and language skills can significantly contribute to children's achievement in school, social and emotional development and life outcomes ([www.youngballymun.org](http://www.youngballymun.org)).

### **Family literacy programmes in Ballymun**

There are three main family literacy programmes delivered by the literacy service as part of the overall community change initiative and as such will be a focus of this research. These programmes are delivered to parents of

children whose ages range from new born infants to 12 years of age. The three programmes are the Story Sacks programme, Incredible Book Club and the Breakfast Buddies programme. Each will be described individually in the following sections.

### **Story Sacks programme**

The Story Sacks Programme is an initiative to support parents to develop their children's language, literacy and learning through active engagement in reading and related activities and introduces the concept of "hugging a book" to capture children's attention and imagination. The Story Sacks programme is adapted from an original idea by Neil Griffiths<sup>1</sup>. It is a weekly course over eight two-hour sessions for groups of up to 12 parents held in the parent rooms in Ballymun primary schools. Parents are invited to attend Story Sacks through various parental engagement activities by the facilitator and the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) teacher, posters displayed in the school, flyers sent home in children's school bags and word of mouth from parents who have previously completed the course.

The weekly schedule of the Story Sacks programme is as follows:

- What is a Story Sack? Make reading exciting and fun, hugging books.
- Act it out: Developing vocabulary, how children learn new words, acting out words.
- Read to me: Using facial expressions, tone of voice and character voices, helping children become fluent readers.
- Sharing books: Taking turns reading with your child, using questions with stories.
- Looking at fact books together: Using fact books, extending learning to the real world, discovering information in a fact book.
- Playing games: Games and activities to help reading, writing and talking skills.

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Griffiths: <http://cornertolearn.co.uk/about-neil/>

- What did we do again? Finish making Story Sacks, review and recap about using Story Sacks.
- Celebration: Presentation of Story Sacks to children, celebration of parents' participation.

Over the eight weeks parents learn skills and strategies and develop resources to promote their children's language and literacy development and bring books to life informed by the balanced literacy framework. The programme uses oral language development strategies, a focus on developing key reading competencies and writing techniques as well as the creation of a Story Sack full of fun literacy activities.

The Story Sack is decorated with an image of the story book and includes materials to bring the book to life for the child such as puppets, games and flash cards. The materials are designed to stimulate language development and literacy or numeracy skills and facilitate the retelling of the story between child and parent. The Story Sack also contains a non-fiction book normally related to the story and supports the introduction of new vocabulary to children and can help children associate and learn about the real world. Each session follows a similar pattern of reviewing the application of literacy supporting techniques and approaches which have been discussed in the programme; introducing new techniques and approaches; and development of handmade, tailored resources to support the application of the techniques and approaches with participants' children. Over 8 weeks, parents learn a range of skills and in parallel, create a resource pack (the 'Story Sack') to encourage active engagement of both parent and child with the books, including a fact book, story book and various games to stimulate language development and literacy skills.

The introductory session of the course sets the tone for the whole programme. In this first session, parents are introduced to the concepts of Story Sacks, how reading can be made fun and the advantages this can offer to children. The facilitator creates a strengths-based atmosphere where everyone feels welcome and free to participate in a fun way. The

facilitator models to parents the approaches and behaviours that can be used in their interactions with their children. For example, a key objective of the programme is to generate a sense of excitement about books and a love of reading. This is demonstrated through the technique of hugging books. This encourages parents to develop their children's anticipation of, and interest in, books in the context of positive parent-child relationships. (youngballymun internal documents).

### **Incredible Book Club**

The Incredible Book Club is an initiative to support parents to develop their children's language, literacy and learning through active engagement in reading and related activities. It is a four week course where parents learn skills and strategies to bring books to life based and informed by the balanced literacy framework. It is an addition to the Incredible Years Parent Programme (Webster-Stratton, 2007). The Incredible Book Club is about reading books to children in a fun and interactive way and is based on a balanced literacy framework and also introduces the concept of "hugging a book" to capture children's attention and imagination. The programme uses oral language development strategies and has a focus on developing key reading competencies. It is a four week programme linking social and emotional skills with language and literacy skills.

The introductory session of the Incredible Book Club sets the tone for the four sessions. In this first session, parents are introduced to the concepts of reading books with children, how reading can be made fun for children and the advantages this can offer to children. It is linked with the concept in the Incredible Years Parent Programme of special time spent between parent and child. Each week of the four-week Incredible Book Club programme parents receive an Incredible Book Club pack which includes a good quality story book and literacy activities related to the book. Literacy activities in the packs include: a list of words for parents to act out with their children; questions to prompt discussion; a book review sheet asking children to say what they thought about the book; activity sheets to support language

acquisition. At each session parents will be encouraged to hug their books and a discussion will take place on reading books to children and the importance of fostering a love for learning and reading in the home learning environment. Parents take the activity pack home each week, read the book and complete the activity sheets together with their children. Each session after the first includes a review of the previous week's activities and books with parents to encourage reflective practice and the sharing of success stories (youngballymun internal documents).

### **Breakfast Buddies**

Breakfast Buddies is an initiative to support parents to develop their children's language, literacy and learning. It is a bi-monthly interactive workshop where parents learn skills and strategies to promote their children's language and literacy development. Each session is two hours long and has a specific literacy theme based on a balanced literacy framework (i.e. reading, writing and oral language). Advice and guidance is given on how to support learning in the home in a fun and manageable way. Sessions encourage interaction between parents and between parents and presenters. In addition, parents are supported in creating practical literacy resources to take away and use at home with their children. Parents are involved in literacy activities designed to help develop their children's language and literacy skills. Parents are personally invited by text message and/or telephone call. A database of parents is built through various youngballymun initiatives, and word of mouth plays an important role in engagement. Contact with Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) teachers and community organisations are also an important mechanism for encouraging participation. Facebook is also used to notify parents of upcoming Breakfast Buddies sessions.

On arrival, parents are greeted at the door by the facilitator, with whom they have a relationship through the Story Sacks programme or the Incredible Book Club programme. As Breakfast Buddies can involve large numbers of parents in attendance there is a number of staff from youngballymun

available on the morning to help facilitate the parent groups. The overall running of the Breakfast Buddies programme is overseen by the family literacy facilitator. Parents of children in primary school who have younger children are encouraged to bring along the younger children. This makes for a lively room with toys and books available to the parents and children. To engage the younger children in play activities there is an “early years corner” in the room which is staffed by an early years practitioner. Parents are asked to stay with their children at all times to comply with health and safety rules. youngballymun staff provide a friendly welcome, sit with parents and engage with the sessions by encouraging and extending ideas. Parents are offered a cooked breakfast roll, salad rolls, fruit salad, tea and coffee on arrival. Parents with older children in primary school and younger children not yet old enough to avail of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) free pre-school year<sup>2</sup> are often excluded from attending family literacy programmes as there are no facilities for child minding. This often results in parents being unable to attend any programmes until their youngest child is in school, resulting in these children not getting the benefit of interventions until they are much older. Breakfast Buddies has been able to bridge that gap by allowing parents to come with their younger children.

The room is laid out in ‘café’ style tables and decorated according to the theme, for example Christmas, Easter, Valentine’s Day, summer holidays etc. Parents sit eating breakfast while they engage in fun literacy activities that aim to support children’s literacy skills. Each session has a specific literacy focus based on the balanced literacy framework (i.e. reading, writing and oral language). The sessions have activities that are appropriate and engaging to the group and the free resources provided endorse the theme of the Breakfast Buddies session. Parents’ ability to support their children’s literacy development through everyday activities is fostered through a fun, caring and supportive environment. Guidance is given on how to support learning in the home in a fun and manageable way and parents are

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<sup>2</sup> The ECCE programme is an Irish Government initiative designed to give children access to a free pre-school year of appropriate programme-based activities in the year before they start primary school.

encouraged to reflect together on how the activities will work in their own homes with their children. Sessions encourage interaction between parents and between parents and presenters and makes for a lively, noisy morning. At the end of the Breakfast Buddies session parents are given a free pack of resources. These resources include the activities parents have already completed within the parent groups and parents are encouraged to go home and do the activities with their children (youngballymun internal documents).

**Table 1: Overall numbers of attendance at programmes  
Sept 2010 – Dec 2016**

	<b>Breakfast Buddies Programme</b>	<b>Story Sacks Programme</b>	<b>Incredible Book Club</b>
<b>Venue</b>	Community Based	School based	School Based
<b>Total number of courses per school year</b>	5	6	9
<b>Course duration</b>	2 hours per session	2 hours per session x 8 sessions = 16 hours per programme.	2 hours total per programme. 4 sessions per 30 minutes.
<b>Total Numbers of Parents Attended from 2010 -2016.</b>	Average 60 per session.	545 parents completed.	565 parents completed.

## **Principles of the programmes**

youngballymun states that the principles underpinning the three family literacy programmes are:

- Parents are the experts on their child and are the primary educators of their child.
- Parents supporting their children's literacy and language skills can significantly contribute to children's achievement in school, social and emotional development and life outcomes.
- A good parent-child relationship is associated with social, educational and psychological benefits.
- Engaging parents early in children's lives has the greatest potential to contribute to good outcomes.
- Responding to varying family needs, structures, cultural beliefs and linguistic differences.
- Proactive, seeking opportunities to engage parents and to develop and sustain relationships.
- Adopting a strengths-based approach, recognising parents' life experience, identifying strengths, building skills, knowledge and capacity of parents, raising awareness of the role of parents.
- Fostering parents' social and learning support for each other.
- Outcomes-focused approach with parents, providing services that parents view as meeting real needs, are helpful and relevant, setting mutually satisfactory and achievable goals.  
(www.youngballymun.com, 2015).

## **Key elements of the programmes**

There are four unique elements to the family literacy programmes in Ballymun. The first is parental engagement and the methods employed to encourage participation. Second is the teaching environment to encourage a participative approach. Third, the facilitation skills and the concept of hugging books that allows for the creation of a fun learning environment and last, free high quality resources to all parents attending the programmes to ensure skills supported in the programme are transferred to the home learning environment.

## **Parental Engagement**

As parental engagement in schools was identified as an issue by the eleven primary schools working in partnership with youngballymun, a new approach was needed to engage parents. I had worked for six years as a family literacy co-ordinator with the local literacy service and I had experienced success in engaging parents, albeit on a much smaller scale. I

knew from my experience that the tone of the programme and the way in which parents are engaged is crucial to the programme's success. I applied this knowledge to my new role in youngballymun by becoming a visible presence in the schools at various events, by talking to parents and building relationships with them. The time spent on building the relationship is crucial to the success of the courses. Once parents get to know who I am, the programmes seem less intimidating for them and they are more likely to attend. As parents attend and finish one programme, it is important to then move them on to another programme with similar objectives and principles to embed their new found practices. Most parents are initially engaged through the Story Sacks Programme or the Incredible Book Club and are then invited to the Breakfast Buddies Programme, which is a bigger setting where on average up to sixty parents attend. These progression routes are deliberately designed so that parents are involved in smaller groups in Story Sacks and the Incredible Book Club where they can grow in confidence in their abilities to support their children's literacy development before they are invited to the bigger community setting of Breakfast Buddies where they will sit, interact and collaboratively learn with parents from the community.

### **Teaching environment**

One of the first things to occur on the morning of any course is a cup of tea and a chat. This relaxes everybody and creates a nice homely atmosphere. During my training to become a group tutor and learning facilitation skills on various college courses in Waterford Institute of Technology, the importance the group contract and having group rules was always stressed. I never espoused to that! I always felt it was ridiculous to set rules and boundaries with adults who are volunteering to learn. As adult literacy teachers we are told about the bad experience our adult learners had in school settings, so why would I impose more rules and regulations upon them and compound those feelings of failure? I feel imposing rules would be detrimental to what I am trying to achieve. I want parents to be relaxed, so that they are open to new learning and new ideas and are willing to

implement them at home, therefore group rules and contracts do not have a place in the three family learning programmes.

### **Facilitation skills and ‘hugging a book’**

As the facilitator for these programmes I try to create a fun atmosphere where everyone feels welcome and free to participate. I model approaches and behaviours for parents that can be used in interactions with their children and I then coach parents to use the approaches. For example, to foster a sense of excitement about books and love of reading, the technique of hugging books is used to encourage parents to develop their children’s anticipation of, and interest in, books. This has a twofold effect on the learning group. Firstly, it acts as an “icebreaker” with parents laughing at the notion of hugging a book and, secondly, it makes them stop and think about their own child’s interactions with books and how through hugging a book their child might become interested in reading. Through my words and actions, I am modelling to parents that learning is fun and enjoyable and I am encouraging positive attitudes to learning for parents and their children. All of the family literacy programmes give parents opportunities to develop their children’s imagination, language skills and a love of learning to each parent’s capacity. Parents are encouraged to reflect on opportunities in their own home when they can engage their children in literacy development activities and to share them with the group each week as the programme progresses.

### **Free high quality resources**

I think it is important to highlight that the three family literacy programmes are well funded and include the provision of high quality free resources to parents attending the programmes. Story books, fact books, and art materials associated with making a Story Sacks bag are free. The four books and related literacy activities of the Incredible Book Club are also provided free. Breakfast Buddies and all of its literacy activities, books and a cooked breakfast are also provided free of charge. Providing these high

quality literacy resources ensures that parents are going home from the programmes with the “tools” to implement the new skills they have learned at the family literacy programmes. These free resources are a crucial part of the family literacy programmes’ success. Parents have told me that they enjoy being able to practice what they have learned in the programmes with their children and value and appreciate the resources.

### **Observations and concerns**

I have a deep affiliation for family literacy programmes because I can see the benefits the programmes can have for parents and children involved. I really want to hear the experiences of parents involved in these programmes and find out what has really worked for them and include it in an Irish family literacy framework. However, before I can begin this research journey I have a few observations and concerns that I need to address:

- My role as the developer and the facilitator of the programmes means I have insider knowledge of the programmes. Will that cloud my judgement?
- Will my role allow me to be objective in the research design?
- How will I ensure my own personal bias is kept in check during the research process?
- How do I ensure parents don’t tell me what they think I want to hear?
- How will I ensure this research is valid?
- How will I develop the family literacy framework?

In order to address these questions I need to be clear about my research question and objectives before I look at my research design.

### **Research question**

The aim of this research is to develop a family literacy framework based on the voices of parents involved, underpinned by best practices. This framework will provide structure and guidelines to community and school partnerships engaged in implementing parental engagement and family literacy programmes in areas identified with specific literacy needs. What

should the framework of family literacy be if based on the voices of parents involved in it? The need for more workable family literacy interventions supported by a coherent family literacy framework has been identified at a national and international level, in order to create a more just and equitable society (UNESCO, 2008). Children in marginalised sectors of society in Ireland are facing serious curtailment of their life opportunities because of limited literacy skills. The need for a coherent family literacy framework is driven by three key themes. Firstly, problems of children's literacy performance lie at the cross-sections between children's book reading and parent literacy. Secondly, the need for the creation and dissemination of high quality research to emerge as the authentic voice of parents within the sector, conducted by those within the sector and represented by them within the broader frame of the education landscape in Ireland. Finally, clearly identifiable elements and components need to be created within the teaching-learning environment of family literacy programmes that are focused on the unique characteristics and challenges faced by those practitioners working in the field of family literacy.

### **Research objectives**

The overarching aim is to explore how family literacy programmes can enhance parental engagement with children's literacy. The objectives of this research are to:

- Identify the elements and components of the youngballymun family literacy programmes that seek to enhance parental engagement and change the home learning environment.
- Identify characteristics of the youngballymun programmes that support literacy development for children within and outside the family literacy classroom.
- Identify specific components of the teacher /learner environment that are conducive to learning for parents in socio-economic areas of disadvantage.
- Study the role of family literacy in creating transformative learning spaces for parents developing their children's literacy skills.

- Develop an Irish family literacy framework using the authentic voices of parents attending the family literacy programmes.

### **Structure of the thesis**

In this introductory chapter I have discussed the local context to this research and the balanced literacy framework, a framework that underpins the content of the family literacy programmes. I have examined the overall philosophy, principles and objectives of the youngballymun family literacy initiatives and given a description of the three family literacy programmes under investigation and some of their unique aspects. This chapter ends with an observation on concerns this research raises and an introduction to the research question and the research objectives.

Chapter 2 introduces my philosophical position, to include my epistemological and ontological worldviews. I reflect on my beliefs on how adults learn to include education for liberation, adult education theories and learning as a social practice. I discuss my choice of methodology, constructivist grounded theory, and how this method is congruent with my beliefs on how adults learn and how the data should be collected.

Chapter 3 discusses the selected literature review when using grounded theory method. The role of parents in the Irish education system, funding for family literacy programmes and the ambiguous definition of the terms parental engagement and parental involvement in research is considered. Education inequality and forms of capital are discussed. The definition, design, rationale and deficit approach to family literacy programmes is discussed to include the role gender plays in who supports children's literacy development. Ecological systems theory as a framework that enables the family literacy teacher to be more holistic in their approach to parents is examined.

Chapter 4 explains my ontological and epistemological position, the methodology chosen, constructivist grounded theory and reasons for it. The

mixed methods employed in the research design are discussed to include an explanation of the design of the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Sampling approach employed for the generation of data and the issue of validity and ethical considerations are also addressed.

Chapter 5 describes the analysis of the questionnaire and a presentation of the findings under four categories: personal, social, educational and economic. Discusses the key questions identified for further investigation in semi-structured interviews as a result of the questionnaire findings. The analysis of the interview data, to include transcribing, initial and focused coding, using constant comparative methods, clustering, writing memos and theoretical sampling to support the discovery of the themes is described.

Chapter 6 outlines the themes that have emerged from the data as a result of the analyses. In keeping with grounded theory methodology, I will engage with the literature relevant to these emerging findings using the themes as my guide.

Chapter 7 discusses existing family literacy frameworks and introduces the family literacy framework SPACES, which is a direct result of the analyses of the themes.

Chapter 8 reviews the research question and research methodology and addresses validity. Discusses the development of the family literacy framework and how it evolved from the analyses of the data. The limitations of this research and recommendations for practice and for future research are discussed.

## **Chapter 2: Philosophical position**

Chapter 2 introduces my philosophical position, to include my epistemological and ontological worldviews. I reflect on my beliefs on how adults learn to include education for liberation, adult education theories and learning as a social practice. I discuss my choice of methodology, constructivist grounded theory, and how this method is congruent with my beliefs on how adults learn and how the data should be collected.

To ensure a strong research design, I need to examine my ontological and epistemological worldviews to ensure my research methodology is compatible with my beliefs and my interpretation of the world. The decision to use constructivist grounded theory method (GTM) was based upon three key reasons: firstly, my beliefs and understanding on how adults learn, to include historical and cultural settings. Secondly, my dual role as the facilitator and researcher of the family literacy programmes, to include my experience of living and working in an area of socio-economic disadvantage. Finally, constructing theory and developing a family literacy framework which will include the authentic voice of participants is the ultimate aim of this research. What should the framework of family literacy be if based on the voices of the parents involved? As an investigator I select forms and methods based on my beliefs and values on how I believe learning happens. The ongoing struggle for equality and social justice is a key tenet of this belief.

### **Education for liberation**

My starting point for my reflective journey on my ontological beliefs must be with Freire (1970) and the significant influence his book "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" has on my teaching practice. Freire used the term praxis to highlight the link between theory and practice in the pursuit of social change. Freire maintains that the struggle for equality and social justice relies on those most oppressed realising that they have the ability to transform society. Family literacy programmes can link lived experience to

critical reflection allowing parents to see new possibilities for themselves and their children. hooks (2003, p.6) in her book “A Pedagogy of Hope” talks about all education being rooted in hopefulness and that our actions, our cultures and societies are worth “living and dying for”. Freire’s and hook’s theories on learning form the foundation of my beliefs about education “for liberation” (Freire, 1970, p.53). Their theory of learning for equality and social justice is integral to my core beliefs as a family literacy teacher. They both agree that adult learners need to think critically about their worlds and be able to apply change for the benefit of themselves, their families and their community; it is something I aspire to.

### **Adult education theories**

The connection between learning theories and how adults learn is an important factor to consider when choosing a method for research in education. Theory is an individual understanding of how the world works. Our actions as people and educators are based on our understanding of the world (Brookfield, 2005). By looking at theorists and their theories of learning, I can begin to make sense of my meaning perspectives. In Mezirow’s (1990) theory of transformative learning, he states that we all have “constructions of reality or perspectives”. These perspectives are based on individuals’ cultural and life experience. How we see the world is a result of our perceptions and experience. Mezirow’s theory fits perfectly with adult learning experiences because adults will always bring their “constructions of reality” to classes and it is always based on their life experience and cultural contexts.

With regard to adult learning theories, Knowles (1970) and his theory of Andragogy (the science of teaching adults) is based on four assumptions that make the way adults learn different to that of children learning. Knowles stated that:

- Adults are self-directed learners; adults will learn what interests them.

- Adults will use their life experience and knowledge to form the basis of their learning.
- Adults are ready to learn for their social roles, adults can immediately apply learning.
- Adults have life experience and knowledge to hang new learning on.

### **Social learning**

New Literacy Studies by Street (1984, 1993) and Gee (2007) incorporate Knowles' theory of Andragogy, in that they treat language and literacy as social practices rather than mere technical skills. Their research requires language and literacy to be studied in real life situations, taking into account the different contexts and cultural settings. Street's view of literacy maintains that the cognitive skills of reading and writing are directly linked to social change and development. Social learning focuses on "learning in context" (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011, p.218). It is about how we learn. Auerbach (1989, p.177) advocates the use of a social-contextual model of family literacy. This model includes opportunities for parents to use literacy to address family and community problems. Subsequently, Barton and Hamilton (1998) found that literacy practices are culturally constructed and rooted in life histories of the participants and their communities. They contend that a historical approach to research supports the understanding of the culture and traditions on current literacy practices. In my practice I have found the influence of culture and society, and inequalities of provision and practice within the home learning environment all have a cumulative effect on literacy attainment in the individual and their respective families, so this historical approach to research fits well with my epistemology and my constructivist view of how adults learn.

Another theory on adult education that is based on social experience and transformative learning is that of Jarvis (2004) and his theory on adult education. Jarvis holds the individual adult, their experiences and interactions in wider society as central to his learning theory. This social experience includes culture which, according to Jarvis, is the knowledge,

values and beliefs of a social group. Learning, for Jarvis, is about living: everything a person experiences throughout their life cycle, including body, mind, and social situations. Each individual constructs their reality and learning from their life experiences, whether consciously or subconsciously, and time has a major but sometimes hidden role to play (Jarvis, 2012, p.134). This theory by Jarvis reminds me of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the role the parent and child relationship has on the development of the child to include the element of time or as Bronfenbrenner (1979) calls it the chronosystem. I will be discussing Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the benefits of viewing family literacy programmes through an ecological lens in Chapter 3.

Like Jarvis, Illeris identifies learning as based in a social context. He asserts that "learning is always embedded in a social and societal context that provides impulses and sets the frames for what can be learned and how" (Illeris, 2007, p.19). Illeris believes that all learning has three dimensions: the content and incentive which are linked to the acquisition process and the society dimension. Illeris describes content as being about what is learned: meaning, perceptiveness, being logical and fitting with the individual's worldview and their understanding of their society. The incentive dimension is the enthusiasm, feelings, attitudes and the act of choosing invested in the learning situation (Illeris, 2007, p.125). This theory by Illeris is very applicable to family literacy programmes because parents are incentivised to attend to support their children's learning, and it fits with parents' worldviews, as a parent involved in this research said "Who wouldn't want to help their child"? (Parent interview 4, p.17).

Learning for equality and social justice form the foundation of my theoretical framework and an understanding of adult learning theories can help facilitate a change in meaning perspectives. In the context of family literacy research, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) can play a role in understanding social systems and their effect on learning. Ecological theory proposes that the development of children and young people can only be understood by viewing it as taking place within the context of a

number of interacting social spheres. The interaction and experiences in the different social systems play a key role in whether young people thrive and reach their full potential or experience difficulties which have a lasting effect on life chances.

### **Constructivism and grounded theory**

Aligning my thoughts on social justice with my understanding of how adults learn has enabled me to further delve into learning theorists who I believe align with my underlying ontology and epistemology. These adult learning theorists are united in their belief that social and cultural contexts affect an individual's ability to learn and change their meaning perspectives. To further develop my research it was necessary to choose a method that was congruent to my beliefs on how adults learn and one that would allow me to be a part of the research process. My choice of methodology is further discussed in chapter 4.

Constructivism is a learning theory which states that individuals construct new knowledge through the interaction of their previous knowledge and the concepts and events that they take part in (Cannella & Reiff, 1994). Qualitative research using a constructivist design is used to investigate the "phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p.13). According to Charmaz (2014, p.13), if the researcher starts with the assumption that social reality is "multiple, processual and constructed" then the researchers "position, privilege, perspective and interactions" must be considered a part of the research. Having reflected on my epistemological and ontological beliefs for my theoretical framework I have chosen grounded theory method from a constructivist perspective as I believe it is consistent with my views on how adults learn.

Constructivist grounded theory method is an inductive approach to conducting research with the purpose of constructing theory (Charmaz, 2014). An inductive approach seeks to produce theory from the data as opposed to a deductive approach, which seeks to prove a theory that

already exists. The main difference between constructivist grounded theory method and the original grounded theory design of Glaser & Strauss (1967) is that the original requires the researcher to be a scientific observer and be separate from the data whereas constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) includes the researcher in the data that is collected. Charmaz believes that the researcher is part of the world that is being studied and the researcher constructs grounded theory through their past and present involvement with people. The researcher's social and cultural history, their experience, will be a part of the analysis of the data. Research from a constructivist's perspective is a meaning making activity where the researcher constructs an understanding of interest from the perspectives of those who experience it (Taylor & Cranton, 2012, p.58). According to Cresswell, meanings are numerous and vary from participant to participant leaving the researcher to look for the "complexity of views" (Cresswell, 2007, p.20). Constructivist grounded theory method takes what is real as problematic and moves the researcher into interpretive science by looking for multiple definitions of reality. It pays a close attention to discourse and action by looking at how experience is created and situations are acted upon (Charmaz, 2014).

My understanding of the phenomena, developing and delivering the programme, my perspectives on the socio cultural histories of areas of high socio-economic need all form a part of the theory that is developed. Constructivist grounded theory method takes into account that as the researcher I am not neutral in my approach to this study. As a teacher working in family literacy for seventeen years, I am bringing my experiences of family literacy programmes in areas of socio-economic disadvantage to the inquiry. My experience of living, working and raising a family in an area designated disadvantaged is my ontology, my view of the world. My perception of what is knowledge and how it can be understood through means of inquiry, my epistemology, has influenced this study. My decision to use a mixed methods inquiry within the constructivist grounded theory paradigm (Charmaz, 2014) is consistent with my epistemological and ontological beliefs and is further discussed in chapter 4.

In this chapter I have established my philosophical position by identifying my ontological and epistemological worldviews. I have reflected on my beliefs on how adults learn to include education for liberation, adult education theories and learning as a social practice. I have discussed my choice of methodology, constructivist grounded theory, and how I believe that this method is congruent with my beliefs on how adults learn.

### **Chapter 3: Initial literature review**

Chapter 3 discusses the selected literature review when using grounded theory method. The role of parents in the Irish education system, funding for family literacy programmes and the ambiguous definition of the terms parental engagement and parental involvement in research is considered. Education inequality and forms of capital are discussed. The definition, design, rationale and deficit approach to family literacy programmes is also discussed to include the role gender plays in who supports children's literacy development. Ecological systems theory as a framework that enables the family literacy teacher to be more holistic in their approach to parents is examined.

The role of the literature review in grounded theory is a contested element of the method (Birks & Mills, 2015) and is further discussed in chapter 4. The original core concepts of grounded theory are to limit exposure to the literature to minimize researcher bias (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I think as a researcher working in the field of family literacy and adult education it would be quite impossible not to have some prior knowledge of research in the area of family literacy. I have tried to overcome this by including this chapter as a selected literature review, clearly stating what I already know.

#### **Role of parents in Irish education**

Parental involvement in children's education is enshrined in the Constitution of Ireland or Bunreacht na hEireann (1937). Article 42.1 is the acknowledgement that parents are the primary educators of their children.

“The state acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children”  
(Government of Ireland, 1937, Article 42.1)

However, neither the state nor the Catholic Church allowed for parental involvement in schools until 1975 when parents were allowed on school boards of management but this was their only permitted role (O’Buachalla,

1988). In 1985 the National Parents Council Primary (NPC) was established under the programme for government as the representative organization for parents of children attending primary school and was made a statutory body in the Education Act 1998. This act underpins current structures and supports that enable parental participation in schools, parents now have the right to:

- Be a member of the board of management
- Establish a parents association
- Access to their children's school records
- Lodge a grievance against the school
- Be consulted during whole-school evaluations (Education Act 1998).

In 1990 the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (DES, 2005) was set up to “break down the barriers to access, progression and attainment within the education system” and later the scheme expanded with the Governments introduction of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS, 2005). The DEIS action plan for educational inclusion (DEIS, 2005, p.36) recognized the role of the family in children's literacy development and provided for a partnership between the Vocational Education Committees (VEC), now the Education Training Board (ETB), National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) and the HSCL teacher in providing “strategies for supporting learning in the home”. However, this definition appeared to be too vague and lacked clear guidelines for accessing funding for family literacy programmes. In 2010 the Department of Education and Skills published guidelines for family literacy providers to support the access to funding for family literacy projects. In this document, reproduced below, (DES, 2010) a clearer definition of both family literacy and family learning programmes is given:

**2.1 Family literacy, language and numeracy programmes aim to:**

- Improve the literacy language and numeracy skills of parents
- Improve parents' ability to help children learn
- Improve the development skills of young children and their acquisition of literacy, language and numeracy

**2.3 Family learning programmes aim to:**

- Develop the skills or knowledge of both the adult and child participants
- Help parents/carers to be more active in the support of their children's learning and development and to understand the impact of that support
- Identify opportunities for learning in the home and the community (DES, 2010)

As noted in the DES (2010) guidelines, family literacy and family learning programmes have very similar definitions with common aims. Both seek to develop parent skills, support parents to develop children's literacy skills and support parents to identify other opportunities for learning for their children.

The objectives for the Irish Government's National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020 aims to develop parents' abilities to support their children's literacy development. These objectives included provision for family literacy initiatives in disadvantaged communities. However, there is always a difference between policy recommendations and policy implementation and these differences can be found in the level of funding given to support the implementation of family literacy programmes. Family literacy provision accounted for 4% of all tuition hours in 2011 (Department of Education & Skills, 2013) In response to a question in the Dáil on family literacy programmes participation and costs (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2014), Minister for Education Jan O' Sullivan replied that in 2012/2013 2,804 parents participated in family literacy programmes' at a cost to the state of €271,900. As the annual budget for adult literacy is €30 million this represents an overall investment of just 0.9% in family literacy provision.

Another example of the vague and inconsistent treatment of family literacy can be found in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report on "education policies that work". This report highlighted the work of the VEC (now ETB) in adult literacy provision and stated that part of an initiative to tackle adult literacy was "A family literacy pilot scheme to address poor literacy from an intergenerational family perspective" (OECD, 2011, Section 2.4.8). It would appear from reading this report that the OECD is assuming that family literacy programmes, which began to receive mainstream funding in 2005 with the introduction of DEIS, is a pilot programme.

Despite all the research reports stating that family literacy can enhance children's educational attainment and develop relationships between school and the home (Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Desforges and Aboucher, 2003; Epstein, 2011; Sénéchel and Young, 2008), family literacy seems to have been forgotten in the current climate of the Irish Government's prioritising of their labour market activation policy. This policy seeks to return those receiving welfare payments to low paid jobs or education courses aimed at getting people back to work. The problem with this policy is that it does not address the underlying issue of educational inequality, poverty and unemployment.

### **Parental involvement and parental engagement**

While there are issues around funding family literacy programmes, there is also confusion amongst schools and the Education Training Boards (ETB) as to what is meant by the term parental involvement? Reviewing the literature, there are many different definitions for parental involvement; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997) define parental involvement as either home based activities related to children's learning in school or school based involvement which involves volunteering at school, parents committee etc. Pomerantz, Moorman & Litwack (2007) concur, defining home based involvement as school practices that happen outside of school, in the home, for example helping with homework and reading books, and school based involvement, which requires parents to make contact with the school, being involved on school boards or parents' committees. Hornby (2000) asserts that parental involvement is important because of the benefits it has on children's educational attainment and parent school relationships. According to Bleach (2010, p.4) "Parental Involvement or investment in their children's education begins with the birth of their children and appears to be never ending".

In their meta-analysis of parental involvement and students' academic achievement, Fan & Chen (2001) found many different definitions for parental involvement, among them: parental aspirations for their children's

academic achievement, parents' communication with their children about school, parent participation in school activities, and parents' rules at home relating to education. The definition of parental involvement is unclear and inconsistent, making it difficult to draw general conclusions from research studies, "because parental involvement subsumes a wide variety of parental behaviour patterns and parenting practices" (Fan & Chen, 2001, p.3). Further acknowledgement of the multifaceted definition of parental involvement emerges from Desforges and Aboucher (2003, p.12). In their literature review of parental involvement it is described as "a catch all term for many different activities." Desforges and Aboucher (2003) concur with Fan & Chen (2001) stating that it is difficult to assess if parental involvement affects school outcomes, as these outcomes are influenced by many different factors.

Epstein (2011, p.43) no longer uses the term parental involvement in her theory of overlapping spheres of influence. She argues that "school, family and community partnerships" is a better definition than parental involvement as it recognizes that there is a shared responsibility to educating children. Evidence based interventions using home-school collaboration have been proven to achieve changes in literacy attainment and school related behaviour (Cox, 2005). Research has confirmed that the partnership approach of child, family and school can determine school success (Epstein, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Family-school partnership models are different from parent involvement models because they use child focused approaches where families and professionals work together in the best interests of the child (Kim, Coutts, Holmes, Sheridan, Ransom, Sjuts, & Rispoli, 2012). Ferlazzo & Hammond (2009) claim that family engagement produces better results for students, families, schools and communities because it develops a relationship building process. Henderson & Mapp (2002) agree, adding that these engagement partnerships can improve children's literacy attainment, attendance in school, increase social skills and lead to improved behaviour at home and in school. Parental engagement differs to parental involvement by listening to parents needs about what is important for them and acting upon it.

Parental engagement builds relationships between parents, school and communities to enhance engagement in children's learning with the aim of improving educational outcomes for children. The three family literacy programmes under investigation engage parents through a partnership approach with families, schools and community settings. These settings influence child development which leads us to Bronfenbrenner and his ecological systems theory, a theory which supports the understanding of the family literacy teacher of child development.

### **Ecological systems theory**

Ecological systems theory focuses on the importance of direct and indirect contact across different services and settings in children's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 1997). Viewing family literacy from this model can be helpful at this stage, to set the context for the overarching framework of the programmes. Ecological theory suggests that the development of children is best understood as taking place in a number of overlapping and interacting social systems. The child is directly present in some of the systems, such as the home, school, and community and there are others which they are not directly involved but which can effect their development, such as their parents, siblings, peers and their social networks. Ecological theory also looks at influences from wider social systems such as historical, demographic, cultural and economic (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Children's learning is influenced by the home, school and community environments and the educational values and experiences of parents. By using the Ecological Framework, as illustrated in figure 2 (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 1997), the child and the child's parent are not viewed in isolation but in the context of their lived reality and the mitigating factors that influence that reality. For example the aim of the three family literacy programmes was to develop parent's skills in supporting their children's literacy development in the home, to then further develop relationships between parents, schools and the wider community for the benefit of the child whilst acknowledging the wider contextual factors influencing parental

abilities. These wider contextual factors can include low levels of literacy skills, poverty, depression, substance and alcohol misuse, unemployment, parent's previous bad experience in school, family cultural practices, homelessness etc.

Ecological systems theory has five levels of interactions (Figure 2) that directly and indirectly influence child development (Weiss et al., 2014):

**Microsystem:** Represents the immediate setting in which the child interacts: the home, school, community and the people in the settings: parent, friends, teachers.

**Mesosystem:** This level represents the interactions and relationships between the individuals and settings that make up the microsystem: relationships between child and parent, parent and teacher, community and parent.

**Exosystem:** This level is comprised of indirect influences on a child's development, for example, the recent cuts to social welfare payments can deprive parents of the choice of being able to buy a book for their child, thus impacting on literacy levels.

**Macrosystem:** This level operates at the broadest level of influence and makes up the political system, social policy, welfare entitlements etc. With the recent austerity measures in place in Ireland, cuts to social welfare payments seriously hinder parents' ability to feed, clothe and provide educational supports for their children (Swords et al., 2011).

**Chronosystem:** This level represents the element of time in the child's life course. Children from socio-economic areas of disadvantage can experience difficulties in their development due to the factors present in the macrosystem, such as poverty, homelessness etc. These factors and the length of exposure to them, can greatly hinder children's' development and their future life chances. (Ballymun Needs Analysis, 2006)



**Figure 2: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory**

Utilising ecological systems theory within an overall family literacy framework enables professionals to be more holistic in their approach to children and parents as there is a greater understanding of circumstances and environmental contexts that may apply (Gill & Jack, 2007). While not all families will be engaged because there are many barriers to engagement,

applying the ecological framework, however, allows for the work of family literacy to be viewed through a series of “lenses” which ensures reflective practice and situates family-school relationships in the context of language, literacy and societal contexts.

### **Habitus and forms of capital**

Knowledge construction and how it is replicated in the social world, is an interesting area to look at in relation to the three family literacy programmes. Bourdieu (1989) affirms that visions of the world are constructed by society. However, he contends that they are carried out under “structural constraints” which he calls habitus. Habitus is created unconsciously through social processes; the social world is internalized and is often accepted as how things are or as Bourdieu states “a world that seems self-evident”. We are predisposed to act, think, believe and feel according to our habitus (Grenfell, 2008). Habitus is formed according to a person’s class position and therefore suggests a “sense of one’s place” and also a “sense of the place of others” (Bourdieu, 1989, p.19), which can lead to “inertia” or the reproduction of structures encountered in early experience (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.133).

In relation to the three family literacy programmes, a parent’s habitus in relation to literacy practices in the home can be culturally embedded, for example a sense of inertia could be a barrier to participation. As this parent explained,

“The very first day I went in I was absolutely mortified. I didn’t know who was going to be there. What was it going to be about, what I was going to be asked? Will any of my flaws come to light in Story Sacks, about parenting and what I didn’t do with my child” (Parent interview 1, p.2).

The social world and knowledge construction is therefore influenced by “accumulated history” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.84) and cannot be understood without knowledge of capital and its effects on the social world. Capital, according to Bourdieu can be economic, social and cultural. Applying the forms of capital to education can convey certain rights to members of social classes in different ways. For example, having access to economic capital ensures that resources are available to pay for school trips, school

uniforms, school books, private tuition or grinds. Access to social capital ensures entry or membership of the best schools, colleges and social groups that can often confer future social and economic capital. Cultural capital is access to books, educational credentials, and a certain style of dress or the right accent that lends itself to acquisition of social and economic capital. Becker (2002, p.292) adds human capital to the forms of capital and says it is the most crucial form of capital in today's societies: "Human capital refers to the knowledge, information, ideas, skills and health of individuals". A lack of forms of capital is hard for some parents, as this parent explains. "I left school when I was 15 so I hadn't got a clue what to be doing with my son or how to be speaking different words to my child" (Parent interview 4, p.9).

Royal (2011) maintains that investing in adult education enhances human capital. This investment increases the skills and educational credentials of individuals and increases the chances of employability, which in turn leads to further acquisition of social, cultural and economic capital. Coleman (1988) discusses "family social capital", both in the family and community as enhancing human capital. Coleman argues that family social capital is crucial for children's intellectual development, based on the relationship between parents and children (Coleman, 1988, p.110) and between parents, children and institutions. Looking at the different forms of capital and the different effects capital acquisition can have on a family; it is easy to make links with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. How much or how little capital a family has can and does affect the system of the family and its interactions with the world. In Ireland today the "social space" of habitus, the structures and order of the social setting or the field (Grenfell, 2008) is accepted as the way things are, even when people are disadvantaged by it. Bourdieu calls this "symbolic violence" (Grenfell, 2008, p.184). The Irish Government's current neo-liberal policies lead to symbolic violence, where individuals are blamed, or blame themselves for their own suffering, whilst the role of society is hidden (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2000). In relation to the three family literacy programmes, symbolic violence is an interesting concept to consider. Empowering parents to reflect on their

habitus, supporting them to reject “the way things are” might lead them to see new possibilities for themselves and their children and could lead to a more just and equal society.

### **Education and inequality**

Equality in education is an essential human right, a right that allows access to other rights, to include economic, health and well-being (Baker et al., 2009). Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1948) declares education as a basic human right. Article 29 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1992) proclaims that education should support the development of children’s full potential, respect for human rights, equality and cultural identities. Educational inequality in Ireland perpetuates educational disadvantage, which is defined in the Education Act (1988) as “the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools” (Government of Ireland, 1988, Section 32: 9).

In today's global economy, education has become a commodity. Current education policy promotes human capital theory (Lauder et al., 2006). Human capital (Becker, 2002) consists of the educational credentials of employees, subject to the requirements of employers leading to public investment in training and education for increased productivity. Royal (2011) maintains to enhance human capital, investment in adult education is required by both individuals and the state. Human capital theory according to O’Brien & Fathaigh (2007, p.594) promotes “a discourse of individualism, employability and self-improvement”. Education is promoted as a contribution to a more “just society”, “fairness”, “equal opportunity” and “partnership”. Education embraces the meritocratic idea that “all can succeed” ignoring the fact that education reproduces social and cultural inequalities (O’Brien & Fathaigh, 2007).

Educational success is reliant on access, participation and economic resources; a person’s ability to attend college for example depends on

access to economic resources as Baker et al. (2009, p.144) state schools and colleges “are major institutions of selection and stratification of the labour market, they mediate life chances within the economy”. Limited access to economic resources leads to barriers to educational attainment and social exclusion, particularly for children and young people from areas of socio-economic disadvantage (Basic Skills Agency, 2002 & Ofsted, 2007). People who experience social exclusion face a number of barriers to full participation in society.

“Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities available to the majority of people in a society. Whether it is economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole” (Levitas et al., 2007, p.9).

Smyth & McCoy’s (2009, p.10) research on combatting educational disadvantage found statistically significant differences in educational attainment between children from areas of socio-economic disadvantage and their middle class peers. Some of the causal factors cited in their research were “parental economic, social and cultural resources” and “Interaction between home and school”. Feinstein et al. (2004) found that influences on children’s educational attainment included parental education and income. A parent involved in this research spoke about her poor reading skills and how it affected her

“I was not very confident about reading out loud and I’d read little books that had five or six pages and that had four or five words on each page but I wouldn’t like to read a whole story. I had no confidence in myself” (Parent interview 3, p.4).

Gorrard and Smith (2007) highlight how low levels of participation in higher education from socio-economically disadvantaged groups can be related to economic factors. Walker et al. (2013) in their research on poverty and shame found that people who became trapped in poverty had limited skills and a lack of opportunities. This perpetuated feelings of shame amongst children and their families:

“At home, children’s reference points were limited such that the experience of extreme poverty sometimes seemed normal. School broadened horizons but the stark differences it exposed were a source of shaming: smartly dressed or not, more than one uniform or not, hungry or not, pocket money or not, calculator or not, the list was endless” (Walker et al., 2013, p.226).

There is no doubt that deficits in human, economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Lauder, 2006) have a devastating effect on children and adults educational attainment and their ability to participate. “I didn’t know what family learning was. I didn’t know I could better myself and bettering myself would better my children, I never understood that” (Interview 3, p.5). Equality in education is crucial to enable individuals to exercise freedom, choice and the ability to respond to inequalities in their lives. Education is vital if individuals are to reach their full potential, to fully participate in society, both culturally and socially and to gain educational credentials to ensure access to employment (Baker et al., 2009).

Ireland’s current economic climate has increased poverty rates and homelessness among the most vulnerable of our society. The child poverty rate in Ireland rose by over 10% to 28.6% between 2008 and 2012, with an increase of 130,000 children living in poverty in Ireland (UNICEF, 2014). The Irish governments cuts to rent allowance, lone parent payments, children’s allowance, and back to school allowance is reinforcing economic and educational inequalities, in effect it is state sponsored inequality.

### **Defining family literacy**

The term “family literacy” was first used by Denny Taylor (1983) to describe literacy practices she observed in middle class families that supported children’s literacy development and the vital importance of these practices. Speaking of the children in the study, Taylor (1983, p.89) describes how they learned to read and write “in liberating ways; literacy allows them to participate fully in the social system of which they are a part”. According to Sticht (2011), recognizing the need for parents to provide rich home learning environments can be traced back to 1908 and Edmund Burke Huey who called for parents to assist children’s learning in the home. Sticht (2011, p.36) further asserts that “literacy follows oracy, so parents who foster their young children’s listening, speaking, vocabulary and knowledge are also fostering success in school”.

Definitions of family literacy vary across sectors and can be clearly linked to the programmes’ desired outcomes; however, the unifying element amongst

all the definitions is the relationship between parent and child and the crucial learning opportunities this relationship represents in a child's formative years. Hannon (1999) states the term family literacy is more inclusive than parental involvement and is used to convey that families have pre-existing family literacy practices. Similarly González, Moll and Amanti (2005) highlight that working class families have already many literacy practices in their homes which they call "funds of knowledge". UNESCO (2008, p.5) refers to family literacy as literacy practices within families that include, "the intergenerational transfer of language and literacy from parents to their children". Similarly, Nutbrown, Hannon & Morgan (2005, p.19) define family literacy programmes as "programmes to teach literacy that acknowledge and makes use of learners' family relationships and engagement in family literacy practices". NALA's definition has a twofold effect, firstly, addressing the adult's literacy needs and secondly the ability of the adult to support the literacy needs of the child'. "Family literacy programmes aim to provide support for family members who want to develop their own literacy and numeracy skills, while helping their children's education" (NALA, 2004, p.9). The Ontario Literacy Coalition in their research (2010, p.3) on family literacy initiatives in Canada define family literacy as

"The development and use of literacy skills in a family's daily life, including how families: use literacy skills in their everyday tasks, help their children develop literacy skills, get involved in their children's education, and use literacy to maintain relationships with each other and with their communities".

This definition encompasses an ecological perspective, reflecting on the lives of parents and children and situating them within their communities and the ensuing relationships that evolve and develop around the child.

Family literacy programmes focus on the learning opportunities and the relationships between children and their parents viewed through a sociocultural lens. Parents represent the first crucial system for children's learning and development (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) and therefore literacy practices in the home are crucial to a child's early cognitive and language development.

The three family literacy programmes under investigation are defined as Family Literacy Programmes. These programmes are universal in approach; this means that anyone can access the programmes irrespective of their educational attainment or employment status. Family literacy as defined by youngballymun (2015) refers to the development and use of literacy skills in a family's daily life by:

- Supporting parents to develop their family literacy skills
  - Supporting families to look for opportunities to use literacy in their everyday lives
  - Supporting parents to develop their children's social and emotional development and literacy skills
  - Supporting parents to get involved in their child's school and education by recognizing their role as their child's first teacher.
- (youngballymun, 2015)

### **Rationale for family literacy programmes**

Parents' social, cultural, economic and human capital (Bourdieu, 1986) can affect their ability to traverse the educational system successfully. Families living in socio-economic areas of disadvantage often do not have the required social and cultural capital valued by the dominant middle class society and schools and therefore have less information about school policies and structures and as a result are less likely to get involved with the school (Weiss, Bouffard, Bridglall, Gordon, 2009). The difference between the language used at home and school can also be a divide as Cregan (2008, p.20) states

“... Evidence also points clearly to the link between this difference in language variety and social class, indicating that the language demands of the school much more closely approximate standard language use, the variety most familiar to middle-class children”.

Literacy is an essential skill that children need to do well in school and to reach their full potential; unfortunately children in need of education capital are least likely to have access to it. In relation to their parenting and early home literacy practices, many families affected by poverty and living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage are victims of the Matthew Effect (Stanovich, 1986), meaning those that often need support the most, don't actually gain access to the programmes. There are many reasons why this happens and one of those is the deficit approach and language used to

describe the “hard to reach parent”. These parents have no exposure to parenting practices and experiences that are validated by the hegemonic culture (Gordon, 2005) resulting in some parents from socio-economic backgrounds “get poorer” whilst their middle class peers capitalize on their knowledge of these practices to the benefit of their children and “get richer”.

The effects of low levels of literacy can be far reaching into a child’s life; the poverty gap in education can affect future chances of employment, with the OECD (2007) stating that educational qualifications affect employability more in Ireland than in any other OECD countries. A recent report undertaken by the ESRI for NALA (Kelly, McGuinness & Connell, 2012)<sup>3</sup> found that adults in employment and struggling with literacy difficulties had reduced earnings by 4.6% and for females in part time employment this rose to 6.3%. Research has shown that children growing up in poorer families can have lower levels of educational attainment; Goodman & Gregg (2010) found that by age three the gap in cognitive test scores between children in poor families compared to their more affluent peers was significant. Feinstein (2003) found evidence that poor learning environments impact children’s cognitive and language skills, with Hart & Risley (2003) estimating that children living in poverty in the first four years of their lives will hear 30 million words less than a child from a more affluent family. Mothers experiencing poverty and deprivation have higher levels of depression and research has shown the effects these issues have on their children “with language and cognitive problems, poor social skills, behavioural problems in infancy and early childhood” (Maggi, Irwin, Siddiqi & Hertzman, 2010, p. 631).

Socio-economically disadvantaged families are less likely to be involved in learning at home or in school due to many contextual factors and barriers caused by poverty, disadvantage, inequality, negative experiences of

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<sup>3</sup> This study uses data from an employer-employee linked dataset, the October 2006 National Employment Survey (NES), to assess the impact of literacy and numeracy difficulties on employees’ earnings.

previous schooling, to name but a few. Desforges and Aboucher (2003, p.5) states that

“Differences between parents in their level of involvement are associated with social class, poverty, health and also with parental perception of their role and their levels of confidence in fulfilling it. Some parents are put off by feeling put down by schools and teachers”.

Research affirms that parents with no confidence in their abilities will avoid contact with the school and that parents' previous experience of school, if it was negative, will hinder their willingness to get involved (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hornby & Lafaele 2011). Poverty can restrict parents' abilities to provide educational opportunities for their children leading to social exclusion and barriers to educational attainment (Basic Skills Agency, 2002; Ofsted 2007).

### **Family literacy programmes**

Family literacy programmes are effective in improving child literacy skills and improving parental involvement (UNESCO, 2009). However, not all family literacy programmes are the same and therefore consideration should be given to the design of the three family literacy programmes under investigation. As discussed in Chapter 1, the balanced literacy framework (National Reading Panel Report, 2000), underpins the design of the family literacy programmes. This framework maps out the four domains of literacy teaching that require attention – reading comprehension, reading fluency, writing and word knowledge. These four domains are structured within a wider set of principles rooted in research, about what works to maximize children's literacy learning in school, including time on task, curriculum, teacher development, parents and community engagement. According to Stevens (2004) the most successful literacy programmes will have a combination of written, visual and oral activities for children's literacy development.

The engagement of parents is crucial to the success of family literacy programmes. Involving parents in a fun learning environment empowers parents in the school context by involving them in their child's education.

Pomerantz et al. (2007, p.400) maintains that supporting parents to develop skills to support their children's literacy development helps parents "feel equipped to deal with the challenges of school". However Auerbach (1989, p.177) cautions using family literacy programmes to "transfer school practices to home contexts" and advocates the use of a social-contextual model of family literacy. This model includes opportunities for parents to use literacy to address family and community problems, a collaborative learning support for parents in addressing child rearing concerns, supporting the development of the home learning culture and opportunities to interact with the school system.

The design of the family literacy programmes is founded on a strengths based approach. Ballymun parents are viewed as valuable resources for their children's learning and a valuable part of the child's ecological system of support. A relationship of trust and mutual respect between the family literacy teacher and the parents helps raise participation rates (Weiss et al., 2009). Culturally responsive teachers make and build relationships with their students as individuals whilst understanding the sociocultural context of the lived environment (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). A pedagogical approach to family learning is summarized by Lamb et al. (2009, p.5) as:

- Promotes the family as a learning environment
- Builds on home culture and experience
- Encourages participatory learning
- Promotes learning as a change in, or affirmation of skills, attitude and knowledge
- Promotes family relationships as supporting well-being and readiness to learn
- Promotes a culture of aspiration in adults and children
- Gives opportunities and builds confidence to try out new skills and ideas  
(Lamb et al., 2009, p.5)

The design of the family literacy programmes incorporates the social contextual model and an ecological perspective. According to Maggi, Irwin, Siddiqi, and Hertzman, (2010), by the age of four, children's development has been influenced by three levels of society: family, community and the broader societal level. The broader societal level includes national wealth and the distribution of income, employment and attitudes towards parents and children. Poverty limits parents' ability to provide educational materials

that children need for their cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional development (Weiss et al., 2009). To overcome this barrier, parents engaged in these 3 family literacy programmes were supported to enhance their family literacy skills with new ideas for fun learning activities and supplied with free resources to go home and practice the activity with their children. Morrow (2003) suggests that providing resources and materials to be used at home supports the programmes' effectiveness. Stevens (2004) concurs, advocating that providing resources to parents creates a literacy-rich environment at home which is conducive to learning.

### **Deficit approach to family literacy**

Literacy practices were defined by Street (2003) as social practices related to reading and writing and "the broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts" (Street, 2003, p.79). Barton & Hamilton (2000) define literacy as a social practice and process that connect people; literacy is best understood as "existing in relations amongst people, within groups and communities". Language and the ability to communicate amongst people, groups and communities should also be considered as a literacy practice. Language and power according to Gee (1990) is situated within power-laden cultural, historical and institutional settings. It is a social construct, where children acquire social norms and fulfil social expectations (Gee, 1990). Parental engagement within schools and family literacy programmes can be viewed as being situated in a power-laden relationship. Research around the roles of parents in schools undertaken by Lightfoot (2003) found that parental involvement in schools had multiple meanings and was inhibited by the assumptions that are made around marginalized families. Parents were often viewed as obstacles to be overcome rather than a resource for their child's literacy development. Auerbach (1989, p.165) in her research "critically analyses those family literacy programmes that focus on teaching parents to do school-like activities in the home and to assist children with homework". She argues that these programmes are based on a "deficit hypothesis which assumes that the parents lack the essential skills to

promote school success in their children”. New Literacy Studies (NLS) maintain all families have a range of family literacy practices already embedded within their home environments. If schools do not value parents’ “funds of Knowledge” (González et al., 2005) then “the powerful in society whose hegemonic definition of what counts as literacy goes unchallenged” (Nutbrown et al., 2005, p.27).

A targeted approach to family literacy programmes can also be viewed as a deficit approach. Programmes that can only be availed of by adults with limited literacy skills create a two-tiered approach to family literacy. These targeted programmes claim to break the cycle of intergenerational literacy disadvantage by supporting parents with literacy difficulties, and supporting children of those adults with literacy difficulties. According to Hannon (1999), targeting programmes only to parents who have literacy difficulties can only make a small contribution to reducing literacy inequalities among young children. In my opinion targeting parents for family literacy classes labels them and their children as not being adequate and is just creating another barrier between the school and the parent. Unfortunately, deficit models of people and communities can pervade today’s neo-liberal Ireland where inequality, rights and collective responsibility have been replaced with individual responsibility and blame (West, 2005). The challenge to family literacy programmes and practitioners is to value the skills families bring to the programmes and build upon them. Every parent must be viewed as a resource to their child. Applying the ecological systems theory within an overall family literacy framework might be a way of addressing the deficit approach and replacing it with a strengths based approach where every parent is viewed as a resource to their child, whatever their starting point may be. This approach may lessen the effects of the inequalities present in the Irish education system.

## **Gender**

This research was carried out with participants on the three family literacy programmes: Story Sacks, Breakfast Buddies and the Incredible Book Club.

There were N=35 respondents to the questionnaire and N = 10 respondents to the invitation for an interview. All of the respondents were female. This is not to say that there is no male participation on the programmes. A small percentage of participants on the programmes are male. It does however require investigation to see if this is a normal occurrence across family literacy programmes in Ireland and perhaps abroad. If it is a normal occurrence what does the research say about it?

In a review of the research papers on parental involvement, I realised that in many instances the gender of participants is not disclosed (Hartas, 2010; Kim et al., 2012; Desforges & Aboucher, 2003; Fan & Chen, 2001; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Hannon, 1999; Auerbach, 1999; Pomerantz et al., 2007). There are also many reports that cite mothers' impact on educational achievement (Goodman & Gregg, 2010; Nixon, 2012; Mistry et al., 2009). I could find no research specifically mentioning men in terms of children's educational achievement, although I presume their influence was labelled under "parents". According to Nutbrown et al. (2005, p.20) the definition of family is "to include the full range of groups within which children are cared for and grow up". However, Timmons (2008, p.97) asserts that "family in family literacy is gendered and refers to a maternal caregiver". Hegarty & Feeley (2010) agree, stating that it is usually the mother who is prescribed the role of literacy teacher. Gorrard & Smith (2007) concur, adding that women's future plans for career and education are often put on hold to support children.

Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997, pp.9-10) discuss the "construction of the parent role" and the belief within families of what they are supposed to do in relation to the education of their children. These roles are based upon societal norms within a community. "The more a group and its members agree on an individual's roles and role behaviours the more productive is the group". Gorrard & Smith (2007) add that where people are born and raised shapes social expectations and opportunities to participate in education. In a recent review of family literacy programmes in Europe (UNESCO, 2009, p.118) the case for more fathers' involvement in family

literacy programmes is discussed in terms of cost, “because fathers have proved resistant to recruitment, engagement efforts targeted at them tend to be more resource intensive”. A research paper on multiple dimensions of family involvement (Fantuzzo et al., 2004) did break down the gender of participants involved in their American study with 8% being male. Closer to home, NALA’s (2010) research “At home with literacy: a study of family literacy practices” states that 12% of the participants in their research were male. It would seem from these two pieces of research alone that male participation in family literacy programmes can be minimal. When the female participants for this research were asked if they were parenting alone over 57% said they were, which tallies with data for the area of single family households at 60% (Harvey, 2015). Could this be one reason for the gender differences in the attendance at the family literacy programmes? Are fathers resistant to engaging in family literacy programmes as it is not their perceived “constructed role”? (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Morgan et al. (2009) found that although fathers are resistant to joining family literacy programmes, they are more likely to engage in literacy practices in the home. The suggestion then from UNESCO (2009) is to incorporate an element in family literacy programmes to encourage mothers to encourage their male partners to get involved in literacy activities in the home. Perhaps this is one way of addressing this issue.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have discussed the selected literature review and the role of parents in the Irish education system. I discussed the differences in the terms parental engagement and parental involvement and the definition, design, rationale and deficit approach to family literacy programmes. I looked at the role gender plays in who supports children’s literacy development and I discussed ecological systems theory. In the next chapter, I will discuss my chosen methodology, constructivist grounded theory, and the design of the data collection methods to include sampling, validity and ethical considerations in the research process.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Chapter 4 explains my ontological and epistemological position, the methodology chosen, constructivist grounded theory, and reasons for it. The mixed methods employed in the research design are discussed to include an explanation of the design of the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The sampling approach employed for the generation of data and the issue of validity and ethical considerations are also addressed.

### **Ontology and epistemology**

During the literature review for a suitable methodology for this research, I realised that key to this research is my understanding of ontology (Grix, 2002) and epistemology (Crotty, 1998) or worldview (Cresswell, 2014). According to Blaikie (2000, p.8) “ontological assumptions are concerned with what we believe constitutes social reality”. My ontological assumption is based on the lived reality of parents in areas of high deprivation and socio-economic need and their ability to support their children’s literacy development despite all the educational barriers, inequalities and poverty that they face on a day to day basis. Raskin (2002, p.4) states “knowledge is a compilation of human-made constructions.” This constructed knowledge directly influences the way we think about the world and our interactions with it. Our constructed knowledge and interaction with the world regularly creates space for our meaning perspectives to change, depending on our interactions with the world and how the information received is perceived, processed, acted upon, evaluated and then reworked into our meaning perspectives (Schwandt, 2000). According to Cresswell (2014, p.9) the constructivist:

“Address the process of interaction among individuals. They focus on specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants.”

For the purposes of this research, the people are the participants of the three family literacy programmes. This allows the researcher to not only

look at the individual experiences of participants of the family literacy programmes, but also to identify similarities in the experience. Parents are experiencing the teaching and learning environments of each programme. However, their perspectives and knowledge constructed from this experience are firmly rooted in their social and cultural history and therefore could be completely different from another participant at the same event. Language and discourse are an important part of the constructivist enquiry because it recognises that ideas used to understand the social world are socially constructed and invested with meaning. According to Carter (1995), language variation is socially constructed and Cregan (2008) in her research found that “the values ascribed to certain patterns of language variation is closely aligned with the social status of people” (Cregan, 2008, p.11). Knowing about different discourses and how they help construct our reality will inform my epistemology and my reflexivity in the research, but crucially will support the development of the grounded theory.

### **Grounded theory method**

My reasons for choosing grounded theory methodology are to explore the phenomena of the three family literacy programmes and generate theory from the experience of the participants. Grounded theory method is suitable, as these particular family literacy programmes are completely new in design, have the evidence-based, balanced literacy framework at their core and have not been investigated before, therefore the concepts of the phenomena warrant investigation. Grounded theory method is different from other research methods as the researcher does not set about testing an existing theory but rather lets theory emerge from the data. As stated by Stern (1980, p.21), there are five basic differences between grounded theory method (GTM) and other research methods:

- The conceptual framework of grounded theory is generated from the data rather than from previous studies, although previous studies always influence the outcome of the work.
- The researcher attempts to discover dominant processes in the social scene rather than describing the unit under study.
- Every piece of data is compared with every other piece
- The collection of data may be modified according to the advancing theory.

- Rather than following a series of linear steps the investigator works within a matrix in which several research processes are in operation at once. (Stern, 1980, p.21)

As discussed in chapter 2, grounded theory method involves an inductive approach. This approach seeks to generate new theory from data, in contrast to deductive methods which compare data to an existing theory. It starts with data collection, involves theoretical sampling to develop theoretical categories, initial coding, focused coding and categorizing, theory building and writing memos. Charmaz (2014) refers to precise yet flexible guidelines and treats grounded theory methods “as constituting a craft that researchers practice. Like any craft, practitioners vary in their emphasis on one or another aspect but taken together, share commonalities” (Chamaz, 2014, p.18). Grounded theory method was originally developed by Glaser and Strauss and published in their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967. At that time there was an over reliance on quantitative research studies and with grounded theory methodology Glaser and Strauss “proposed that a systemic qualitative analysis had its own logic and could generate theory” (Charmaz, 2014, p.7). The idea to generate new theory from data appealed to social scientists and became very popular (Birks & Mills, 2015). Grounded theory method has evolved over the years prompting Charmaz and Bryant (2007) to affirm that grounded theory method (GTM) is the method used to carry out the research and the grounded theory is the result of the research process.

Although publishing their book together in 1967, differences emerged between the grounded theory strategies of Glaser and Strauss. Glaser continued to work on the original grounded theory and Strauss collaborated with Corbin to develop the systematic “Straussian grounded theory” (Morse, 2009, p.5). Strauss & Corbin (1990, p.23) explain grounded theory as

“One that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systemic data collection and analyses of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analyses, and theory stand in reciprocal relationships with each other. One does not begin with a theory, and then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge”.

Charmaz worked and studied with both Glaser and Strauss and developed ideas from their work on grounded theory methods. The constructivist approach of Charmaz (2014, pp.12-13) includes both the

“The inductive, comparative, emergent and open-ended approach of Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) original statement. It includes the iterative logic that Strauss emphasized in his early teaching as well as the dual emphasis on action and meaning”.

Constructivist grounded theory is an inductive approach to conducting research with the purpose of constructing theory (Charmaz, 2014). As stated in chapter 2 the main difference between constructivist grounded theory and the original grounded theory design of Glaser & Strauss (1967) is that the original requires the researcher to be a scientific observer and be separate from the data, whereas constructivist grounded theory includes the researcher in the data that is collected (Chamaz, 2014). Charmaz believes that the researcher is part of the world that is being studied and the researcher constructs grounded theory through their past and present involvement with people. The researcher’s social and cultural history, their experience, will be a part of the analysis of the data. Charmaz firmly believes that the researcher is a part of the research: “We construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives and research practices” (Chamaz, 2014, p.17). Research from a constructivist perspective is a meaning-making activity where the researcher constructs an understanding of interest from the perspectives of those who experience it (Taylor & Cranton, 2012, p.58). According to Cresswell, meanings are numerous and vary from participant to participant leaving the researcher to look for the “complexity of views” (Cresswell, 2007, p.20). Constructivist grounded theory takes what is real as problematic and moves the researcher into interpretive science by looking for multiple definitions of reality. It pays close attention to discourse and action by looking at how experience is created and situations are acted upon (Charmaz, 2014). The constructivist approach to a grounded theory method fits with my ontological and epistemological assumptions as described in chapter 2. My knowledge of living and working in the area I propose to research means that I am embedded in the cultural practices and history of the area. According to Coughlan & Brannick (2014, p.4),

“inquiry from the inside involves researchers as natives and actors, immersed in local situations generating contextually embedded knowledge which emerges from experience”. I am in the enviable position of being a part of the phenomena, alongside the participants in the family literacy programmes.

### **Criticisms of Grounded Theory Method**

The inductive process of grounded theory underpins the research design. Taking its leave from the world views of participants, it is grounded in their lived experience and so is congruent to my goals as a researcher. However, grounded theory is not without its critics. A significant criticism by Thomas & James (2006) of grounded theory method is whether or not through inductive analyses a theory is reached. “How are grounded theorists to quarantine themselves, as social selves, from the data they are analysing and re-analysing to enable “theory” to emerge?”(Thomas & James, 2006, p.18). I think this criticism is based on the earlier original work of Glaser and Strauss (1967). In constructivist grounded theory the researcher and the research data shape the content of theorising to develop the theory. We can then ask if constant interaction with the data makes for a stronger theory. Charmaz (2014, p.242) maintains that critics often base their criticisms on the earliest work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and fail to acknowledge the numerous new interpretations of the original method.

Thomas & James (2006, p.28) suggest that

“Grounded theory with its procedural machinery also relegates the clear accounts of researchers themselves: students, teachers or other professionals. Although there is a new kind of constructivist grounded theory it is unclear what this can add to such accounts, indeed it may even subtract from them as users focus on method rather than voice”.

In my opinion, however, constructivist grounded theory is all about the participant’s voice. Through the processes of transcribing, coding, memoing and using In Vivo codes the participant’s voice embeds and underpins the generation of theory. Having reflected on Thomas’s and James’s critique of grounded theory methods, I am wondering if they are somehow suffering from “epistemological unconsciousness” (Staller, 2013, p.396). Perhaps Thomas and James have different ontological and epistemological

worldviews on what is “real and how we can know and how it becomes known” (Staller, 2013, p.409). Clearly the “right way” is not the structured approach of constructivist grounded theory for Thomas and James (2006).

According to Staller (2013, p.409), constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) challenges the objectivist epistemological underpinnings of Glaser and Strauss (1967). Objectivist epistemologies are described by Crotty (1998, p.8) as “understandings and values are considered to be objectified in the people we are studying and if we go about it in the right way we can discover the objective truth”. Constructivism in contrast rejects objectivist epistemologies: “there is no objective truth waiting to be discovered, truth or meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities of our world” (Crotty, 1998, p.8). Furthermore, there have been a number of significant revisions since the original grounded theory method in 1967, with Strauss & Corbin (1990) collaborating to develop qualitative analysis informed by pragmatism and symbolic interactionism. Then we have Charmaz and the constructivist approach - it is easy to see why grounded theory has its critics when even the designers of the research method cannot agree. Choosing grounded theory as a method requires the researcher to clearly state which version of grounded theory methodology they are using, as the epistemological underpinnings are clearly very different. It is crucial, therefore, that the researcher has a clear understanding of their epistemological and ontological worldviews when using grounded theory to clarify their worldview.

Bryman (2016) discusses the practical implications of conducting grounded theory, stating that time is a crucial factor in grounded theory, with its requirement of transcribing all interviews and the constant interaction with data. I agree with Bryman that it is time consuming. However, I felt that the time was well spent. I enjoyed the processes of interacting with the data to develop the themes but perhaps another researcher would not have the time to spend? It is crucial therefore to spend time choosing a methodology that fits one’s epistemology and ontology but also how much time a

researcher has to give. It is important to stress the need for a coherent research design. Bryman (2016, p.580) also suggests that grounded theory “is vague on certain points for example the difference between concepts and categories”. I agree with Bryman on the vagueness of what constitutes theory and the difference between concepts and categories. When I was applying theoretical sampling looking for categories for my themes, I found Charmaz (2014) to be lacking a clear descriptive process for the next stage and so looked to Braun & Clarke (2012) to support my analysis. This analysis can be found in chapter 5.

As previously mentioned in chapter 3, the literature review in grounded theory is also a controversial element of the method (Birks & Mills, 2015). The original core concepts of grounded theory are to limit exposure to the literature to minimize researcher bias (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I think as a researcher working in the field of family literacy and adult education, it would be quite impossible not to have some prior knowledge of research in the area of family literacy. I have tried to overcome this possible bias by including chapter 3 as an initial literature review, clearly stating what I already know. Charmaz (2014, p.307) is quite clear in her instructions “You may let this material lie fallow until after you have developed your categories and the analytical relationships between them”. She purports leaving the literature review to fit the specific purpose and argument of the research. Bryman suggests “being able to link research questions, findings and discussions to the existing literature is an important way of demonstrating the credibility and contribution of your research” (Bryman, 2016, p.6). I have followed the advice of Charmaz and Bryman and linked my thematic findings to the literature review.

Although grounded theory has its critics, I am of the opinion the choice of method must fit the research and be congruent with the ontological and epistemological worldview of the researcher. Constructivist grounded theory is flexible, allowing interaction with the participants and supportive of the investigation into the family literacy programmes.

## **Mixed methods**

In order to answer my research question and develop my grounded theory from the voices of the participants on the family literacy programmes, mixed methods seemed to be the best approach to capture the data. Mixed methods research has been labelled the third paradigm (Johnson Burke, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007). The philosophy of mixed methods is pragmatism; this involves using the best method suited to the research project without getting caught up in the “paradigm wars” of which method is best (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Cohen, Mannion and Morrisson (2011, p.23) also see mixed methods approaches in a “pragmatist paradigm” which illustrates the necessity of quantitative and qualitative methods to fulfil the needs of the researcher and to address the research question. Denscombe (2008, p.280) asserts that pragmatism is “practice driven” and argues that there are multiple versions of the truth and reality. Reality is socially constructed and as such “what works” to answer the research question should be used by the researcher. By using a mixed methods approach I will be able to probe the collected data for meanings and corroborate and triangulate my findings.

Cresswell (2014, p.215) suggests that “mixing or blending” data collection methods enhances the interpretation of the research findings. Denscombe (2008, p.272) also proposes that mixed methods can increase the accuracy of data, as it gives a better overview of the phenomenon, overcomes the limitations of a single approach and can support sampling in cases where a questionnaire might be used as a precursor to an interview. Clarifying the use of data collection methods in grounded theory, Charmaz describes methods as “merely tools” in the grounded theory process. “Our data collection methods flow from the research question and where we go with it” (2014, pp.26-27). For this research I have chosen to combine quantitative and qualitative research methods. I chose to do this because I perceived it to be the best way to capture data from the phenomenon.

## **Data collection: Design of the questionnaire**

Questionnaires are used to support data collection. Grix (2010, p.129) asserts that they are “most effective when used in conjunction with other methods, especially one or more varieties of the interview technique”. Questionnaires come in many forms and can be done as surveys on the internet, by email, post or by phone. The questionnaire proposed for this research will be administered in a group setting. Bryman (2016, p.221) refers to this type of questionnaire as “self-administered questionnaires” because respondents must read and answer each question by themselves. Brace (2008) maintains that to collect accurate data, the researcher needs to get accurate answers and therefore attention needs to be paid to the questionnaire design. Cohen et al. (2011, p.379) have adapted the work of Selitz, Wrightsman & Cook (1976) to give researchers a guide for questionnaire construction. This guide allows the researcher to reflect critically on the questionnaire design. There are four main criteria in the guide:

- Decisions about question content: for example, is the question necessary, can respondents answer the question?
- Decisions about question wording: for example, can the question be understood, is the question leading?
- Decisions about form of response to the question: for example, is the form of response easy, definite, uniform and adequate for the purpose?
- Decisions about the place of questions in the sequence: for example, is the answer to the question likely to be influenced by the content of preceding questions?

The design of the questionnaire was informed by my chosen methodology, constructivist grounded theory. I chose this method because data is not collected but constructed through interaction with participants, whose voices are included in the grounded theory generated (Coughlan, Brydon-Miller, 2014). Questionnaires are described by Charmaz (2014, pp.47-48) as “elicited documents” which allow respondents to have control over the amount of information about themselves they wish to reveal. Charmaz

(2014, p.48) states that questionnaires work best when respondents have “a stake in the addressed topics, experience in the relevant areas, view the questions as significant and possess the writing skills to express themselves”. As the respondents in this research were all participants on the family literacy programmes being investigated, their voices were informing the process even in this initial data collection phase.

The decision to design a questionnaire to get an initial overview of the parents attending the programmes was made for three reasons. Firstly, the questionnaire would allow me to obtain an overview of the characteristics of the parents attending, for example, ages of children, educational attainment and employment history. Secondly, it would allow me to elicit the participant’s motivations for attending the course and if they had changed their practice in family learning as a result of the course. Finally, the resulting analyses of the data should therefore support me in identifying themes to be explored more thoroughly in later interviews.

The questionnaire, which can be found in appendix A of this document, was adapted from one used by the Clare Family Learning Project ([www.clarefamilylearning.org](http://www.clarefamilylearning.org)), to evaluate their family learning courses. On further investigation I realised the Clare Family Learning Project questionnaire was adapted from the work of Lambe, Fairfax-Cholmeley & Thomas (2008). Their research showed that family learning activities produce a number of outcomes and relate to different categories of progression – personal, social, educational and economic. Krosnick & Presser (2010, p.300) suggest that novice researchers developing or adapting questionnaires should review questions from earlier surveys before writing their own as

“The design of questions and questionnaires is an art as well as a science and some previous questions are likely to have been crafted by skilful artisans or those with many resources to develop and test items”.  
(Krosnick & Presser, 2010, p.300)

As this questionnaire had been designed for participants of family literacy classes, it could be adapted to suit the research needs of this investigation.

The questionnaire was adapted to use both semi-structured and open-ended questions; this allowed respondents to answer the questions in their own terms, using their own discourse. Cohen et al. (2011, pp.382-392) state that semi-structured questionnaires “set the agenda but do not presuppose the nature of the response” and using open-ended questions invites “honest, personal comments”. However, as discussed by Cohen et al. (2011), there are risks involved. In its favour, using open-ended questions would enable respondents to answer on their own terms about their family literacy practices. However, there is a risk that respondents may not answer the question at all or give irrelevant information. Charmaz (2014, p.48) raises questions about the use of questionnaires and their construction qualifying that researchers cannot re-ask a question in a questionnaire and it is in no way a substitute for the “immediacy of interviewing”. Conversely, Glaser & Strauss (1967, p18) agree that both quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (interviews) data are useful for verification and the generation of theory and “different forms of data on the same subject, when compared will each generate theory”. Whilst agreeing with Charmaz on the “intimacy and immediacy” of the interview process, I was confident that my choice of methods for this research (initial questionnaire and then interviews) would yield the data required to generate a grounded theory. After much consideration and several revisions in content and format, I was happy that respondents would easily understand my questionnaire (Bryman, 2008) and I piloted it with willing volunteers. These volunteers fully answered the open-ended questions, and following a verbal evaluation with them about completing the questionnaire, where they stated they were happy to complete it, I decided it was a risk I was willing to take to encourage respondents’ voice.

Cresswell (2014, p.97) refers to ethical implications in collecting data and discusses the importance of explaining to participants the purpose of the study and to ensure no participant is pressured to give informed consent. Cohen et al. (2011, p.165) explains that all educational research is sensitive:

“The researcher needs to be sensitive to the context, the cultures, the participants, the consequences of the research on a range of parties, the powerless, the powerful and peoples agendas.”

Therefore the relationship between the researcher and participants became a serious consideration. My knowledge of living and working in the area I propose to research means that I am embedded in the cultural practices and history of the area. According to Coughlan & Brannick (2014, p.4), “inquiry from the inside involves researchers as natives and actors, immersed in local situations generating contextually embedded knowledge which emerges from experience”. In addition to being an “insider” in the community, I am also an “insider” in the organization where the family literacy practices are embedded.

However, there is a risk, what if some of the respondents complete a questionnaire because of a sense of obligation to me as their tutor and tell me what they think I need to hear? To overcome this I adhered to my ethical approval guidelines, which are discussed later in this chapter. I asked a third party to administer the questionnaire with parents at the end of the Breakfast Buddies programme. The third party was not involved in the delivery of the family literacy programmes. I was not present in the room and did not approach any parents to fill in the questionnaire while they were being completed. The third party had been briefed about potential literacy difficulties of participants and was aware of the need to be supportive if literacy issues arose; one participant needed support to fill in the questionnaire. Shah (2004) found that “insiders” have more knowledge of the workings of the organization and therefore can understand what is required to advance the research. The process of working as an “insider” in the research process made the data collection for the questionnaire an uncomplicated task.

### **Data collection: Administration of questionnaire**

The location and timing for the administration of the questionnaire was the local Arts Centre, where Breakfast Buddies is held bi-monthly. Parents were invited by a number of different practitioners in the area, such as the Home School Community Liaison Teachers, Speech and Language Therapists and through other practitioners working within the youngballymun initiative. I

knew that the majority of parents in attendance would have availed of at least one of the three family literacy programmes on offer: The Story Sacks Programme, The Incredible Book Club and Breakfast Buddies. Therefore I decided this would be an opportune time to administer the questionnaire. Using Breakfast Buddies for the initial data collection meant less disruption to ongoing family literacy classes. As an adult literacy teacher for sixteen years, I am aware of the barriers to participation for some parents. The Story Sacks Programme and the Incredible Book Club are often a parent's first introduction to any type of adult learning programme and therefore I felt a need to "mind" those parents and not have their class disrupted by introducing the third party for the administration of the questionnaire. The Breakfast Buddies Programme was more suitable as the majority of attendees have previously attended The Story Sacks Programme and the Incredible Book Club.

I had not set a target number of questionnaires to be completed but was extremely satisfied when I realized later that 30 (67%) of the possible 45 participants had completed questionnaires. The questionnaire also included an option for respondents to take part in an interview and 11 (37%) said they would be willing to be interviewed.

### **Data collection: Interview design**

Interviews are one of the most common methods of collecting data for qualitative research, although they are often paired with other methods of data collection. According to Savin-Baden & Major (2013, p.358), interviews are very useful to "probe deeply into a participant's experiences, and are ideal when the researcher wishes to follow up initial responses". There are four main types of interview technique: structured, semi-structured, unstructured interviews and focus group interviews. Grix (2010, p.128) states the structured interview uses questions that are predetermined. This type of interview can be done face to face or over the phone and is very close to survey questionnaires. The aim of these interviews is to achieve "a high degree of standardization or uniformity". The semi-structured interview

allows the interviewer to have a few questions in mind but the interviewer has the flexibility to ask them in whatever order, and allows the interviewer to pursue other information as it arises in the interview process. Grix (2010) maintains the unstructured interview is often used at the start of a research project, where the researcher has a random list of questions to further investigate the project. Focus group interviews are used to interview a cohort of people with similar interests and background. Although the interviewer has a set of questions, the idea is to spark conversations between group members and the interviewer becomes more of a moderator and less of an interviewer.

Having considered the different types of interview methods I decided to choose a semi-structured interview process as I felt it was congruent to my epistemology. I wanted the interview questions to be informed by the analysis of the questionnaire, but I also wanted the freedom to ask other questions if I wanted to follow other lines of inquiry during the interview process. Bryman (2016, p.469) refers to the researcher having an “interview guide” which supports the semi-structured interview process by allowing researchers to “glean research participants’ perspectives on their social world and that there is flexibility in the conduct of the interviews”. A constructivist perspective sees the interview as the moment in which knowledge is co-constructed (Savin-Baden & Major 2013, p.358). This was important to me, as the interaction with respondents was integral to the development of the family literacy framework. I needed to hear their experience of the programmes and the semi-structured interview process would allow me to do that.

The design and development of the interview questions was informed by two elements, a sample of grounded theory interview questions (Charmaz, 2014, p. 67) and the analysis of the questionnaire. The interview guide can be found in Appendix C of this document. According to Cohen et al. (2011, p. 409), interviews allow participants to reveal their understandings of the world in which they live and give voice to situations from their own standpoint. “In these senses the interview is not simply concerned with

collecting data about life; it is part of life itself, its human embeddedness is inescapable". Charmaz is in agreement with Cohen et al. as she describes using intensive interviewing to generate data for qualitative research as a "gently guided one-sided conversation that explores research participants' perspectives on their personal experiences of a research topic" (Charmaz, 2014, p.56). The data that is generated from the interview process will be transcribed and coded according to grounded theory method conventions.

As a novice researcher in preparation for the one to one interviews, I decided to do a practice interview with my colleague who had also been my third party in the questionnaire process. My third party colleague recently completed her own M.Ed. study and was very understanding and willing to help. Charmaz (2014, p.60) states that practice interviews can avert mistakes during the real interview process. Birks & Mills (2015, p.73) agree, describing the demands placed upon a novice researcher "remaining attuned to what each participant is saying, being theoretically sensitive to what this means to your developing theory and directing or following the interview accordingly can be very demanding". As the facilitator on these family literacy programmes and now the researcher, I had three concerns heading into the interview process.

My first concern was around role confusion for me as the researcher; my second concern was around the questions, how I can ensure I get full explanations of the teaching learning environment. The third concern was my need to debrief with a colleague after the interview process to ensure I was being reflexive, was this ethical? Looking to the literature, Asselin (2003, p.102) states that role conflict occurs when the researcher responds to the interview from a perspective other than as the researcher; she counters that in order to avoid role confusion, the researcher must be on guard to this possibility during the interview process. Asselin (2003) further asserts that emphasizing the role of the researcher, the reason for the study and the concept of confidentiality to the research participants will ensure participants understand the different role of the researcher and also act as a reminder to the researcher. I felt assured by this approach and used it in my

practice interview to get a sense of it and later incorporated it into my interviews. To address my second concern, where my pre-existing knowledge as the facilitator and interviewer could have the potential to leave me lacking details from participants, I practiced framing my questions to clarify to participants that I needed further details. McConnell-Henry et al. (2009/10, p.6) affirm that couching questions for participants with pre-existing knowledge ensures that the participant gives the details needed to answer the research question. To address my third concern regarding debriefing after the interview process and ensuring my reflexivity whilst still being ethical to the participants, I once again asked my colleague, my third party, to aid me in the process of debriefing and being reflexive. According to Cohen et al. (2011, p.225), reflexive researchers will be aware of the ways their research choices, insights, cultural background and epistemology shape the research. I felt that by engaging my colleague in debriefing after all interviews were completed and I had time to formulate my thoughts, would help me bring clarity to what I had heard. I also felt that I was being ethical in my approach, as my colleague was not viewing or listening to any transcripts from participants, and had no knowledge of who had been interviewed. She was merely listening to my thoughts and giving verbal feedback to me.

### **Data Collection: Parent interviews**

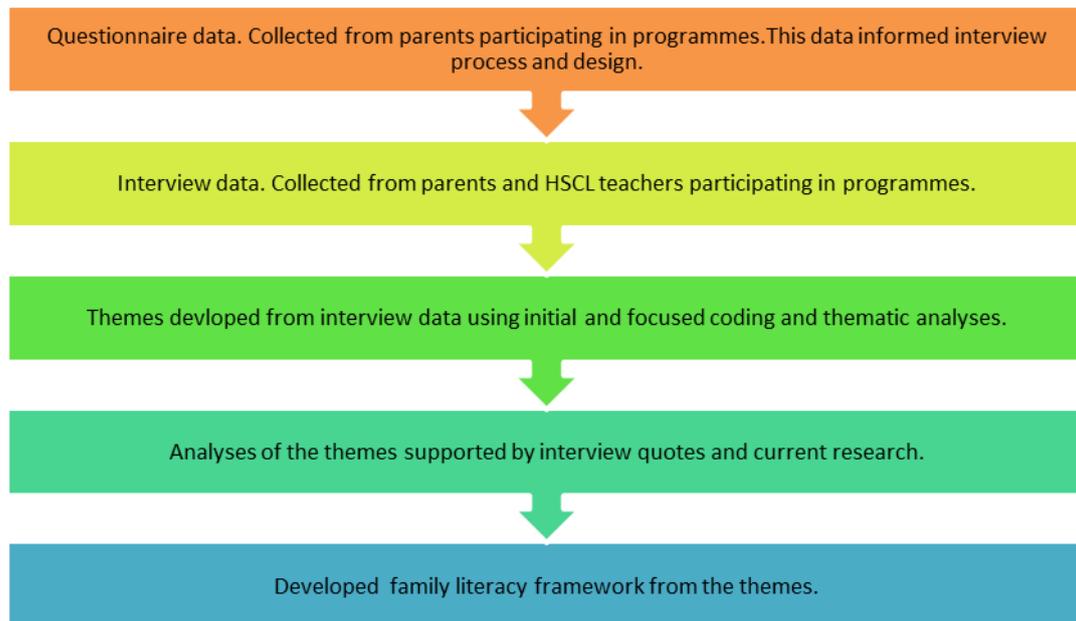
Having collected and analysed the data from the questionnaires, I turned my attention to collection of my next data set through one to one interviews. 37% (11) of respondents to the questionnaire had identified themselves willing to be interviewed; I contacted these respondents by telephone and invited them to participate in the interview process at a time and place that was convenient for them. Of the 11 participants contacted 7 were available to take part in the interview process. I met with each participant individually in the Axis Centre, in the youngballymun meeting room over a period of two weeks. On meeting the participants, I explained to them about the interview process. I advised them of their rights to withdraw from the process at any time if they so wished. I asked for their permission to record the interview

using a Dictaphone and gave participants a consent form. I read a copy of the consent form to them, and I asked them if they were happy to continue to sign the form giving their informed consent. Once they agreed, I started the Dictaphone and began the interview process.

### **Data collection: HSCL teacher Interviews**

As stated earlier there are eleven primary schools in Ballymun, served by seven HSCL teachers. Three of these posts were newly filled in September 2015, which narrowed my pool of prospective participants for the interview process to four, as I felt I could not include these HSCL teachers who had no experience of the programmes under investigation. I interviewed just three of the four remaining HSCL teachers, as I felt I was not getting any more useful information and had at this point reached saturation. The HSCL teachers interviewed represented five of the eleven primary schools in Ballymun, just under half at 46%.

The interviews with the HSCL teachers were arranged in advance over a period of two weeks at a convenient time for each HSCL teacher in their respective schools. I explained the purpose of the research and the interview process and I asked for informed consent. I used a Dictaphone for the interview process. The data collection process is summarised in Figure 3.



**Figure 3: Data collection process**

### **Sampling**

As the methodology being used is constructivist grounded theory, data collection is an ongoing process and not a distinct and separate phase of research. It is an iterative process, with further data being collected on the basis of analysis of previous data, therefore the extent of sampling is not known in advance. Sampling is complete when theoretical saturation is reached. The most relevant grounded theory methodological approaches for gathering data in this research are document collection, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups with parents attending the three different family literacy programmes.

Cohen et al. (2011, p.143) suggest that there are various decisions to be made early on in the research process to decide on sampling size, representativeness of the sample, sampling strategy, access to the sample and the type of research being undertaken (qualitative/quantitative/mixed methods). As this research is a small scale research project, investigating three family literacy programmes, the inclusion criteria for the sampling population was all parents who had attended one or more of the three family literacy programmes under investigation. Therefore the exclusion

criteria were parents who had not attended any of the three family literacy programmes. I decided that convenience sampling would be appropriate for the initial data collection i.e. the questionnaire. According to Bryman (2016, p.187) “A convenience sample is one that is simply available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility”. All participants on the three family literacy programmes are invited to attend Breakfast Buddies; this meant that there would be a large proportion of the representative sample in the one venue on the one day. I am not researching the general population in Ballymun, merely the people attending the family literacy courses, so I felt convenience sampling was appropriate.

### **Sampling for parent interviews**

According to Grix (2010, pp.129-130), questionnaires are most effective when used with other methods, especially interviews. He advocates the use of a question on the questionnaire which seeks to identify participants for interviews allowing the researcher to “mix quantitative and qualitative data”. I decided to include a question on the questionnaire as Grix had suggested. As a result 37% (11) of respondents to the questionnaire had identified themselves willing to be interviewed.

### **Sampling for HSCL teacher Interviews**

As previously stated in chapter 1, there are eleven primary schools in Ballymun, served by seven HSCL teachers. Three of these posts were newly filled in September 2015 which narrowed my pool of prospective participants for the interview process to four, as I felt I could not include these HSCL teachers as they had no experience of the programmes under investigation. I only interviewed three of the four HSCL teachers as I felt I was not getting any more useful information and had at this point reached saturation. The HSCL teachers interviewed represented five of the eleven primary schools in Ballymun, just under half at 46%.

## **Validity**

Validity is used to check the reliability of the findings of research. Cresswell (2014, p.201) states that validity is an asset to qualitative research, as it seeks to ensure the results of the research are correct from the perspective of the researcher, the participants and the reader. Validity in qualitative research is a fundamental component throughout the research process and Morse et al. (2002, p.14) believes that without validity, research is valueless and therefore in-depth consideration must be given to appropriate methods to ensure validity in research. Because of the risks to internal validity in practitioner-research, Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2007, p.136) identify the necessary elements that address credibility:

- The amount of experience that the practitioner has in the field
- The enquiry or type of questions that the time spent in the field has given the practitioner
- Triangulating data by using multiple sources to check the accuracy of description and interpretation, including member checking and peer debriefing.

However, there appears to be debate on exactly what criteria is needed to achieve validity. With a range of approaches on offer, it can be difficult for a novice researcher to choose an approach. Savin-Baden & Major (2013, p.475) highlight Lincoln & Guba's (1985) four main criteria as being the "gold standard" for researchers seeking validity in their research:

- **Credibility:** findings should be convincing
- **Transferability:** findings can be transferred to similar situations
- **Dependability:** the research findings will last over time
- **Confirmability:** that the researcher has remained neutral during data analysis.

Conversely Grix (2010, p.118) maintains it is impossible for researchers to offer "a value free" analysis, as the researcher's analysis is always based on their view of the world. As I am using grounded theory method from a

constructivist perspective it would be impossible for me to remain neutral during data analysis. Charmaz (2014, p.13) maintains

“Viewing the research as constructed rather than discovered fosters researchers’ reflexivity about their actions and decisions. The constructivist approach perspective shreds notions of a neutral observer and a value-free expert”.

Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2011, p.180) state that “validity is the touchstone of all educational research...researchers need to locate discussions of validity within the research paradigm being used”. Grounded theory method has its own way of validating research. According to Birks & Mills (2015, pp.141-142) it is:

“Processes that determine the relevance and value of data...how you apply the essential grounded theory methods in its collection, generation and analyses that will determine whether your research will be deemed a quality study”.

Glaser & Strauss (1967, p.224) in their seminal work on grounded theory, discuss that the theory should be “accurate in fit and relevance to the area it purports to explain”. Charmaz (2014, pp.337-338) has built on previous work by Glaser and Strauss and developed her criteria for grounded theory studies, and she discusses her criteria:

- **Credibility:** reflecting logic and conceptual grounding using the grounded theory methods such as coding and observations between categories.
- **Originality:** in reference to the significance of the study, are there new insights, is the research theoretically significant?
- **Resonance:** the need for the theory to have scope and relevance for those that use it, does it reflect the studied experience, are there links between the experience of participants and larger institutions?
- **Usefulness:** knowledge development and practical application, does the research add to knowledge?

As stated earlier this research uses mixed methods to collect data. “The criteria for effective mixed methods research rest on the analytic coherence of the research product, integrated findings, and illumination of the research problem(s)” (Charmaz, 2014, p.325). Addressing and ensuring validity is vital at every stage of the research. Mannion and Morrison (2007, p.198)

state that threats to validity can be minimized at the design stage of the research, during data collection and when data is being analysed.

### **Addressing validity in this research**

As the researcher, my perspectives are open to change and interpretation, therefore I need to be reflexive in my interactions during the research design process, collecting the data, analysing the data, interpreting the data and in my interactions with respondents in the data collection process. According to Larrivee (2000, p.294), knowing that an issue exists involves the reflective practitioner in a process of enquiring about the current situation but also the promise of future solutions and insights. As asserted by Etherington (2004, p.19), reflexivity in qualitative research requires the researcher to be conscious of our reactions and how we use them and to understand our epistemology and ontology in our understanding of the society we inhabit. Research journals have been used by many qualitative researchers in practicing reflexivity as the researcher reflects on his/her role in the study, their personal background and histories can shape their interpretations of the data collected but can also shape the direction of the study (Cresswell, 2014, p.186). Reflexivity can also positively influence the construction of knowledge. The constructivist tries to understand how meanings are presented and used and perhaps changed through language and action.

“Reflective writing from a constructivist perspective facilitates deep learning because it makes connections between facets of experience – between cognition and emotion, between past and present experience and between old and new knowledge” (Carlile & Jordan, 2005, p.25).

Validity will therefore be ensured by:

- Clarifying the bias I am bringing to this research by creating an open and honest narrative throughout the study, by naming my ontological and epistemological perspectives in my philosophical position.
- Being reflexive in my approach and keep a research diary. Cresswell states (2014, p.202) that if the researcher clarifies the bias they bring to the study, this self–reflection creates an open and honest narrative.

- Only participants who have knowledge of the family literacy programmes will be asked to participate in the research.
- Transcribing all interviews and provide samples of my initial coding, focused coding, memo writing and thematic analysis as a part of my chapter on findings.
- Triangulating data by administering a questionnaire (by a third party) to try and minimize any potential bias. Data from the questionnaires will inform the follow on interview process. I will interview parents attending the family literacy programmes, and using data from these interviews I will triangulate that data with interviews from HSCLE teachers involved in the family literacy programmes.
- Triangulating the data with published research in the field of family literacy and data from evaluations and studies of the current family literacy programmes that I deliver.
- Use rich descriptions from the interview process to highlight links with the research currently available on family literacy.
- Throughout this research process I will be meeting my research supervisor and discussing the research and any findings. These discussions which will aid my reflections and interpretations of the research process and findings, enhance the validation process throughout this research journey.

## **Ethics**

Cresswell (2014, p.97) refers to ethical implications in collecting data and discusses the importance of explaining to participants the purpose of the study and to ensure no participant is pressured to give informed consent. Cohen et al. (2011, p.165) explains that all educational research is sensitive.

“The researcher needs to be sensitive to the context, the cultures, the participants, the consequences of the research on a range of parties, the powerless, the powerful and people’s agendas”.

It was clear to me that I needed to consider all ethical implications and have built into the research design, ways of averting these issues. Table 2 explains how each ethical issue was addressed.

**Table 2: Addressing ethical issues**

	Ethics Issues	Issue addressed by:
1	Power relationship between the researcher and participants who may feel a sense of obligation to their tutor.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asking a third party, not known to the participants, to meet the groups and describe the research project to them, and note or answer their questions. This person invites their participation in the research while assuring them of its voluntary nature.</li> </ul>
2	Protection of informants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants will be able to take any issues that may arise to a neutral named third party, so that their complaints or concerns can be kept confidential in order that it will not prevent them benefitting from the programme they are attending.</li> <li>• Literacy issues of informants: questionnaires and interview questions can be administered orally. No informant will feel 'put on the spot' by being asked to read something and sign it.</li> <li>• All procedures involved in data collection will be explained to informants to ensure understanding of the research process</li> <li>• All informants will be advised of their right to withdraw from the research process at any stage and their data will be destroyed and not used.</li> <li>• All informants will be advised that they will not be identified in any documents related to this research and that a unique identifier will be used to anonymise them</li> <li>• All informants will be asked to give informed consent</li> </ul>
3	Data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The researcher will store all written questionnaires in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office. This office is in a secure building and the office is locked when not in use.</li> <li>• The data derived from the questionnaire will be stored on the researcher's laptop using password protection. Only the researcher and researcher's supervisor will have access to the data.</li> <li>• All informants will be given a unique identifier, their names will only be known to the researcher and researcher's supervisor.</li> <li>• Transcribed interviews will be stored on the researcher's personal laptop and access to the data</li> </ul>

		<p>will be password locked.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The researcher’s laptop has up to date anti- virus software installed and the laptop is only used for the purpose of this research.</li> <li>• If data is to be shared with the research supervisor the data will be sent using “dropbox” which can only be accessed by invitation and using a password known only to the researcher and research supervisor. The data included in the “dropbox” will only be accessible for a limited period of time.</li> <li>• Any data/findings shared with the research advisory group will be done using all the proper conventions for ethical research and no informants will be identified during this process.</li> <li>• The data will be stored for two years after the final thesis has been ratified then it will be destroyed by the researcher. Data files on researcher’s laptop will be deleted and all hand written questionnaires will be shredded.</li> </ul>
4	Self-Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The interviews will take place in the premises of youngballymun. The experience of the researcher is that there are no concerns about self-protection.</li> </ul>
6	Protection of Waterford Institute of Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The research supervisor will be involved in meeting the researcher and discussing the research and any findings. Both the researcher and the research supervisor will be responsible to uphold the research standards of WIT.</li> </ul>
7	Researcher’s own ethical standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The researcher will be reflexive and keep a research journal to critically reflect on issues raised during the research process.</li> <li>• The researcher will be aware of their own epistemology and its influence on the research.</li> <li>• The researcher will be honest at all times in the communication of the research findings. The research data will be accurate in its collection and reporting and all facts will be verifiable through the research collected and based on critical analysis of the data collected.</li> <li>• The design and collection of the data will take into account any literacy difficulties of the informants and these difficulties will be dealt with in a sensitive manner as is expected of all teachers of adult literacy. The researcher is a registered teacher with the teaching council and therefore the Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers from the Teaching Council Act, 2001 applies.</li> </ul>

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have given an explanation of my ontological and epistemological position, the methodology chosen, constructivist grounded theory, and reasons why. I have discussed the mixed methods employed in the research design, to include explanation of the design of the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. I have also discussed the sampling approach used for the generation of data and addressed the issue of validity and ethical considerations. In the next chapter I will present the analysis of the findings from the questionnaire and the analysis of the interview data.

## **Chapter 5: Findings**

Chapter 5 describes the analysis of the questionnaire and a presentation of the findings under four categories: personal, social, educational and economic. Key questions are identified for further investigation in semi-structured interviews as a result of the questionnaire findings. Analysis of the interview data, to include transcribing, initial and focused coding, using constant comparative methods, clustering, writing memos and theoretical sampling to support the discovery of the themes is described.

### **Analysis of questionnaire and presentation of findings**

Once the completed questionnaires had been returned by the third party, I counted 30 completed questionnaires. I then checked to see that they had been completed and how much or how little of the open-ended questions had been given a response. Cresswell (2014, p.197) suggests reading the data to get an overall impression of the “depth, credibility and use of the data”, so I began to read each individual questionnaire in its entirety to get a comprehensive overview of the responses. I began to conceptualize how I would collate and display the data collected. I then began using pen and paper, to note respondents’ answers and put them into categories - personal, social, educational and economic. When I had all of these closed-ended questions collated I decided to display this information in bar chart and pie chart format, I included both the percentages and actual numbers of responses to display the information. I also included tables with quotes taken from the completed questionnaires to highlight respondent voice.

Once the closed-ended questions were complete, I began to look at the semi-structured and open-ended questions. There were multiple responses and detailed descriptions of family learning practices in the replies. I made the decision to categorize these answers as “social” as the responses appeared to conceptualize the essence of the family literacy programmes. One of the main reasons for doing a questionnaire was to try and elicit respondents’ voices on their learning/non learning from the family literacy programmes. I hoped that these responses would help generate themes or

questions for further investigations in the qualitative semi-structured interview stage. As the question “how did you hear about this programme?” was answered with a mixture of three definitive answers from respondents, I was able to display the information in bar chart. On analysis, respondents answered the question “what was the most enjoyable thing about the programme?” with a combination of seven most enjoyable things. For the analysis on this question I devised a table with the seven reasons and placed an “x” in the table each time a respondent answered with that reason. I was then able to chart these in bar chart format and I also displayed them in a table showing percentages in order of preference. I then decided to include some quotes from respondents to highlight their voice in the research process. The next question was “What was the least enjoyable thing about these programmes?” There were very few answers to this question, most respondents either did not answer or answered “nothing at all”. There were a few written comments which I included in the commentary.

I then came to the final question “Has the programme helped you to support your child’s homework, learning at home, reading, writing and talking skills?” There were so many different answers to the question that I needed to include, but I felt the bar chart format would not portray the essence of the respondents’ voices, so I decided to highlight the themes arising from the responses by creating a word cloud. McNaught & Lam (2010) suggested that word clouds are a useful tool to aid educational research, as they can support researchers to visualize patterns in text and gather common themes. However, they caution that word clouds do not use the phrases or sentences that the words are composed of and they do not recommend it as a standalone research tool. I agree that a word cloud does not include respondents’ sentences, and I also agree that it should not be used as a standalone research tool; however, I think a word cloud at this stage of the research is appropriate. The word cloud included in this research is highlighting the key learning themes from respondents in their family learning practices. I have also included a selection of quotes from the

answers of respondents, so that their words and sentences that generated this word cloud are visible.

### Findings of the questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed as part of the research into the three family literacy programmes currently under investigation, namely, 1) Breakfast Buddies 2) Story Sacks Programme 3) The Incredible Book Club. The questionnaire was only available in hardcopy format. The findings are shown under the categories, personal, social, educational and economic. The questionnaire was aimed at parents who had attended at least one of the three family literacy programmes under investigation. In total, thirty respondents on the family literacy programmes completed the questionnaire. As stated earlier in chapter 3, Hegarty & Feeley (2010) state that literacy is often a gendered role, and therefore it should be noted that all respondents in this research are female.

### Findings under the category: Personal

#### (i) Age of respondents

The respondents' ages ranged from 20 years to 61 years old. The majority of parents (21 = 70%) were under the age of 35 years (Figure 4).

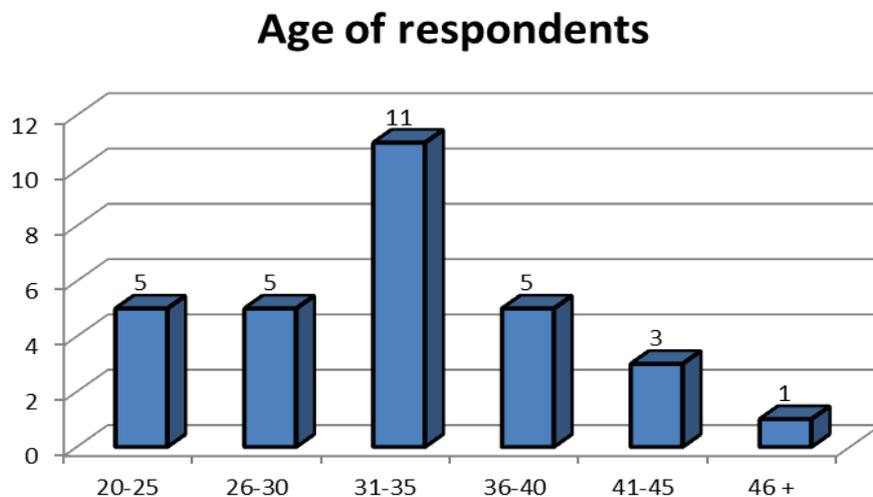
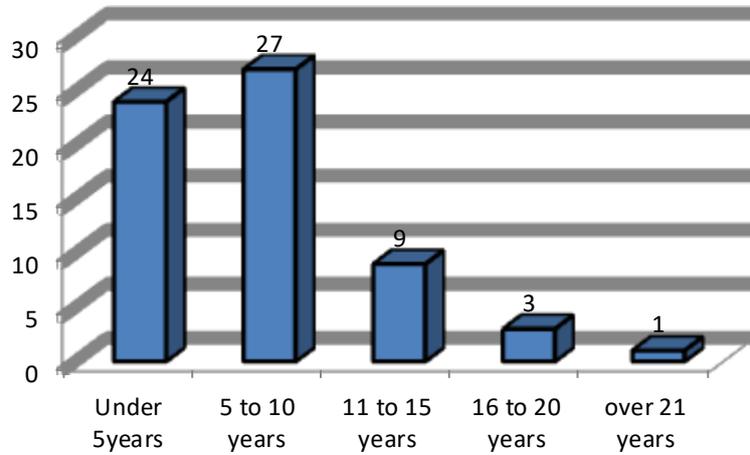


Figure 4: Age of respondents

(ii) Age of respondents' children

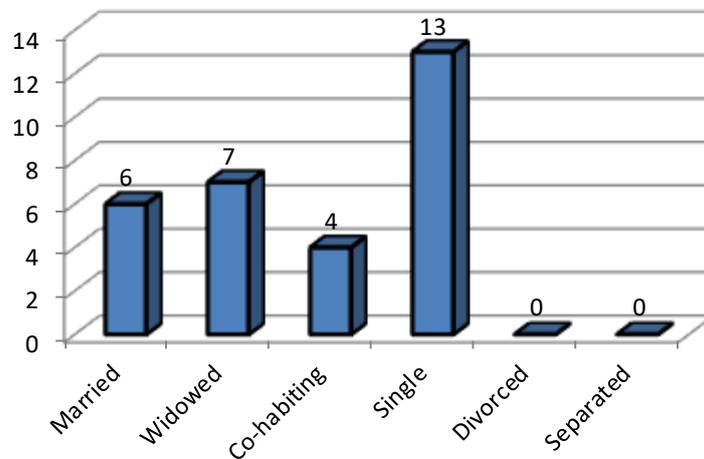
Over 60 (94%) children of parents in attendance are benefitting from the programmes' content as these family literacy programmes are targeted at children in primary school (Figure 5).



**Figure 5: Age of respondents' children**

(iii) Marital status

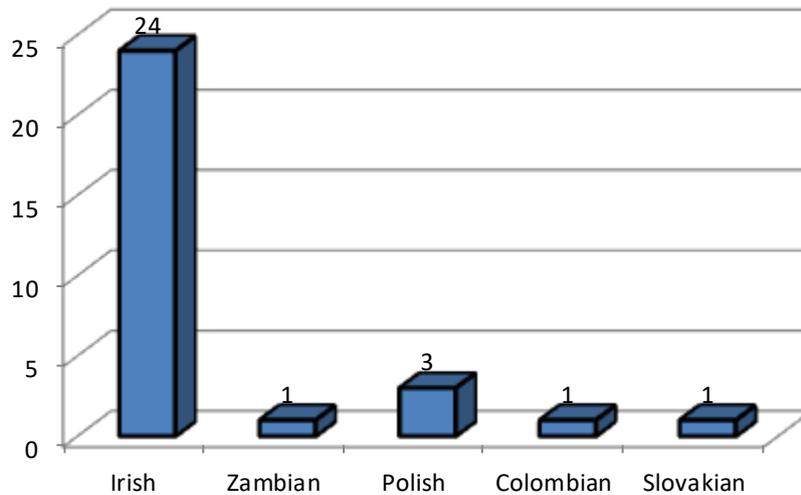
Twenty (67%) of families are parenting alone (Figure 6). This corresponds with demographic research of the area (Harvey, 2015).



**Figure 6: Marital status of respondents**

(iv) Respondents' nationality

80% of respondents identified as Irish, while 20% identified themselves as non- Irish (Figure 7). The non-Irish nationalities included Polish, Zambian, Colombian and Slovakian.

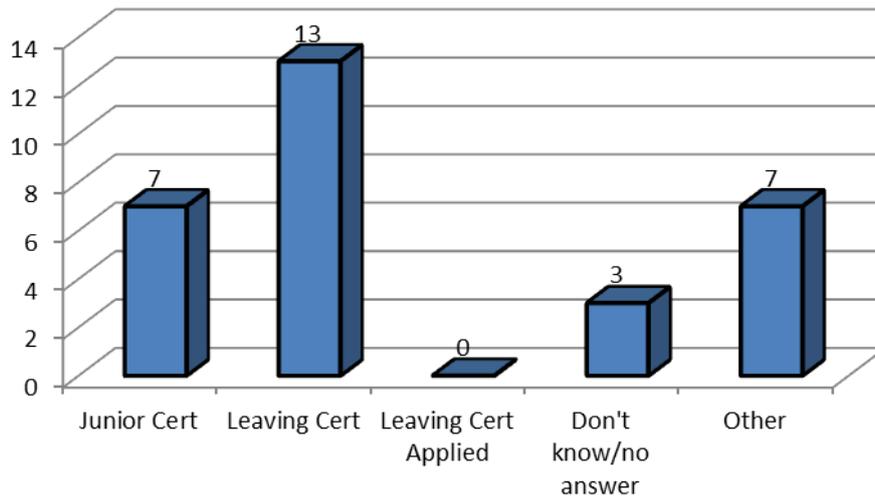


**Figure 7: Respondents' nationality**

**Findings under the category: Educational**

(i) Education level of respondents

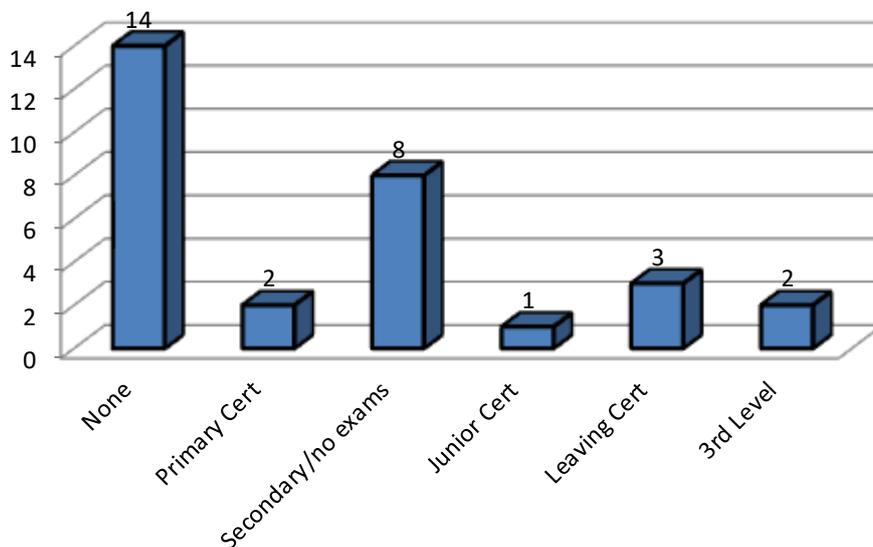
The majority of respondents had completed a state exam (67%) and had left school by the age of 19 (Figure 8). This is made up of 23% having sat a Junior Certificate Examination and 44% a Leaving Certificate examination. 10% of respondents had no state exams. The "other" category was made up of respondents who had done a third level degree (2 respondents), secretarial course (2 respondents), and three more respondents had completed NCVA or, as it is now known, QQI.



**Figure 8: Education level of respondents**

(ii) Education level of respondents' fathers

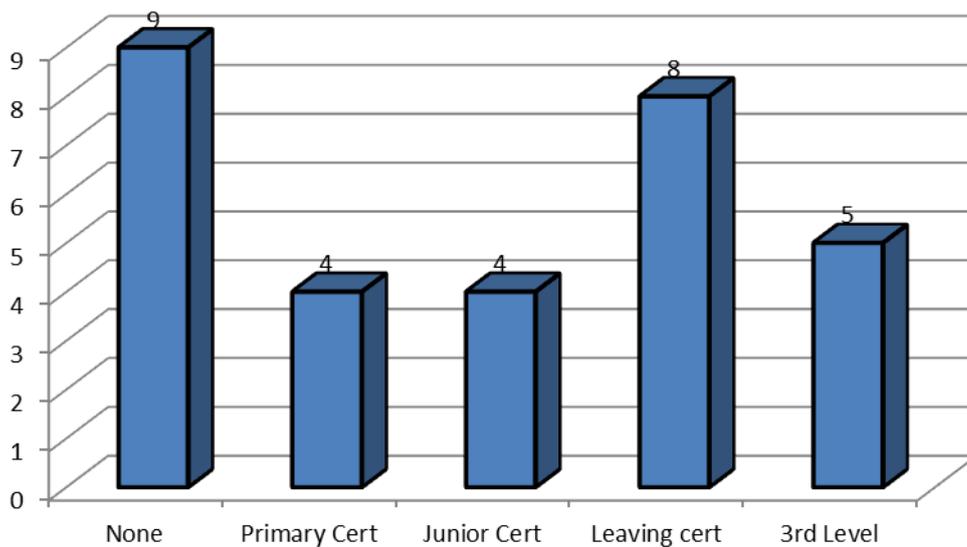
On the questionnaire I asked respondents for their mother and fathers' educational levels to see if there was any correlation in educational attainment of parent and child. 14 (47%) respondents did not answer or wrote "don't know" for the answer. It is interesting to note information from the 53% of respondents who did reply that two fathers who had a third level qualification were non-Irish (Figure 9).



**Figure 9: Education levels of respondents' fathers**

(iii) Education levels of respondents' mothers

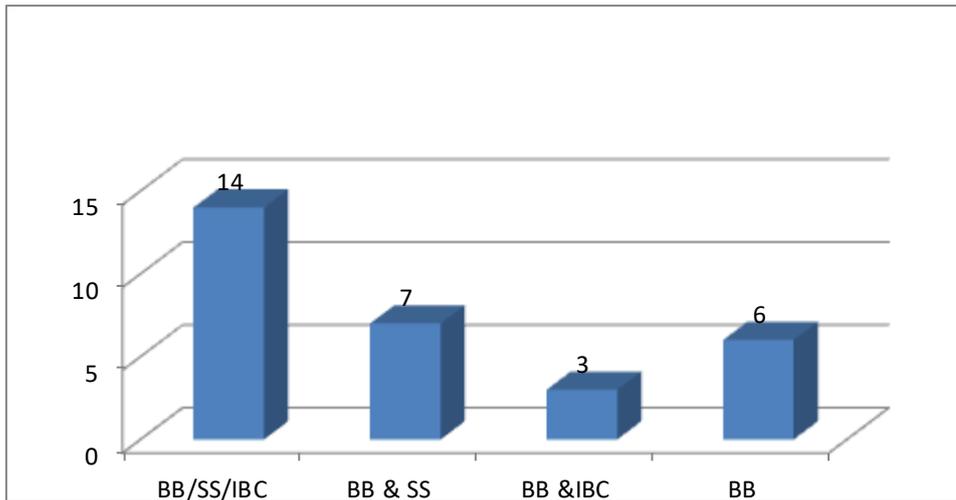
43% of respondents' mothers were reported as having no state qualifications. 13% of mothers had a Junior Certificate Examination and 27% had a Leaving Certificate Examination (Figure 10). When I compare the educational attainments of respondents' mothers to the respondents' own attainments, educational attainment has risen over a generation. It is also interesting to note that two of the five mothers with a third level degree were also non- Irish.



**Figure 10: Education level of respondents' mothers**

(iv) Family literacy programme attendance

As the sample being used was convenience sampling, all respondents had attended one or more of the family literacy programmes (Figure 11, Table 3). 100% of respondents were in attendance at Breakfast Buddies. I decided to break the data down into the different components of the three family literacy programmes, Breakfast Buddies, Story Sacks Programme and the Incredible Book club.



**Figure 11: Respondents' attendance at family literacy programmes<sup>4</sup>**

**Table 3: Respondents' attendance at family literacy programmes**

Attended all three family literacy programmes	47%
Breakfast Buddies Programme & Story Sacks Programme	23%
Breakfast Buddies Programme & Incredible Book Club	10%
Breakfast Buddies Programme only	20%

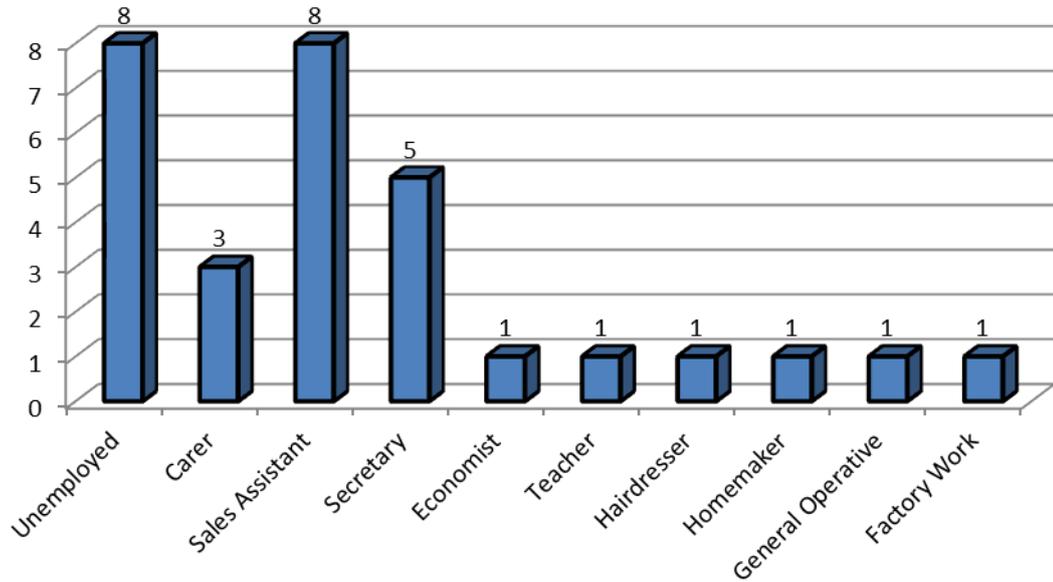
### **Findings under the category: Economic**

#### **(i) Occupation on leaving school**

27% of respondents were unemployed when leaving school. 63% were in low paid employment, such as factory work, sales assistant and general operative (Figure 12). The economist was a non-Irish participant and the

<sup>4</sup> BB = Breakfast Buddies Programme, SS = Story Sacks Programme, IBC = Incredible Book Club

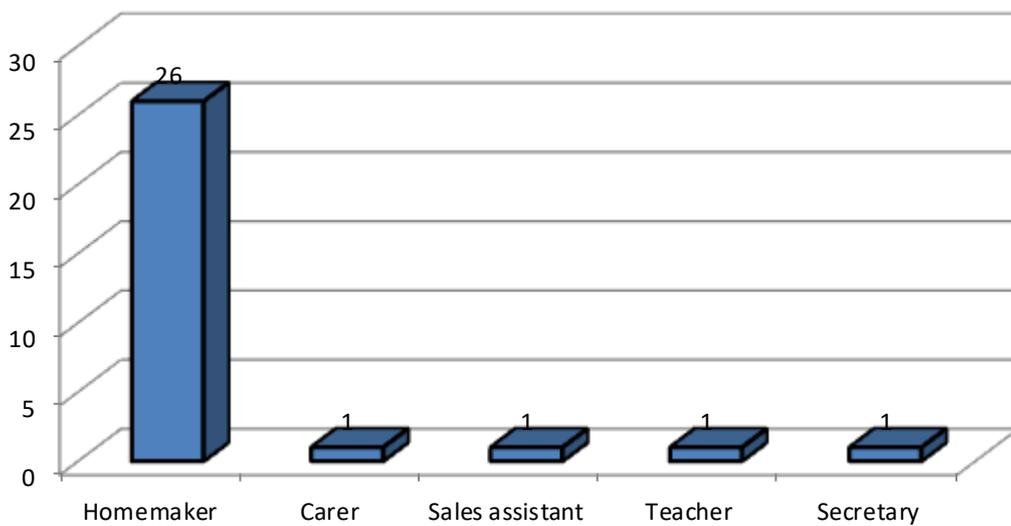
teacher was Irish and her children attend school in Ballymun, making her eligible for the programme as these programmes are universal in target.



**Figure 12: Respondents' occupation on leaving school**

(ii) Present occupation of respondents

87% of respondents stated their current employment as homemaker (Figure 13). Perhaps this reflects the gendered role of literacy and child rearing.

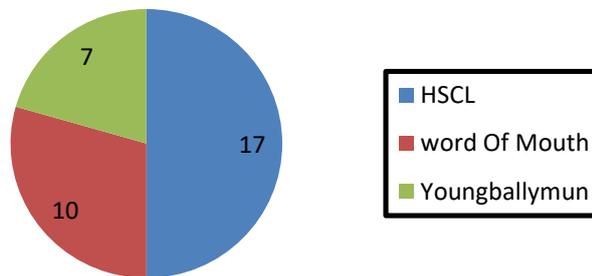


**Figure 13: Respondents present occupation**

## Findings under the category: Social

Initial contact regarding the programmes:

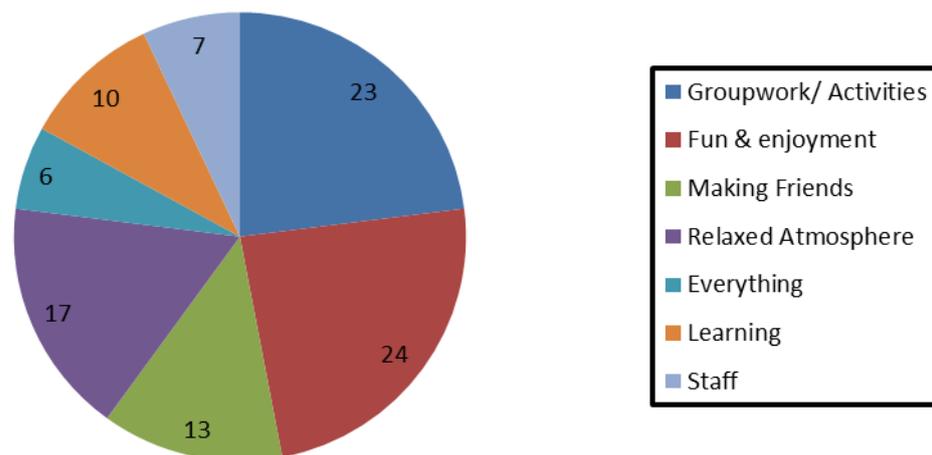
Respondents gave three definitive answers to the question “How did you hear about the programme?” (Figure 14). The partnership between youngballymun and the Home School Community Liaison teachers is a key element in getting parents to attend with over 57% of respondents saying they heard about family literacy programmes through their child’s school “from my kids’ school”. Word of mouth also played its part, 33% of respondents said they heard about it from a friend “my friends went to it and told me how good it was”. 23% of respondents’ said they heard about the programmes from other youngballymun programmes.



**Figure 14: How did you hear about the programme?**

### (i) Most enjoyable thing about programmes

Group work activities and fun and enjoyment were by far the most commonly listed responses (Figure 15, Table 4). To capture this information I created a table of the responses (Table 5) and how many respondents listed them in answer to the question. I then used this information for the pie chart. One of the main reasons for doing the questionnaire was to capture the voices of participants who are attending the family literacy programmes, therefore I have decided to include a selection of the comments from respondents here in answer to the question “What was the most enjoyable thing about this programme?” (Table 5).



**Figure 15: What was the most enjoyable thing about this programme?**

**Table 4: Responses represented in percentages**

<b>Fun &amp; enjoyment</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Groupwork/activities</b>	77%
<b>Relaxed atmosphere</b>	57%
<b>Making friends</b>	43%
<b>Learning</b>	33%
<b>Staff</b>	23%
<b>Everything</b>	20%

**Table 5: What was the most enjoyable thing about this programme?**

*“I love the atmosphere, the activities, the people, the chats. It’s a brilliant community to be able to come together once a month or so, all the different schools to actively enjoy together some activities and information, it’s really enjoyable”*

*“Having fun while doing enjoyable things for my children and learning new things and ways of doing stuff at home”*

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*“Learning how to get my kids excited about reading books”*

*“I enjoyed the interaction with other parents. As a young mother I felt isolated as my friends had no children. I learned fun ways to incorporate learning into my daughter’s routine”*

*“Meeting other people and seeing the faces of my children when I do the activities with them”*

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(ii) Least enjoyable thing about the programme:

Respondents were asked to state what they least enjoyed about the programme they had attended. One respondent commented on the writing group work activity at Breakfast Buddies *“having to be creative in writing and combining everyone’s creativity on one page – challenge (not unenjoyable)”*. Over half of the respondents said there was nothing at all they didn’t like, with one respondent commenting *“I enjoyed it all, wish they were on more often”*. Two non-Irish respondents commented they disliked reading the book. Another respondent commented her least enjoyable moment was *“waiting for the paint to dry!”* in reference to the Story Sacks programme.

(iii) Word cloud for key learning themes

The word cloud (Figure 16) included in this research is highlighting the key learning themes from respondents in their family learning practices.



*“My son attends speech and language therapy and I get loads of tips at Breakfast Buddies to help his speech”*

*“Encourage activities that promote learning”*

*“Reading with my child for at least 10 minutes a day”*

*“They love to read now and I encourage them to learn new words”*

*“Hug the book make reading enjoyable”*

*“We have great fun sharing stories and talking”*

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### **Summary of key findings**

30 respondents completed the questionnaire. These respondents were all participants of the three family literacy programmes: 1) Breakfast Buddies; 2) The Story Sacks Programme; and 3) The Incredible Book Club. All respondents were female.

- 70% of respondents were under the age of 35.
- 94% of respondents' children are benefitting from the family literacy programmes, allowing for children no longer in primary school.
- 80% of respondents were Irish – 20% non –Irish.
- 67% of respondents are parenting alone.
- 23% of respondents had left school with a Junior Certificate Examination.
- 44% of respondents had completed a Leaving Certificate Examination.
- 10% of respondents had no state examinations.
- 67% of respondents stated their main occupation as Homemaker.
- 57% of respondents heard about the programmes through their child's school.
- 33% heard about the programmes from their friends.
- 80% of respondents cited fun & enjoyment as the most enjoyable thing about the programme with 77% listing group work activities and 57% commenting on the relaxed atmosphere.
- 100% of respondents said the family literacy programmes had supported them to develop their children's literacy development.

- 37% of respondents identified themselves for interviews.

### **Key questions identified for further investigation in semi-structured interviews**

The analysis of the questionnaire has provided a broad overview of respondents' lives under the four categories of personal, educational, economic and social. From the questionnaire I have identified themes that I would further investigate in semi-structured interviews with both parents and HSCL teachers.

#### (i) Questions identified for parents

- What were motivations for initial attendance at the family literacy programme?
- What key elements of the programme made them stay?
- As a result of attending the programmes, were there any changes in family literacy practices in the home, if and when these happened, if it was as a result of the family literacy programme/s attended?
- Were there any changes in relationships between parent and child and between parent, child, school and community?

#### (ii) Questions identified for HSCL teachers

- As 57% of respondents stated the HSCL teacher told them about the family literacy programmes, I would enquire about the HSCL's motivations for encouraging parents to attend.
- 100% of respondents stated that the programmes had supported them to develop their children's literacy skills. I will ask the HSCL if they have seen a difference in children's literacy skills and also any difference they have seen in parents who have attended the programmes.
- I would also like to enquire of the HSCL teachers if their perspectives on parents have changed from being involved in the programmes.

## **Analyses of the interview data**

As previously discussed in chapter 3, seven parents agreed to be interviewed and these interviews lasted approximately 30–40 minutes each in duration. Grix (2010) advises contacting prospective interviewees in advance of the interview to see how much time they can give to the interview process. In asking parents to participate in interviews, I needed to ensure they were comfortable with the interview process. This was critical to the interview's success. I needed to be cognizant of the parents' time and their need to collect children from school, do the shopping, cook dinner etc. For these reasons I asked parents how long they could give to the interview process and parents were happy to be interviewed for 30-40 minutes. After analysing the parents' interviews I wanted to triangulate my findings with the HSCL teacher interviews. The triangulation of data from the interview processes supports the

“...Coherent justification of themes. If themes are established based on converging several sources of data or perspectives from participants, then this process can be claimed to be adding validity to the study” (Cresswell, 2014, p.201).

There were 3 HSCL teacher interviews and these lasted approximately 20 minutes each in duration. As was the case with the parents, I contacted the HSCL teachers prior to the interview and asked how much time they could give to the interview process knowing how busy school life can be. The HSCL teachers were happy to give 20 minutes. All of the interviews, 10 in total, were transcribed and then the coding process was applied to generate the theory.

## **Transcribing interviews and initial and focused coding**

Initially I was daunted by the amount of interviews that needed to be transcribed, as it was a large undertaking. However, the process of listening to and transcribing every interview allowed me to adapt questions in later interviews to fill in gaps in the data that I perceived had not been addressed in preceding interviews. This process also allowed me to immerse myself in the data and begin to conceptualize what I was hearing. As each interview was transcribed, I began to write initial line by line codes staying close to

the data and coding using gerunds. Braun & Clarke (2012, p.61) define coding as

“The building blocks of analysis: if your analysis is a brick built house with a tile roof, your themes are the walls and roof and your codes are the individual bricks and tiles”.

I found this definition to be really helpful as I started to code. Charmaz (2014, p.121) states that using gerunds when the researcher is engaged in initial coding supports the researcher to interact with the data, to “define implicit meanings and actions”. Line by line coding for a novice researcher is awkward at first but ensures the researcher is verifying and saturating categories and minimizes the risk of overlooking an important category (Holton, 2007, p.274). According to Saldana (2013, p.3), a code is a word or phrase that “symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data”. Initial coding breaks down data into distinct parts and supports the researcher to look for similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This initial coding process was time consuming but I felt it was well worth it, as it triggered ideas in my thinking on the research. I tried to remain open to every possibility and using gerunds really helped me to “interact with the data” (Charmaz, 2014, p121). A sample of initial coding using gerunds is presented in Table 7.

**Table 7: Sample of initial coding using gerunds (Interview 5, p.18)**

Parent interview 5	Initial coding using gerunds
<p>Interviewer: Oh so your relationship with your daughter changed then because of...?</p> <p>Participant 5: Completely yeah. We just got closer because I was actually doing something that she liked. She loves reading and it made her progress then through the years in school then. She was great.</p>	<p>Relationship building between parent and child/finding activity to do together / finding an activity that child enjoyed/ being able to do activity together/ seeing child progress in school/ feeling happy about child’s progression/ feeling a part of progression in school</p>

I also used constant comparative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) throughout the coding process. This allowed me to compare interview statements and codes and try and look at the world through my respondents' lives. Cohen et al. (2011, p.600) makes the point that

“In constant comparison data is compared across a range of situations, times, groups of people and through a range of methods. The process resonates with the methodological notion of triangulation”.

Using the constant comparative methods as I collected data from interviews, gave me fresh insight and ideas as to what the respondents were telling me (Table 8).

**Table 8: Constant comparative methods: comparing interview statements**

Parent interview 4, p.6	Parent interview 2, p.4
<p>I: So what is it that you like about it?</p> <p>P4: I like all the activities. Right. All the different activities that you wouldn't even think of doing with your kids. And you get to meet loads of nice people from all over the walks of life. All different nationalities and you hear their story as well. What they do with their children so it's great like that. You give them feedback and they tell you theirs.</p>	<p>I: So did you do anything else with the Story Sacks bag when you went home?</p> <p>P2: I played games with him with the story sack bag and we sat down and read the story, we snuggled together up on the couch and read the story and then we did a jigsaw. I made one for the bag and we made a "find the animal on the page" and we had little cards with the animals on it so it was matching the animals to the pictures and he really enjoyed it.</p>

As I completed coding each interview I began to write a descriptive memo of each interview to capture my conceptual ideas about the codes and what I was finding (Table 9). Holton (2007, p.276) explains how using the coding and memo-writing process progresses patterns in the data, as these patterns begin to emerge the researcher's confidence grows. Charmaz (2014, p.163) agrees with Holton but adds "critical reflexivity" to her description of the memo-writing process. I found memo-writing to be a very reflexive process as it allowed me to challenge my own assumptions and ideas that were emerging as I coded the data. I also used In Vivo codes in my memo-writing and these codes preserve participants' "meanings and actions" (Charmaz, 2014, p.134). I incorporated these codes into my later analyses as they really supported me to focus on what the participants were really telling me about family literacy programmes. According to Charmaz (2014, p.135) In Vivo codes "anchor your analysis in your research participants' worlds".

**Table 9: Sample of a memo**

18/8/15 Memo for Parent interview 1.
<p><b>"It sounded like something I needed to do"- In Vivo Code</b></p> <p><b>P1 had a feeling she should be supporting her child but didn't know how to. The school is an obvious place to base courses, as that is where the parents are bringing their kids to school. P1 says perseverance got her to the course and for her it grew from there, literacy practices are now incorporated into everyday life. This has changed the relationship with P1 and her daughter but also brought about huge changes in P1's own life. From doing these courses she realised she could learn and knew what she wanted to be, so her personal development is huge. I wonder is this transformational learning? The practices she learned from Story Sacks and Breakfast Buddies she is still using today even though her daughter is 10! So the change in her practice seems to be embedded in her and has changed her life as she said herself. She also spoke about changes in her daughter who writes her own stories, and loves reading. P1 also</b></p>

**talks a lot about having fun while learning in the programmes and that this encouraged her and also how helping her daughter and her daughter’s enjoyment made her want to do more. This is very interesting, it is like a never ending cycle of happiness; the happier the child is, the parent wants to do more. Interesting ...there is also evidence of the change in relationship with the school, something else to enquire about in future interviews.**

As I finished the process of initial coding I moved on to the second stage which was focused coding. The focused coding process supported me to identify frequent codes in my initial coding. This allowed me to synthesise and analyse initial codes. During the focused coding process I began to categorise my data. I began a process of comparing focused codes from one data set to another and I found themes were beginning to emerge from the data. Charmaz (2014, p.160) affirms that “checking your focused codes against large batches of data makes the analytic process effective and efficient”. Braun & Clarke (2012, p.61) describe codes as “going beyond participant meaning and provide an interpretation about the data content”. In this example of focused coding (Table 10) the focused code “Barrier to engagement” is providing an interpretation of the data content.

**Table 10: Sample of Focused Coding (Interview 1, p.2)**

<b>Parent Interview 1</b>	<b>Initial coding</b>	<b>Focused coding</b>
I: So how did you feel going into it the first time?		
P1: The very first day I went in I was absolutely mortified. I didn’t know	Feeling embarrassed/ feeling nervous /self-conscious	Barriers to engagement

<p>who was going to be there? What was it going to be about what I was going to be asked of me and if any of my flaws would come to light in Story Sacks, you know like about parenting and what I didn't do with [Child's name] and stuff so I was a bit embarrassed going in and a bit nervous.</p>	<p>Concerned parenting skills not sufficient- being found out / fearing flaws will be highlighted</p> <p>feeling embarrassed/ feeling nervous/</p>	<p>Fearing being found out in parenting abilities</p> <p>Barriers to engagement</p>
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When I had finished focused coding, it was becoming clear that I had a number of themes that were emerging across different data sets. A theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning with the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). I decided to cluster these themes, in order to do this I placed focused codes from each interview side by side (Table 11, Table 12) then I printed these pages and using pen and paper, I began to circle the reoccurring codes to check their validity and my analysis. This practice I felt supported my reflexivity during the process of analysis. By using this method of clustering I was ensuring that what I had considered to be a theme was actually standing up to my analysis. Charmaz (2014, p.192) states that theoretical sampling “brings systematic checks and refinements into your analyses”. Charmaz (2014) suggests that initial coding, focused coding, clustering and memo writing lead to theoretical sampling. “Theoretical sampling is strategic, specific and systematic because you use it to refine your theoretical categories”. I began this process by looking through the data for examples that supported me to

construct “full and robust categories” (Charmaz, 2014, p.200), as I found enough data to support a category I included it as part of a theme.

**Table 11: Theoretical sampling**

Parent interview 3 focused codes	Parent interview 4 focused codes
<p>Low self esteem</p> <p>Self concept</p> <p>Detached from child’s learning</p> <p>Conscious of inaction/inability to support child’s learning</p> <p>Self-concept</p> <p>Not aware of fl practice</p> <p>Permission to learn</p> <p>Personal learning goals</p> <p>Seeing children’s potential</p> <p>Helping children- permission to learn</p> <p>Barriers to engagement/ overcoming barriers/ strategies to overcome barriers</p> <p>Collaborative learning</p> <p>Peer support</p> <p>Peer sharing</p> <p>Social outlet</p> <p>Feeling welcomed/</p> <p>Self-Perceptions</p> <p>Facilitator expertise</p> <p>Being included</p> <p>Self-perceptions</p> <p>Being treated like an adult</p>	<p>Permission to learn</p> <p>peer support</p> <p>Social outlet</p> <p>Collaborative learning</p> <p>Personal learning goals</p> <p>Self as learner</p> <p>Unfulfilled potential</p> <p>Personal learning goals</p> <p>Parent as learner</p> <p>Recognizing personal levels of literacy</p> <p>changing perception of role as parent</p> <p>collaborative learning</p> <p>Curiosity for course</p> <p>Collaborative learning/peer support</p> <p>Collaborative learning</p> <p>Peer support</p> <p>Environment/ contextual setting</p> <p>Recognizing other parents learning</p> <p>Contextual factors</p> <p>Collaborative learning</p> <p>Contextual factors</p> <p>Safe environment</p>

**Table 12: Theoretical Sampling for emerging themes**

<b>Barriers to participation</b>	<b>Overcoming barriers to participation</b>	<b>Teaching Learning Environment</b>	<b>Transformational learning</b>	<b>Cultural Shifts Between Home-School-Community</b>
<p>“The very first day I went in I was absolutely mortified. I didn’t know who was going to be there? What was it going to be about? What was going to be asked of me? and if any of my flaws would come to light in Story Sacks, you know like about parenting and what I didn’t do with [child’s name] and stuff so I was a bit embarrassed going in and a bit nervous”</p>	<p>“You were brought in and everybody was included so. The facilitator the way she was able to facilitate the group of people because everyone’s different and you’re dealing with adults. You’re not dealing with kids where you can say “oh you can’t do this or you’re in trouble like” Adults do their own thing like she was well able to facilitate as they say”.</p>	<p>“It’s great fun. It was brilliant but it got you thinking “God we could do this with our kids” and it got you thinking with the group and you got to learn other things as well from the group about what they do with their children as well and what I could take out of that to bring home to my family as well.”</p>	<p>“I have changed. Before I did the programmes I was like me mother.” Just go and play. Leave me alone. Just get out of me sight”. But now I enjoy my children. I enjoy spending time with them. I enjoy talking to them. I loved reading to them when they were babies and I love doing the shared reading with [child’s name] now. It’s brought me around to enjoying my kids and how to enjoy them and how to spend time with them without losing the head with them”.</p>	<p>“Before that I would drop [child’s name] to school go home collect her and that would be it. I wouldn’t really even know any of the other teacher’s names at all but now if there’s anything on I am asked to volunteer. I feel really comfortable going into the school now. I feel like it’s built a bridge or a root if you know what I mean like I can talk to them like It’s not so daunting anymore”.</p>

According to Braun & Clarke (2012, p.65), the process of reviewing potential themes with the coded data is about quality checking and is important for novice researchers. They highlight questions a researcher should ask themselves as they develop themes:

- Is this a theme (it could just be a code)?
- If it is a theme, what is the quality of this theme (does it tell something useful about this data set and my research question)?
- What are the boundaries of this theme (what does it include and exclude)?
- Are there enough (meaningful) data to support this theme (is the theme thin or thick)?
- Are the data too diverse and wide ranging (does the theme lack coherence)? (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p.65)

Through the grounded theory processes of coding, constant comparisons, memo writing and theoretical sampling, the themes developed into 5 core themes and 10 subthemes. I then went back through the data again to look at the sub themes and see if they were actually a core part of themes or if they were themes in their own right. Braun & Clarke (2012) state that the researcher needs to be able to clearly state what is unique and specific about each theme. They offer questions for novice researchers to guide the development of themes:

- Themes should ideally have a single focus
- Themes can be related but do not overlap, so they are not repetitive, although they may build on previous themes
- Themes should directly address your research question  
(Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 66)

After going through the data set again, I decided that I had 5 themes and that the subthemes were part of the key themes. Having applied Braun & Clarke (2012) guide to developing themes, I decided the 5 themes directly answered my research question and did not overlap. I thought perhaps the theme Barriers to Participation and Overcoming Barriers might be perceived as overlapping, but I felt they did not overlap but rather the theme overcoming barriers to participation built on the previous theme.

## **Naming the five themes**

Now that I had completed the analysis and had developed the themes I wanted to name the themes using In Vivo codes, I felt these codes kept the research close to respondents' voices. Charmaz (2014, p.135) states that "In Vivo codes are characteristic of social worlds and organizational settings...they can provide a crucial check on whether you have grasped what is significant". Braun & Clarke (2012, p.69) concur stating that "using quotes in titles can provide an immediate and vivid sense of what a theme is about while staying close to participants' language and concepts". I therefore went back through the memos I had written when analysing the data and carefully chose an In Vivo code that I felt matched the theme. The five themes are described below and outlined in Figure 17.

### **1. Barriers to Participation – "I didn't know what to do with a child in school".**

This theme reflects the barriers to participation encountered by the respondents. In the interview process, they described various barriers to participation ranging across a variety of areas: from being an early school leaver, to being a single parent, not having any interest in the school and having low self-confidence and self-esteem.

### **2. Overcoming barriers to participation - "You feel like you're worth something"**

This theme builds on the previous theme to reflect how the barriers to participation were overcome for respondents. In the interview process respondents describe the facilitation style of the family literacy teacher, the concept of care and "feeling like you're worth something".

### **3. Teaching – learning environment - "If parents really enjoy going to something then it must be good"**

This theme builds on the previous theme, to locate the teaching and learning environment as a key concept to overcome barriers to participation and to address retention in family literacy programmes. There were many factors that respondents highlighted as being a reason why they attended

and stayed in the programmes, most notably the fun learning environment and the creation of a virtuous learning cycle.

#### **4. Cultural shifts between home-school-community -"I feel like it's built a bridge or a root"**

This theme highlights cultural shifts in the home-school-community relationships that the respondents experienced as a result of attending the programmes.

#### **5. Transformational learning -"I feel like a real mother"**

This theme builds on the previous theme, to capture the changes respondents reported in their lives as a result of attending the programmes, the learning they experienced, their application of it and how it affected them and their children in ways perhaps they never thought possible.



**Figure 17: The 5 themes named using In Vivo codes**

Theories constructed through grounded theory “aims to provide understanding of a phenomenon that will ultimately inform practice in a given discipline” (Birks & Mills, 2012, p.148). With the themes I have developed from the generated data, I am going to confirm its relevance by looking at the research already conducted on family literacy and develop a framework that will support change in family literacy practice.

In this chapter I have described the analysis of the questionnaire and a presentation of the findings under the categories, personal, social, educational and economic. I have discussed the key questions identified for further investigation in semi-structured interviews as a result of the

questionnaire findings. I also described the analysis of the interview data to include transcribing, initial and focused coding, using constant comparative methods, clustering, writing memos and theoretical sampling to support the discovery of the five themes. In the next chapter I will develop the themes through a thematic view of the findings in the literature.

## **Chapter 6: Thematic view of findings**

Chapter 6 outlines the themes that have emerged from the data as a result of the analyses. In keeping with grounded theory methodology, I engage with the literature relevant to these emerging findings using the themes as my guide.

As mentioned in chapter 3 and 4, the literature review in grounded theory is probably one of the most controversial elements of the method (Birks & Mills, 2015) and is “diametrically contested between traditional and evolved grounded theorists” (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006, p.29). The original core concepts of grounded theory are to limit exposure to the literature to minimise researcher bias (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). It would be impossible for me to work in the area of family literacy and come to the research knowing nothing about it. I have been clear about my personal bias by clearly stating my philosophical position in chapter 2 and by including my initial literature review in chapter 3. Charmaz (2014, p.307) is quite clear in her instructions on a literature review: “You may let this material lie fallow until after you have developed your categories and the analytical relationships between them”. She purports leaving the literature review to fit the specific purpose and argument of the research. Bryman suggests “being able to link research questions, findings and discussions to the existing literature is an important way of demonstrating the credibility and contribution of your research” (Bryman, 2016, p.6). As discussed in chapter 5, from the analysis of the findings 5 themes emerged: Barriers to participation, Overcoming barriers to participation, Teaching learning environment, Cultural shifts between home and school and Transformational learning. I have followed the advice of Charmaz (2014) and Bryman (2016) and linked my thematic findings to the literature review. This in depth review will support the development of the family literacy framework.



**Figure 18: Barriers to participation**

## **Barriers to participation – “I didn’t know what to do with a child in school”**

### **Parental engagement**

Recruiting parents for family literacy programmes can be an arduous task. There are many barriers to engagement that need to be overcome to ensure parental engagement. Research has shown that barriers to engagement in literacy programmes are many and varied and are more prevalent among older people, men and people from socio-economic areas of disadvantage (NALA, 2010).

These barriers have been identified as:

**Contextual:** for example limited programmes and inadequate government policies to tackle social exclusion, inequality and educational disadvantage.

**Informational:** inadequate information available on education and training opportunities.

**Institutional:** covering accredited processes, perceptions of classroom settings and a limited range of literacy options.

**Situational:** related to person’s circumstances for example if they have access to high quality childcare provision.

**Dispositional:** related to a person’s outlook and attitude, for example their self-confidence, value placed on learning, attitude to education and any

sense of embarrassment or stigma attached to literacy difficulties (NALA, 2010).

Working in the area of adult literacy for sixteen years, I have seen how barriers to engagement can affect adults with literacy difficulties and as a result can have a negative effect on their lives. A parent involved in this research spoke about her fear of attending programmes. “I wouldn’t really mix well with people and I was always afraid of going places because I suffered really bad with anxiety” (Parent interview 5, p.2). When applied to family literacy, barriers to engagement can have a devastating effect on children’s life potential. “There is significant evidence from research, both in Ireland and elsewhere, that disadvantage associated with poverty assumes a multiplier effect and are exacerbated when large proportions of pupils in a school are from poor backgrounds (a 'social context' effect)” OECD (2011, p.5). Family literacy plays a key role in children’s acquisition of literacy skills and can potentially overcome the cycle of educational disadvantage. As a family literacy teacher, I believe that there are specific barriers to parental engagement that are unique to the relationships between the school and parents. Hornby & Lafaele (2011) developed a model of factors as barriers to parental involvement and I consider it to be an effective representation of the barriers to parental engagement (Table 13). Their model explains the barriers from the perspective of parents, children, parent-teacher relationships and wider societal factors which I contend can be clearly linked to ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 1997). I am going to use their model to describe the barriers to parental engagement to family literacy programmes.

**Table 13: Model of factors acting as barriers to parental involvement<sup>5</sup>  
(Hornby & Lafaele, 2011)**

<p><b>Individual parent and family factors</b> (<i>Microsystem &amp; Exosystem</i>)</p> <p>Parents beliefs about P.I</p> <p>Perceptions of invitations for P.I</p> <p>Current life contexts</p> <p>Class ethnicity and gender</p>	<p><b>Child factors</b> (<i>Microsystem &amp; Chronosystem</i>)</p> <p>Age</p> <p>Learning difficulties and disabilities</p> <p>Gifts and talents</p> <p>Behavioural problems</p>
<p><b>Parent-teacher factors</b> (<i>Mesosystem</i>)</p> <p>Differing goals and agendas</p> <p>Differing attitudes</p> <p>Differing language used</p>	<p><b>Societal factors</b> (<i>Macrosystem</i>)</p> <p>Historical and demographic</p> <p>Political</p> <p>Economic</p>

### **Societal factors**

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the current economic climate in Ireland has increased poverty rates and homelessness among the most vulnerable of our society, exacerbating situational barriers to participation. The child poverty rate in Ireland rose by over 10% to 28.6% between 2008 and 2012 this is an increase of 130,000 children living in poverty in Ireland (UNICEF, 2014). For many parents their cultural and social capital often limits children’s life potential before it has begun. Providing their children with the tools to successfully navigate the Irish education system is beyond some parents’ capabilities. “While social class inequality in education manifests itself in terms of individual injustice, its origins lie in the institutionalized inequality of access to wealth and income that directly influences one’s capacity to buy educational services on equal terms with others” (Baker et al., 2009, p.151). Free resources and food for parents attending the family literacy programmes in Ballymun became a crucial component for parents attending:

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<sup>5</sup>My addition in *italics*. As discussed earlier ecological systems theory has five levels of interactions that directly and indirectly influence child development all of which I have labelled in the model.

“We got all our free stuff and our book, we were able to take what we learned home and talk about it to our children” (Parent interview 1, p.3)

“My son knew I was coming to Breakfast Buddies and he knew I'd be bringing home something. Some sort of activity to do and he was delighted...that was a reward for me as well, to see him getting interested in something and you got your little cup of tea and your little bite to eat which is a bonus as well” (Parent interview 7, p.10).

A recent article in the Irish Times (Oct. 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015), highlighted the figures of children and families that are now homeless in Ireland, with the majority headed by single parents.

“In Dublin, of the 637 families in homelessness accommodation last month, 419 (65 per cent) were headed by single parents. Outside Dublin, of the 101 families, 77 (76 per cent) were headed by single parents. They also show the total number of homeless people during the week of September 21st to 27th was 4,999. This was made up of 1,571 children, 980 parents and 2,448 adults without children.”

Homeless parents and children are often put in emergency accommodation in hotels, which can be some distance away from the children's school and so creating an access barrier to participation for children and parents. Poverty and homelessness are societal barriers that are steeped in the political, economic, historical and demographic inequalities that are perpetuated by the Irish Government's neo-liberal approach to social equality. These figures on poverty and homelessness in Ireland today bring to mind Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Rogers, 1996). When parents are struggling to feed, clothe and put a roof over their children's heads, parental engagement and the educational needs of children will inevitably get lost in the chaos of life, trying to meet physiological and safety needs, which become a daily priority.

### **Parent and child factors**

Parents understanding of the role they can play in supporting their children's education and their belief in their ability to support their children are crucial to parental engagement. Some parents involved in this research project spoke about not being involved with the school and believing that it was the schools responsibility to teach their child: “because at that stage I never did anything in the school I wasn't interested in the school I just sent them to school and that was it” (Parent interview 2, p.2.). Hoover-Dempsey

& Sandler (1997) affirm that parents with no confidence in their abilities will avoid contact with the school, and Hornby & Lafaele (2011) state that parents' previous experience of school, if it was negative, will hinder their willingness to get involved. Schools and teachers can treat parents from a deficit perspective which seriously hinders parental engagement (Weiss, 2014). A deficit perspective is where parents are blamed for the failings of their children in the education system. For example, the transition of children from primary school to secondary school can be fraught with anxieties for children, not least when they have grown up feeling that they are treated differently. This deficit perspective is then transmitted to children by teacher/school attitude or parent/school attitude or both. "They kept asking me '...was there discrimination against Ballymun people?' This was a big thing for them. They heard teachers weren't fair to Ballymun people..." (Teacher interview, youngballymun, 2011, p.35).

The age of children can also impact on parents' participation. As children get older they like to be seen as independent and often do not welcome their parents' involvement in the school. However, this is the "public viewing" of engagement. Support for literacy practices can still be evident in the home learning environment. As already stated the approach from the school to offer supports to the family is another potential barrier to engagement if parents are approached from a deficit perspective (Weiss, 2014). For example, the introduction of the HSCL teacher into DEIS schools is a welcome initiative and has helped build links between family and school. However, a parental voice is clearly missing from the service design. This extract is from a report written by HSCL teachers discussing their preparation before a home visit

"A central element in the preparation for family visits is the identification and selection of families for whom the HSCL Scheme might provide extra support and encouragement. The gathering of pre-visit information creates a good starting point. Discussion with the principal, year head, class teachers or community organizations prepares the coordinator for the visit. The consultation with staff members, together with school records, gives an insight into the child's progress, punctuality, attendance and well-being in school" (Government of Ireland, 2006, p.22).

An ecological systems theory approach in the work of the HSCL perhaps would have included the parent and child in the discussions highlighted

above, which would be a more strengths-based approach. Timmons et al. (2008) found that parents can feel judged by schools and teachers if they were to admit literacy difficulties or any problems and this reluctance can impact on parental engagement.

Barriers to family literacy and parental engagement can be attributed to social class. Nechyba et al. (1999) identified three ways in which social class could impinge on parental involvement. Firstly, an informational barrier, the “culture of poverty” where it is thought that working-class parents place less value on education than their middle class peers. Secondly, a dispositional barrier, working-class parents have less “social capital” in terms of social networks and skills, leaving parents feeling they are unable to support the work of the schools. Thirdly, an institutional barrier, working-class parents view schools as middle-class institutions with mainly middle-class teachers working in them, which creates a culture clash within the school and a lack of understanding on behalf of the school and parents as to what each other’s role entails. The OECD (1997) also highlighted that class, ethnicity and gender can play a role in the degree to which parents engage with schools and support their children’s acquisition of literacy skills. This can lead teachers and schools to perceive this as a lack of interest on the parent’s behalf, leaving some schools and teachers to assume that some parents “don’t care”.

### **Parent-teacher factors**

Parents’ and teachers’ engagement is formed through different perspectives and interests (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Parents in socio-economic areas of disadvantage want their children to do well in school and often rely on the teacher’s expertise to teach their child.

“It is important to raise the bar – which Write-Minded has helped us to do. In an area like this it is easy to become complacent and that ‘that will do’, but it has really helped us push against the barriers and [it] challenges us and the children” (Teacher interview, Youngballymun, 2011, p.60).

Teachers’ attitudes and beliefs about parents can directly influence parent’s willingness to get involved in the school. Teachers’ understanding of

families influences their understanding of their students and their student's families (Caspé, 2003).

"I remember a parent once. She said that she read the stories to her child but she sometimes didn't know the words on the page...But if you think of a mother not being able to know the words in a children's story book-and we are talking about a picture book for young children-it gives you an idea of some of the issues we face here."

(Teacher interview, youngballymun, 2011, p.53).

Parents' social class background has a key role in determining educational outcomes. Schools, through their selection processes, ability grouping, and curriculum and assessment procedures have no resemblance to working class cultural values reproduce social class inequalities (Baker et al. 2009). Living up to schools' expectations can be hard for a parent struggling with societal factors. "Social conventions and institutions that bind society together – family, community, education and other public services – proved to have even greater potential for shaming" (Walker et al., 2013, p.223). The difference between parent's primary discourse and the schools' secondary discourse can also be a barrier to engagement with the school, as well as affecting children's literacy attainments. Differences in language use among children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their middle-class peers were linked to poor literacy attainment for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. They were found to struggle to use and understand the language used by schools (Cregan, 2007, p.5).

### **Hard to reach parents**

Epstein (2011, p.270) asks the question "who are the hard to reach parents?" She states that fathers, teen parents, older parents, step parents, parents who work, parents who don't speak English, basically all parents at some stage can be labelled hard to reach. In my opinion, the problem with this term arises when it is used by schools to explain lack of parental involvement in programmes aimed at parents to support their interaction with the school. Is it always the parent's fault? Is there no responsibility on behalf of the school to create meaningful engagement? Larrivee encourages teachers to find new ways to create "authentic learning communities" (Larrivee, 2000, p.293). This could be achieved through

reflective practice. If parents are not engaging is it because they are hard to reach or the school has yet to reach them?

In research carried out for the Australian Government on engaging hard to reach families, Cortis, Katz & Patulny (2009) highlight that the definition for “hard to reach groups” varies between programmes with no distinct definition, which is similar to Epstein’s (2011) observations. Doherty, Hall and Kinder (2003, p.5) believe that programmes embedded in early intervention and prevention use the term “hard to reach” to define three groups of people:

- (i)The under-represented: people who are marginalised, socio-economically disadvantaged, people who are normally not represented in mainstream groups.
- (ii)The invisible or overlooked: families who slip through the cracks of service provision and are left disaffected by the process.
- (iii)The service resistant: people who choose not to engage with services, but according to services could benefit the most

Families who live in areas of socio-economic disadvantage are labelled in deficit terms: the hard to reach, the underclass, the disadvantaged, the long-term unemployed, the single parent, the under-represented and the invisible families to name but a few. Elitism and exclusion cause prejudice, which spreads these ideologies about working-class families through services and society. This causes those at the receiving end of inequality to trust less and be fearful of a society that does not value them (Dorling, 2011). Is it any wonder then that some parents are reluctant to engage? Families described in these deficit terms are at risk from the same core factors: poor living standards, poor housing conditions, lack of access to high quality early years provision, poor health, waiting lists for services for children (for example speech delay) and access to justice (Buchanan, Bennett, Ritchie, Smith, Smith, Harker, & Vitali-Ebers, 2004). The factors of social exclusion, which lead to families being labelled as hard to reach or the “underclass” (Feiler, 2010, p.25) are complex and diverse and are used as an excuse for bad services, abdicating their responsibilities. The term

hard to reach is stigmatising and is based on a deficit model of engagement with parents and is “constructed and controlled by practitioners” (Cortis et al., 2009, p.3). Schools looking for ways to overcome barriers to participation should reflect on their policies on engagement to ensure they are not “hard to reach schools” (Crozier & Davies, 2007). During the research interviews, Home School Community Liaison Teachers spoke about the impact of the programmes on the parents attending and also their prior assumptions on parent’s capabilities:

“I really saw in Story Sacks, when they were making their own bags, that we have very talented and educated parents and it lifts me to see that in them, what has really opened up my eyes in terms of Breakfast Buddies is to see the potential they have” (HSCL interview 8, pp.2-3)

“I think there’s more that we can do from a teacher’s point of view. I can see now the benefits of having a chat with the parent, the benefit of having a home school person. The class teacher doesn’t have the time for personal contact with parents. I see the benefit of the family literacy programmes because parents who have had a poor school experience themselves will automatically be negative about school” (HSCL interview 9, p.9).

“I would have always thought when I was in the classroom that the parents are very separate, now I realise we can’t do anything in the isolation of our classroom if we aren’t being supported at home. A child isn’t going to learn to read or have a love for reading with school alone, they need that help, they need that support so I think it’s made me realise how important it is to get parents involved” (HSCL interview 10, p,10).

In my experience, schools rarely reflect on their policy or practice in relation to engagement. It is often viewed as the parent’s fault for non-attendance. The assumption is that it is the parent’s responsibility to engage with the school (Crozier & Davies, 2007). Teachers can adopt an attitude of “professional distance” as they can find interactions with parents quite stressful due to the fact that they have very little training in communicating with parents. Teachers can often view parents as problems, adversaries, vulnerable, less able, needing counselling and the cause of the child’s behavioural problems (Hornby, 2000, pp.6-7). According to Crozier & Davies (2007, p.310) “parents were set apart and “othered” as inadequate, deficient or at best just not able to cope”. The deficit language of “hard to reach” coupled with the deficit approach of some schools and teachers in areas of socio-economic disadvantage have a negative effect on parental

engagement. Parents spoke about their involvement with the school before attending the family literacy programmes:

“I wasn’t really involved in my child’s learning at school at all” (Parent interview 1, p1)

“I never did anything in the school, I wasn’t interested in the school, I just sent them to school and that was it, because before that there was nothing in the schools to do” (Parent interview 2, p.1)

“I was very nervous because you don’t know what to expect, you’re going into a room with people you don’t know” (Parent interview 5, p.3)



**Figure 19: Overcoming barriers to participation.**

### **Overcoming barriers to participation - "You feel like you're worth something"**

As stated earlier in Chapter 6, there are many barriers to parental engagement, these barriers have been identified as contextual, informational, institutional, situational and dispositional (NALA, 2010). Overcoming barriers to engagement is crucial to addressing some of the inequalities prevalent in our education system. For parents living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, limited access to economic resources leads to barriers to educational attainment and to social exclusion for their children (Basic Skills Agency, 2002; Ofsted, 2007). Education is vital for individuals to reach their full potential, to fully participate in society, both culturally and socially and to gain educational credentials to ensure access to employment (Baker et al., 2009). Overcoming barriers to participation

and engaging parents in family literacy programmes is a fundamental component to parents' ability to challenge the status quo and achieve educational equality for their children.

A partnership approach to relationships between schools, teachers and parents, would be one way to overcome barriers to participation. Teachers viewed as experts on teaching and parents viewed as experts on their children, would support parental engagement (Hornby, 2000). This partnership approach would encompass a strengths-based perspective and so include elements of mutual respect, integrity, innovation, care and equity in the practice of working with families.

McCurdy & Daro (2001) discuss the importance of, awareness of and sensitivity to cultural backgrounds in service delivery. The advertising of programmes in positive terms to parents (such as supporting children's enjoyment of reading) and programmes having a universal approach are seen as important factors to engagement by Cortis et al. (2009). Universal programmes mean that the stigma of being "a hard to reach parent" or "a problem parent" (Hornby, 2000) is removed. Programmes can still be targeted, but from within the universal framework. To overcome barriers to engagement for the three family literacy programmes, I implemented various methods in a partnership approach with the Home School Community Liaison teacher at the initial point of contact. Flyers, posters, phone calls, text messages and one to one contact with parents are some of the methods I have employed.

"A flyer was sent home for Story Sacks and posters were put up on the school doors for Breakfast Buddies, a flyer went home to every single parent followed by a reminder on the text a parent that we use in the school for promoting any classes and courses that go on" (HSCL interview 8, p.1)

"When I heard it was about stories and helping you help your kids enjoy reading I wanted to do it."(Parent interview 3, p3)

Relationships and relationship building are crucial to successful engagement with parents. Barrett (2008) emphasizes relationships are critical to successful engagement with vulnerable families, although they are time intensive. Cortis et al., (2009) discuss the importance of relationship

building, stressing the support it gives to parents to build self-esteem and help overcome anxieties about participation.

“You were handing out leaflets, trying to get people to go into it and explained to me what it was, so that’s how I went to Story Sacks” (Parent interview 1, p.1).

“I knew the facilitator to say hello to but I didn’t know her any other way. It was a bit nerve-wracking starting but once you got in there everybody was chatting all together” (Parent interview 3, p.3).

“We tried a couple of times to get the parents to do Story Sacks and numbers were low but I think once the parents knew you and me it gave a real push and a drive” (HSCL interview 10, p.1).

Parents will view schooling and education through their own lens of experience in school (Auerbach, 2002). I want to transform that experience for parents and allow them to view learning with their child at home as different to that of school, home learning should be fun! Crucial to the design of the family literacy programmes is the underlying concept of family literacy and what it means. Heath (2010) describes two critical factors vital to the family literacy concept. First is the continued language interaction with children across the lifecycle, and second is the pleasure and enjoyment of spending time with children on literacy activities. The three family literacy programmes are delivered to parents in school and community settings. The emphasis on engaging parents is to create a non- threatening, indirect and informal invitation to participate; this is done through a “fun way”. For example, parents on the Incredible Years Parenting Programme are invited to voluntarily stay after their programme ends to participate in a book club for their children. This is a non-threatening invitation as they are already in a group setting with their peers and facilitators. The family literacy practitioner will then give parents a free “book pack”, which includes a story book and related literacy activities and demonstrate the “hug a book” technique. Through this fun way of introducing parents to reading books to their children, parents feel equipped to introduce family learning activities in their own home. Parents involved in this research spoke about “hugging books”:

“So that was one of things I definitely learned was about how to encourage my child to hug the book and enjoy reading” (Parent interview 7, p.28).

“There was a couple of things you told us to do with our children that might help introduce and encourage them with the book. We thought you had lost

the plot, you were telling us to “hug our book, no matter what book it is you hug it and say “ I love this book” we all had to try it, we all hugged the book but we were all laughing and smiling and found it funny” (Parent interview 7, p.13)

The importance of highly trained sensitive staff in supporting parents to engage through various methods of communication (such as text message reminders, phone calls, timing and accessibility of service, provision of childcare), is discussed by Doherty, Hall and Kinder (2003). They suggest that services should prioritize children and family’s needs above those of the organization. In my opinion, putting children and families at the centre of services is actively applying the ecological systems theory. Applying the ecological framework allows for the work of family literacy to be viewed through a series of “lenses” which ensures reflective practice and situates family-school relationships in the context of language, literacy and societal contexts. To provide a societal context to the family literacy programmes and overcome cultural barriers to participation, the Breakfast Buddies Programme is held in the local Arts Centre. Parents are invited to Breakfast Buddies as there is an existing relationship between the family literacy teacher and the parents. Breakfast Buddies can be attended on average by 60 – 80 parents and their young children. The tone and atmosphere on arrival is crucial to the programmes successful intervention. All staff supporting the delivery of the programme are trained to understand the powerful effect of the relationship between parents and staff on parents’ motivation to get involved and stay involved. Parents involved in this research spoke about attending the Breakfast Buddies programme:

“Well it’s a bit shocking when you go in you don’t know what to expect, there’s so many people there and the atmosphere’s great and you’re just looking around and I don’t know, it’s breathtaking. It’s actually very good.” (Parent interview 4, p.8).

“When I walked into the room I don’t know why I was a bit nervous at all because the atmosphere was great. I thought that everyone was in good spirits. The way the tables were laid out as well it was all good fun but also it wasn’t about fun it was about learning as well. The whole thing was giving you information and tips about what to do with your children or even for yourself, it was great” (Parent interview 7, p.4).

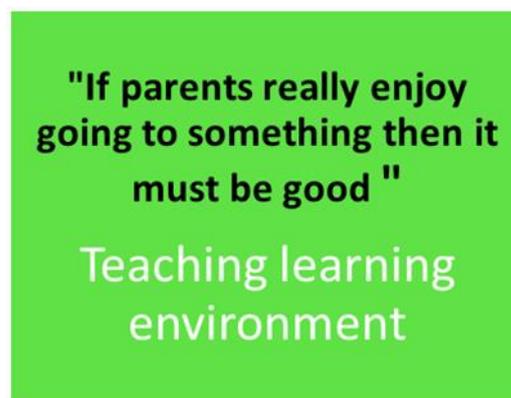
Family literacy and the practice of reading and developing children’s literacy skills in the home require time and dedication. If parents are having fun

performing the literacy activities with their child, they will be more likely to continue the activity. According to Heath (2010, p.38) “intangible are the rewards that reading together gives: social intimacy, laughter, fulfilment of curiosity and contemplation of the wonders of real and imagined worlds.” From my experience of working as a family literacy teacher, designing and delivering these programmes for the past six years, I have found that parents have become literacy champions in Ballymun. Parents will promote the programmes to other parents because they enjoy them and see their value. This has a huge positive effect on attendance by parents who would normally be labelled by schools as “hard to reach”. It also has a personal motivating factor to ensure high quality delivery of the programmes and continued relationship building with parents.

“I want other parents to get what I’ve gotten out of everything. That’s why I really try and get them to go and then it’s like a personal challenge each time I try to get somebody new and different that I know would really benefit from it”(Parent interview 6, p.9).

“Word of mouth I think, you’re not going to go to something if you don’t really like it and you definitely won’t tell other parents about it” (Parent interview 6, p.4.)

“I think it’s all just word of mouth. You just have to get people out there that have done all of these courses and tell other parents, like I’ve been telling people” (Parent interview 2, p.15).



**Figure 20: Teaching learning environment**

**Teaching-learning environment- “If parents really enjoy going to something then it must be good”**

Research shows that children’s learning is rooted in three environments family/home, school and community. Feinstein (2003) asserts that the home

learning environment is important for children, especially in the formative years, as poor learning environments impact on children's cognitive and language skills. The need for family literacy programmes to support parental engagement with their children, the school and the community is fundamental to bridging the gap for children so that they can reach their full potential. Research has shown that women enduring poverty and deprivation with young children have higher levels of depression. This is related to delays in children's' cognitive skills, language acquisition and behavioural problems (Maggi, Irwin, Siddiqi & Hertzman, 2010). According to Feeley (2014, p.5)

“Being excluded from literacy use is a gross inequality that effects not only individuals but also generations of families and communities. Literacy ‘difficulties’ occur in the context of wider economic, political, and socio-cultural injustice and amount to a form of state care-lessness, although individuals, families and communities are often held to blame”.

When overcoming the barriers to participation for parents living in socio-economic areas of disadvantage the teaching-learning environment is a key component of the programmes' success. As a family literacy teacher working from strengths-based perspective, I want parents to feel relaxed as soon as they walk in the door. I want parents to enjoy themselves and learn something new in a fun nurturing environment so that they will stay in the programme until its completion. At the end of one programme they will be encouraged to participate in further programmes and to continue their learning journey. Family literacy programmes can support parents to develop their skills to support their children's social and emotional development and literacy skills. Parents involved in this research spoke about attending the programmes for the first time and how they felt:

“Just a bit nerve-wracking as you would be starting anything new, but once you got in there everybody was chatting altogether.” (Parent interview 3, p.3)

“Well you get involved with other parents who are involved and you get to see their point of view and what they like to do with their books and how they speak to their children about it. So I thought it was good and gets you out as well.” (Parent interview 4, p.2)

“The facilitators, you, were real nice and welcoming you put us at ease, made us feel comfortable. We had a laugh and broke the ice and everybody was there for the same thing so I wasn't so embarrassed”. (Parent interview 1, p.3)

Once barriers to engagement for parents are overcome, family literacy programmes need to ensure that parents are retained. One way of addressing retention is by examining the teaching-learning environment and what works for participants. The views of the Home School Community Liaison teachers involved in this research confirm that the approach taken by the family literacy teacher is having a positive effect:

“More so they were looking forward to going to it when they started it, you know by the attendance, you know yourself Lána, like we’ve had full attendance bar somebody bringing a child away for an appointment or sickness, it seemed to be the Story Sacks and the Breakfast Buddies, there seemed to be good number of people that show” (HSCL interview 9, p. 4)

“They loved the Story Sacks, because that’s the one where they have the product at the end and they loved that finished product. I had the kids coming up to me in the junior school showing me the bag, like they just loved it and it was so special that their parents had made something for them and they absolutely loved it and I think it got people talking, it got people working together. I think there was a real, a great buzz about the whole experience. They really enjoyed doing something” (HSCL Interview 10, p.7)

### **Andragogy, the science of teaching adults**

As described earlier in Chapter 1 the three family literacy programmes under investigation support parents to develop their childrens’ literacy skills using a balanced literacy framework (US Reading Panel, 2010). This evidence based framework supports children’s literacy development and is adapted to suit adult learners attending the family literacy programmes through the use of adult learning methodologies. Malcolm Knowles (1970) and his theory of Andragogy (the science of teaching adults) is based on four assumptions that make the way adults learn different to that of children’s learning. Knowles stated that:

Adults are self-directed learners; adults will learn what interests them,  
Adults will use their life experience and knowledge to form the basis of their learning  
Adults are ready to learn for their social roles, adults can immediately apply learning;  
Adults have life experience and knowledge to hang new learning on.  
(Knowles & Holton, 2005, p.3)

Knowledge of andragogy is crucial when designing any learning activity for adults; the three family literacy programmes are designed to be relevant to the lived realities of the participants. This quote from a HSCL teacher

involved in this research captures the theory of andragogy as it occurs in the family literacy programmes:

“It’s not really a set up where they are going to learn something directly from a teacher that’s imposed on them, it’s active learning from other parents they can bring in their own experience- if it’s not personalized its useless”  
(HSCCL Interview 9, p.9)

Although Knowles (1970) takes a broad view of adult learning and doesn’t look at individual learning styles, his theory is very relevant to adult learning today (Mumford & Gold, 2004). Gardner (2009, p.106), states that due to personal histories and experiences, biological and cultural backgrounds, that no student is a “blank slate” therefore life experience and knowledge will form the basis of learning. Gardner looks at individual differences among learners, their different strengths, interests and ways of processing information.

Knowing about “multiple approaches to understanding” as proposed by Gardner (2009, p.106) supports the design and implementation of the family literacy programmes. However, it can also cause problems; a parent’s intelligence profile might be completely different to that of their children. To overcome this problem some of the concepts from the “You Make the Difference” (2007) programme by the Hanen Centre were adapted for use in the programmes. Parents are introduced to the concept of the “Three A Way” and to “OWL.” The Three A Way means to 1) Allow the child to lead the activity, for example sharing a book, 2) Adapt to share the moment, for example getting face to face with the child when reading the book, 3) Add new experiences and words, for example talking and acting out new words in the book to ensure understanding. To “OWL” means to Observe, Wait and Listen, for example when reading a book together parents should Observe what their child is looking at, Wait to see what the child will do and Listen to what the child is trying to tell the parent (Manolson, Ward, & Dodington, 2007, pp.5-9). Introducing these new strategies to parents encourages their patience and understanding for their child and supports the parent-child relationship, resulting in the child’s learning capacity and self-confidence growing.

According to Connolly (2008, p.72) in a learning group the objective is to develop new “skills, knowledge and competencies”. Learning occurs in an environment where “behaviours and practices involved in continuous development are actively encouraged” (Mumford, 1995, p.55). Whilst I agree with both Connolly and Mumford, I also believe that the group dynamic is vital to creating a fun learning environment. A fun learning environment is crucial to family learning programmes, if parents can have fun performing the family literacy activities with other adults it will encourage them to have fun when repeating the activity with their child. As stated earlier, this deficit approach can have a negative effect on communities and people. According to West (2005, p.11) “families who live in deprived communities are frequently perceived in deficit terms, as breeding grounds of disaffection and under achievement”. One way of addressing this deficit approach is to create a fun learning environment as it helps establish a welcoming atmosphere and adds to the strengths-based approach of the family literacy teacher. I think this quote from a HSCL teacher captures the fun learning environment as it occurs in the family literacy programmes:

“I think that's the most important thing about the Story Sacks and the Breakfast Buddies that fun element that reading for pleasure that reading doesn't have to be about coming home with a school book doing reading for 10 minutes and that it's forced - that it can be fun and it can be informal and I think that parents sometimes I think they feel a bit daunted in relation to that and I think we broke down some of those barriers” (HSCL interview 10, p.5)

### **Strengths-based approach**

A strengths-based approach, or a wealth model, as applied to the family literacy programmes, lies in the recognition by the family literacy teacher that every parent has the ability to transform their own and their children's lives. Linking lived experience to critical reflection allows parents to see new possibilities for themselves and their children. This strengths-based approach to teaching and learning, utilising critical thinking, allows time for reflection by participants on their worlds and gives them the tools to change it. A strengths-based approach in education is not a new idea. Dewey (1938, p.10) is quoted as saying “The purpose of education is to allow each individual to come into full possession of his or her personal power.” Lopez & Louis (2009, p.1) state that a strengths-based approach is best

understood as “a philosophical stance and daily practice that shapes how an individual engages the teaching and learning process.” As a family literacy teacher, a strengths-based approach enables me to view every parent as an asset to their children and to welcome them as a friend both in the community and in the family literacy programme. By using these approaches, parents’ confidence and self-efficacy grows. In this quote a participant of this research tells us about the first time she came to a class and how the family literacy teacher’s strengths-based approach made her feel:

“It’s just your whole general attitude. You’re just nice and bubbly and just welcoming. You make people feel welcome. You could go to you with anything I think and you’ll just be like “come on what’s the story?” you just make people feel at ease I think” (Parent interview 5, p.4).

NALA (2004, 2010), in their research on family literacy, emphasize the “wealth” model which highlights the recognition that families already have literacy practices in their homes and “aims to validate, support and develop the work that parents already do” (NALA, 2004, p.25). They further state that this approach moves away from the deficit approach of literacy provision and suggests family literacy teachers incorporate this approach into any family literacy programme by using the ORIM framework (Hannon, 1995) which incorporates oral language, books, early writing and environmental print as the four strands of early literacy development. The ORIM framework is discussed further in Chapter 7. A strengths-based approach and a wealth model are similar in that they both view parents as an asset to their children and build upon literacy practices already present in the home. However they differ in practice, the wealth model is a way of viewing a family’s strengths. A strengths-based approach is the practice of working with families, to include qualities of respect, integrity, innovation, care and equity. A strengths-based approach assumes that every individual has resources that can be utilized toward success in many areas of their lives (Saleebey, 2001). It supports social action and the addressing of inequalities in society, reflecting a belief in families’ strengths and contributions to society, rather than the deficit approach of focusing on their problems or them as the problem. Saleebey (1992, p.8) argues that practitioners using a strength-based approach “require a deep belief in the

necessity of democracy and the contingent capacity of people to participate in the decisions and actions that define their world.”

The first fundamental step to a strengths based approach in the teaching and learning environment must be in appropriate methods of engagement and in identifying ways of overcoming barriers to participation. To enhance engagement, Feeley (2014, p.56) proposes a “cohesive structural approach” because she suggests that current literacy provision that is described as “critical literacy practice fails to make the connection to any critical agency.” This leads to those in need of literacy support “unmotivated to engage or persist in learning that perpetuates and heightens their oppression” and so limits the scope of adult literacy programmes. I would further Feeley’s (2014) proposal by asking the question is non- engagement or non-attendance an act of unconscious defiance and silent rebellion on behalf of the “oppressed”? If these programmes are seen as having no cultural association to the lived world of participants, does that explain their reluctance to attend? The OECD figures for 1997 (IALS, 1997), estimated there were 500,000 adults in Ireland with unmet literacy needs. Feeley (2014, p.47) states that only 11% of these adults have engaged in any formal learning since those figures were released. The recent figures released from The OECD’s Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) states 1 in 6 Irish adults has difficulty understanding basic written text (NALA, 2013). The role of education policy in promoting social inclusion is called into question by O’ Brien & Ó’ Fathaigh (2007, p.602), when they ask the questions “To what extent are education providers willing to change the system to fit the individual”? And “To what extent are educational interventions informed by the lived experiences of disadvantaged groups?”

### **Freire**

Freire (1970) maintains that the struggle for equality and social justice relies on those most oppressed realising that they have the ability to transform society, “who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of the oppressed society” (Freire,1970, p.27). He

suggests that the unequal distribution of wealth, resources and power are man-made constructs. The “dehumanisation” of society (Freire, 1970, p.25). In my opinion, as discussed in chapter 3, this is elaborated by Bourdieu’s (1986) theory on forms of capital and its accumulation and conferring of rights on certain sections of society in its embodied, objectified and credentialised states. The “oppressed” are often blamed, or blame themselves for their own suffering, whilst the role of society is hidden. This is what Bourdieu would call an act of symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2000). Similarities to symbolic violence can be found in the work of Gramsci and his theory of “hegemony” described by Brookfield (2005, p.99) as “the process by which one group convinces another group that being subordinate is a desirable state of affairs.” Using counter-hegemonic ideals, becoming critically aware of hegemony, of oppression, of dehumanisation, are ways in which Freire tells us that we can use education for liberation. Using dialogue, according to Freire (1970) creates educational spaces, allowing participants to name their world and transform it. He uses the term Praxis to highlight the link between theory and practice in the pursuit of social change. Praxis according to Mayo (2012, p.27) is a “critical reading of the world one inhabits” and adult educators operating in this world can enable people to “read the word and the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987). hooks (2003, p.43) highlights the role of educators in seeking new skills to share knowledge:

”Educators who challenge themselves to teach beyond the classroom setting, to move into the world sharing knowledge, learn a diversity of styles to convey information. This is one of the most valuable skills any teacher can acquire.”

Lynch & O’ Neill (1994) remind us that Freire’s work took place in South America, where the education sector is autonomous. How can his dialogical method be engaged in a country like Ireland where education is under state control? Freire, according to Lynch & O’ Neill (1994, p.315), maintained that “it is for each group in its own cultural context to explore the significance of his writing in their own system.”

Applying Freire's concept of dialogue in family literacy programmes allows parents to share their thoughts on issues in the community. It creates a safe space to be heard and to be listened to. In this quote a participant in this research tells us about a Breakfast Buddies session that discussed the much-contested water charges and learning how to discuss current social issues with her children:

"At the last Breakfast Buddies we learned to talk about stuff that's going on even regarding the water charges and stuff. There's a lot of it going on - a lot of talk at the moment and if the child mentions it there's no harm in maybe explaining a little bit of what's going on" (Parent interview 7, p.16).

Freire defined two types of education: "banking education" (Freire, 1970, p. 54) and "problem posing education" (Freire, 1970, p.60). Banking education treats students as receivers of knowledge from the all-knowing teacher; students are empty vessels to be filled. Freire believed that this form of education can serve to domesticate people, with Crean (2008, p.14) acknowledging the similarities of banking education to "Gramsci's belief that education serves to reinforce the ideas of the status quo." In contrast problem posing education is the "practice of freedom" (Freire, 1970, p.61), by raising consciousness through reflections on participants' lives. In this approach participants through dialogue with their teacher and other participants become "co-investigators" (Freire, 1970, p.80) of the

"Way they exist in the world with which, and in which, they find themselves. They come to see themselves not as a static reality, but as reality in process, in transformation" (Freire, 1970, p.64).

Problem-posing education allows for people to link their lived reality to their current circumstances, to reflect upon it and to create change together through dialogue. This is the connection of action and theory. This is praxis. During the Story Sacks programme relationships are built between teachers and parents as the programme progresses. This often causes parents and teachers to reassess their views and opinions of one another and supports the development of family-school relationships. In this quote a participant in this research tells us how her perception of teachers changed:

"I was told that teachers knew everything and do what they say and respect them, not that I didn't have respect for them, but they were teachers and they knew everything. So I thought they were above me but they're not above me they are just like everyone else they just teach. Now I know we're on the same level - they're doing a job as well."  
(Parent interview 3, pp.25-26)

This quote is from a HSCL teacher involved in this research and how her view has changed:

“Through going to things like Story Sacks or Breakfast Buddies it opened up my eyes as to how much the parents want to help and how they value all these little measures and they tell me about stories they read at home and the kids love them and it’s time for them so I suppose they’re helping as much as they can” (HSCL interview 8, p.7)

Freire’s aim for education is radical, it challenges the status quo and educators to reflect on their practice as teachers and incorporate change. He states that a more just and equitable world can be achieved through critical reflection and dialogue within communities of change and “the starting point for organizing the programme content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people” (Freire, 1970, p.76). This strengths-based approach is further evidenced in Auerbach’s (1989) work on family literacy. Her research on approaches to a social–contextual model for family literacy builds on Freire’s ideas of problem-posing education by incorporating cultural and social issues relevant to participants’ lived experience into family literacy programmes. This she states “draws on parents’ cultural strengths and encourages critical thinking about key issues in family life” (Auerbach, 1989, p.177). A culturally sensitive model of family literacy (Street, 1997) ensures family literacy teachers use a strengths-based approach and “build upon what is already there” (Street, 1997, p.209).

### **Affective Domain**

Working as a family literacy teacher for many years now, the affective domain of learning has become a key tenet of my work. The affective domain of learning is the emotional side of learning, an individual’s motivation, feelings, values, enthusiasm and attitude to learning. For family literacy programmes to be successful in supporting parents to develop their children’s literacy skills, the relationship between parents and children needs to be supported. To support this relationship I endeavour to instil in parents a love for reading and learning that they can share with their children. This forms a part of the strengths based approach. However,

Feeley (2014, p.10) highlights in her research that the affective domain of literacy and its obvious benefits is mostly ignored despite evidence of “the intricate role (both in attitude and action) it plays in supporting learning”. Freire recognises the affective domain of learning on the part of the teacher and the participant: he discusses dialogue as being unable to exist without the role of love, humility and faith in humankind, qualities needed in teachers for “authentic education” (Freire, 1970, p.74). The affective domain of learning offers participant’s love, care and solidarity (Baker et al., 2004) which is crucial to Freirean pedagogy and vital for a strengths-based approach. This participant tells us how her relationship changed with her daughter after doing the Story Sacks programme:

“We became a lot closer actually because every night we’d sit down and read a story together and it’s our favorite part of the whole day and I know bedtime isn’t usually a kid’s favorite part but when everything else stopped there was no cleaning, no school, no work, there was only me and her in the room and if we finished the story it would lead to our own stories ... so we were able to build a relationship and come closer. She was telling me more things and enjoying her time with me at night time, it was really brilliant.”  
(Parent interview 1, p.8)

The affective domain of learning is evident in this quote from this participant about how attending the programmes made her feel:

“It’s hard to pick one thing but I do feel really good about myself and I feel excited going to it in the mornings but it’s the way the staff as well just make you feel like you’re worth something, I don’t know what it is, I’m trying to put it into words.”(Parent interview 7, p.24)

### **Experiential learning cycle**

Parents working together in the group are learning collaboratively, supporting each other and giving each other feedback on literacy activities. Tennant states that through this process parents are “generating the experiential base for learning” (Tennant, 2006, p.109). If experience forms the basis of all learning (Rogers, 2000) then critical reflection on experience (Freire, 1970) should be a learning outcome for all family literacy programmes. The experiential learning cycle, as described by Kolb (1984) has four stages, (I have used the family literacy programmes as way of explanation of each stage)

- Concrete experience (feeling) – watching the family literacy teacher read a children’s story book using facial expression, tone of voice and hugging the book for added excitement.

- Reflective observation (reflective) – Thinking about helping their child with learning, how to implement it in practice and observing reading of a children’s story book.
- Abstract conceptualization (thinking) – through the process of modelling reading parent understands the “how” of reading a book to a child, using tone of voice, facial expressions and creating children’s anticipation for books by hugging the book.
- Active experimentation (doing) – Parent uses skills learned in the programme to promote fun family literacy in the home learning environment.

Obviously the learning cycle as described here is a simplified version of the learning process. However, I think it is useful to remember when developing a family literacy programme. The coaching and modelling of family literacy practices to parents in areas of socio-economic disadvantage is crucial. Some parents may not have had a book read to them by their parents when they were young and so may not have the skills needed to promote literacy in the home learning environment, as parents in this research were willing to attest to:

“It’s just that I wasn’t in to reading, my mother never read to me so it’s just we weren’t brought up that way” (Parent interview 2, p.5)

“Me ma and da never read to me. Me da never knew how to read and write so I never got help with me homework and me ma wasn’t there so I struggled with me homework all through school as well.”(Parent interview 4, p.10)

“Oh my ma never read to us or anything, she never really interacted with us as kids. Actually the only thing I remember is “right come on get up time for school “and then “right there’s your dinner, bed” that’s it, like you’ d be thrown out to play and come in when the street lights come on” (Parent interview 5, p.15).

### **Virtuous learning cycle**

Through analysing the data from the interviews and generating themes, I discovered a virtuous learning cycle was occurring for the parents involved in this research (Figure 21). Mumford & Gold (2004) describe a virtuous learning cycle as “an effective focus for development, leading to perceived relevance of the activity and therefore instant application and the reward of

success. This in turn leads to more enthusiasm for learning” (Mumford & Gold, 2004, p.91). Parents described to me how happy they felt when they realized their new family literacy practices were having the desired outcome on their children’s learning and how it was encouraging them to do more, which was supporting the embedding of the family literacy practice.

“I say to myself if I didn’t put the effort in with her and do the reading she wouldn’t be like that. She wouldn’t because like I know other kids in the class and their parents don’t read to their kids and they’re not up where she is. Now I’m not bragging or anything I don’t mean to, but she’s doing amazing with her English in school. I feel amazing and really proud”  
(Parent interview 5, p.16)

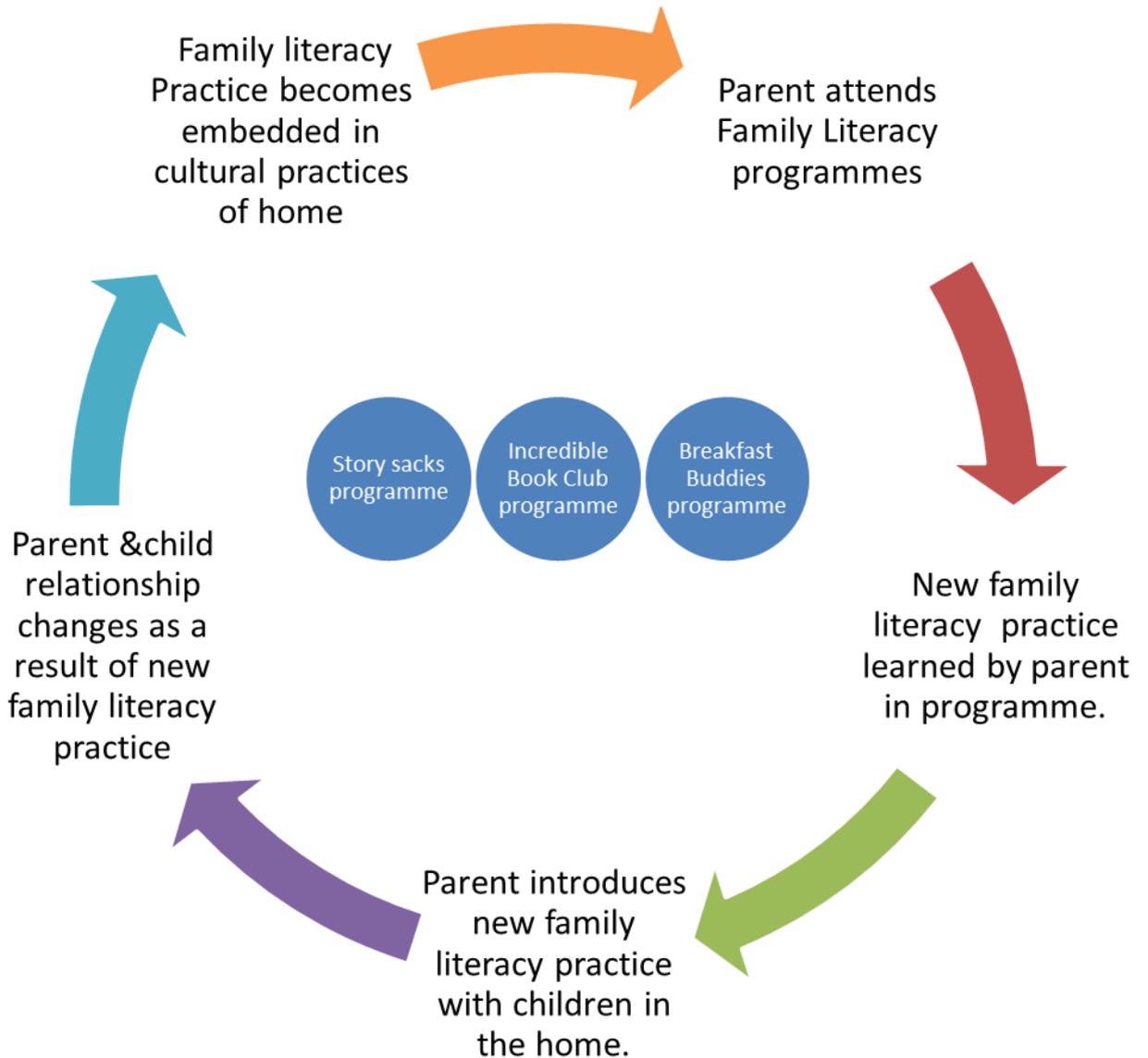
“But the kids were amazed that I had spent all that time making the sack and that it was for them They were proud to show it off “my mammy made this for me” that’s lovely to see as well. That they’re proud of you” (Parent interview 3, p.13)

“I think they really enjoyed the Incredible Book Club every week and the feedback was fantastic and it fed into the Incredible Years programme really well - that was maybe what they used as their special time with the kids and the children were asking could they read the story again and again and the parents just loved it” (HSCL interview 10, p.2)

The virtuous learning cycle as created by the parents at home begins with the delivery of the family literacy programme in the group setting. Group dynamics and the creation of a fun teaching and learning environment are crucial to the success of the programmes. The modelling and coaching by the family literacy teacher of family literacy practices is the “experiential base for learning” (Tennant, 2006, p.109). Group work supports the understanding of the activity and encourages interaction and trust between parents and teacher, as this HSCL teacher explained:

“For the parents to see somebody reading it and to get experience of that, I think it gave them all a bit more confidence and you know I said the modelling was fantastic for them. They could go home and they knew what they were doing” (HSCL interview 10, p.3)

## Virtuous learning cycle



**Figure 21: Virtuous learning cycle applied to the family literacy programmes**

### Reflective learning

The traditional relationship that parents may be aware of between teacher and student is reconstructed to create a partnership approach to learning. Within each family literacy programme there are key learning moments for

the group but content is also determined by the needs of each individual parent's child. This is achieved through one to one interaction between parent and teacher, building a relationship of trust and support. Larrivee (2000) suggested poverty was having an effect on children coming to classes. This, in my opinion, is no different to the effect poverty has on parents attending classes. Larrivee encourages teachers to find new ways to create "authentic learning communities" (Larrivee, 2000, p.293) to adjust the power dynamics in the classroom to turn "power-over into power-with learners." This is endorsed by Mayo (2012, p.34) who believes that adult education that assumes a Freirean pedagogy must put an emphasis on collaborative learning and knowledge creation, to encourage "reading and transforming the world together", as a parent in this research demonstrates with this quote:

"It got you thinking "God we could do this with our kids" and it got you thinking with the group and you got to learn other things as well from the group about what they do with their children as well and what I could take out of that to bring home to my family as well." (Parent interview 7, p.7)

To "read and transform the world together" means becoming a reflective practitioner. This enables the teacher to move "beyond a knowledge base of discrete skills to a stage where they can integrate and modify skills to fit specific contexts" (Larrivee, 2000, p.294). I believe that reflective practice has enabled me to think critically about my beliefs, my ontological assumptions, and has enabled me to become a better teacher. As a teacher, I want parents attending the programmes to be reflective practitioners, to reflect on the new skills they have learned and to adapt them to suit their child in their home learning environments. Kolb's (1984) understanding of learning as a continuous process based on experience can be found in experienced based learning or experiential learning as described by Andresen, Boud and Cohen (2000). In their interpretation of experiential learning they describe the learner as occupying a central place in all considerations of teaching and learning. One of the main features of experiential learning is a reflection by learners to extract significance from learning and contemplate further action. The adaptation of Kolb's (1984) learning cycle ensures that there is an element of reflection built in to each of the three family literacy programmes. Parents are encouraged to discuss

and engage in a reflexive learning process, thereby validating their new practices in a safe environment. Brookfield states reflexive learning “is learning tinged with criticality” (Brookfield, 2005, p.250), it is learning that involves discussing with others the problems of everyday life and supporting each other to re-imagine solutions. This parent explains her reaction after attending the Story Sacks programme for the first time:

“And I was saying right I should really- I really- I need to start reading to this child! So I went home that day actually- I only started Story Sacks and I picked up a book and I said come on and we sit down and we read this.”  
(Parent interview 5, p.8)

In this quote a parent speaks about solving a problem in her home with the support of the group. Crucially this quote shows, through reflective learning, she has learned that there are other ways to approach a problem:

“When you’re in the Story Sacks group and you might be having a problem - I don’t know getting your child to bed. - Somebody else might give you some advice and you try that and if that doesn’t work you try something else. And you’re like oh God it’s not necessarily my way or the hard way. You have to bend it for each child?”  
(Parent interview 6, p.18)

### **Achievable tasks**

A high quality family literacy programme should be meaningful to participants and situated within the family and community context (Neuman, Caperelli & Kee, 1998). As we have already discussed, poverty limits parents’ ability to provide the educational materials that children need for their cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional development (Weiss et al., 2009). The three family literacy programmes support parents to develop their children’s’ literacy skills and their social and emotional literacy. The Incredible Book Club is a literacy add-on to the Incredible Years Parent Programme (Webster Stratton, 2007), which is a 12 -14 week group-based parenting intervention guided by cognitive, behavioural and social learning principles. According to UNESCO (2009) and Desforges & Aboucher (2003) family literacy programmes that support educational training and socio-emotional support skills have a long-term impact on children’s literacy attainment. This parent explains the change in her interaction with her child as a result of attending the programmes:

“I’ve two older children and I’ve never been able to put into practice the stuff that I do now with the two younger children. With the two younger children

you can see the big huge difference in everything. Socially, emotionally, everything, school-wise” (Parent interview 6, p.14)

Sénéchel & Young (2008) found great advantages to children where their parents had been trained to teach specific literacy skills. Parents engaged in the programmes are supported to enhance their family literacy skills with new ideas for fun learning activities. Free resources are provided at each programme and are invaluable to parents experiencing poverty. These resources enable parents to go home and practice the activity with their children. However the literacy activities need to be achievable; parents need to feel that the coaching, modelling and collaborative learning that occurs in the programme is enabling them to accomplish the activity at home with their children. Conversely, a finding by McElvaney & Artelt (2009) suggests that families from disadvantaged areas can find it difficult to apply the learning in family literacy programmes at home. These findings highlight the need for a comprehensive coherent family literacy framework that supports family literacy teachers and HSCL teachers to implement family literacy programmes and parental engagement models to a high degree of proficiency to enable parents support their children’s literacy development.

“It was something different every single time that you went. It was giving you different ideas on what to do with your kids and giving you a bit of confidence for yourself to actually do these things. Sometimes I do be thinking “ah I don’t know how to maybe do certain things” but no you took confidence away to be able to do this” (Parent interview 7, p.9)

“It’s just something different. It’s fun. You make it exciting. You make it relevant to whatever age group. I mean you can always associate it. You always have something for the smaller children something for the older children. Just lots of great tips and advice and fun ways of learning.” (Parent interview 6, p.10).



**Figure 22: Cultural shifts between home and school**

### **Cultural shifts between home and school-"I feel like it's built a bridge or a root"**

A recent review of best practice on parental engagement undertaken by Goodhall, Vorhaus, Carpentieri, Brooks, Akerman & Harris (2010), discovered that programmes which concentrated on both academic skills and parenting skills were more effective at supporting parents' development of children's literacy skills. They suggest that "evidence-based models that build relationships across the family, the school, and the community can improve outcomes for low-income and socially-culturally marginalized families" (Goodhall et al., 2010, p.63). Family literacy programmes that utilize a partnership approach between schools, families and communities develop a shared responsibility for children's' learning. These programmes have the potential to support better outcomes for children and families. Weiss et al. (2009) believe that when schools reach out to parents from socio-economic areas of disadvantage "they increase the chances of building effective relationships and sustained family involvement" (2009, p.21).

Hoover-Dempsey & Whitaker (2010, p.56) discuss parents' role construction and self-efficacy as "personal psychological motivators of involvement" for parents. They describe parents role construction as what parents believe they are supposed to do regarding their children's education which is influenced by "important others". Parents self-efficacy to support

their children's learning experiences is influenced by their experiences of involvement and success, observation of other parents' success and "verbal persuasion" from "trusted others" (Hoover-Dempsey & Whitaker, 2010, p.57). Hoover Dempsey & Whitaker (2010, pp.56 - 57) describe "important others" and "trusted others" as family, other parents and children's teachers. This reflects Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994, 1997) ecological systems theory and the mesosystem, which represents the interactions and relationships between individuals and settings that make up the microsystem. As previously discussed the child and the child's parent cannot be viewed in isolation but in the context of their lived reality and the mitigating factors that influence that reality. Role construction and parents' self-efficacy influence parents' decisions about getting involved in family literacy programmes. According to Hoover- Dempsey & Whitaker (2010, p.57)

"The more active parental role construction is and the more positive parents' sense of self efficacy is, the more likely parents are to be actively and productively engaged (with teachers and school personnel if a positive and trusting relationship is in place) in supporting their children's learning."

Weiss et al. (2009 p.22) states that parents who were previously marginalized can gain "voice and presence" by getting involved with their children's school. Parents involved in this research spoke about the changes in their relationship with the school as a result of attending the programmes.

"There was a huge change in my relationship with the school. Before the programmes I would drop my child to school, go home, collect her and that would be it. I wouldn't really even know any of the other teachers names at all. Now if there's anything on, I am asked straight away to volunteer. I know all the teachers, the teachers know me and I feel really comfortable going into the school now, to have a chat with the principal. I feel like it's built a bridge. I can talk to them, it's not so daunting anymore." (Parent interview 1, p.10)

"I help out a lot in the school now whereas before I was nervous around crowds, but now I'll read stories to junior infants or senior infants in the school and all the parents are there looking at me. Years ago I wouldn't have done it, but now if they ask me to do anything I'm there. I'd actually love to do it as a profession, working with children." (Parent interview 5, p.21)

It is evident from these quotes that when family literacy programmes engage parents effectively, relationships between home, school and community are forever changed. However, schools need to be aware of

their role in supporting parents to overcome barriers to participation. According to Greene & Long (2011), schools need to encourage parental support. Parents from socio-economic areas of disadvantage are not always aware of their roles in supporting their children's learning or how to support it. Parents are willing to become more involved if approached in ways that build positively on their role construction and self-efficacy (Hoover Dempsey & Whitaker, 2010). A partnership approach to parental engagement, listening to parent's voices on their engagement with the school, is one way of addressing barriers to engagement. According to Epstein (2011), schools can often view families in deficit terms, parents are the "hard to reach" (2011, p.270), therefore the invitation to get involved in family literacy activities is also crucial to setting the tone for engagement. Epstein (2011) has found that parents are more likely to get involved if the teacher has a positive attitude towards parents and encourages involvement. However, the fact remains that parents are often viewed in deficit terms and blamed for their children's lack of progress in school. An example of this can be found in Goodman & Gregg (2010) where they highlight that parental aspirations are at fault for the literacy attainment gaps between children from richer and poorer backgrounds. On reading this particular piece of research, I felt the need to ask the question about teacher aspirations for their students and schools' aspirations in supporting teachers, parents and students in achieving high aspirations? Is it all the parents' fault, have schools and teacher training no part to play in falling levels of literacy attainment and aspirations?

There is also the issue of lack of resources in socio-economically disadvantaged homes. As previously discussed, Walker et al. (2013), in their research on poverty and shame, found that people who became trapped in poverty had limited skills and a lack of opportunities, perpetuating feelings of shame amongst children and their families. As discussed in Chapter 3, deficits in human, economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Lauder 2006) have a devastating effect on children's and adults' educational attainment and their ability to participate. These inequalities in the education system surely play their part on effecting

children's educational outcomes and aspirations: Lupton (2006), in her research on effective schools, discusses the idea that schools in disadvantaged areas might have a different set of requirements than schools in more affluent areas. She states that disadvantaged schools need more support staff as well as innovative and concentrated strategies for parental involvement. Hornby (2000) agrees, referring to the fact that teachers have little or no training to work with parents effectively and often lack the skills needed to engage parents around developing their children's literacy skills. Weiss et al. (2009 p.14) believes that families, schools and communities must create family involvement together "actively taking part in and sharing mutually respectful relationships and partnerships." Epstein (2011, p.54) concurs, highlighting the fact that teachers also benefit from parental involvement: "Teachers' experience more positive feelings about teaching and about their schools when there is more parental involvement in the school." HSCL involved in this research also spoke about their perspective changes on parental involvement:

"Well I'll be honest I probably didn't appreciate what the programmes were ...I never attended them so maybe from my role in home school it has helped me to appreciate what happens outside the school day. For me going back to the class I will make a point of supporting any parent activity I can and to show the kids that I see it's important for the parents to be here, so my whole perspective of things has changed."(HSCL interview 8, p.6)

"I think it strengthens things and really promotes trust between the school and the home as well so it's really breaking down those barriers" (HSCL interview 10, p.10)

As reviewed earlier, there is a wealth of research to support the claim that family support and involvement in literacy activities can support children's life potential (Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Weiss et al., 2009; Desforges & Aboucher, 2003). The level of parental involvement in early literacy activities with their children is associated with the level of children's literacy attainment (Senechal & LeFevre, 2002). Family literacy programmes have a range of additional benefits to the family, including improved social and cultural capital, and improved self-confidence (Swain et al., 2009). However, despite all of this evidence, parental engagement strategies in some schools are based on a deficit model. Schools using the term "hard to reach" are placing judgement values on parents, these values

translate to attitudes and can become endemic within the school. Parents encountering these attitudes will choose not to engage. Hanafin and Lynch (2002) suggest that programmes for socially-disadvantaged groups are culturally deficit models used by the schools to explain educational failure. They highlight that a working class parental voice is missing from educational debate because of their perceived inability to participate. To overcome these barriers to participation, knowledge of ecological systems theory would focus the school on the importance of direct and indirect contact in children's lives and their role within that crucial system. A module in teacher education programmes on engaging and including parents in their children's education and the benefits for parents and teachers of that relationship could also be an effective method to overcome the deficit models of engagement. Teachers trained to use a strengths based approach would ensure that all schools include qualities of respect, integrity, innovation, care and equity in the practice of working with families. Perhaps then the so called "hard to reach" might be reachable and that phrase will no longer be used to set parents apart as "others".



**Figure 23: Transformational learning**

### **Transformational learning -"I feel like a real mother"**

As previously discussed in chapter 3, utilizing ecological systems theory within an overall family literacy framework enables professionals to be more holistic in their approach to children and parents. There is a greater understanding of circumstances and environmental contexts that may apply

(Gill & Jack, 2007). Applying the framework supports family literacy teachers to understand the worlds of the parents they work with, ensuring their learning needs are met. Having a greater understanding of learners' worlds is to look at learners' epistemologies and ontologies, their reasons for attending the family literacy programmes, and their lived realities at that moment in time. I believe having an understanding of parents' epistemologies and ontologies can support the implementation of the ecological systems theory framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 1997). For a family literacy teacher, having this knowledge can also support transformational learning experiences, providing opportunities for parents to reflect on their worlds and their place in it. Freire (1970) maintains that the struggle for equality and social justice relies on those most oppressed realising that they have the ability to transform society.

Transformative learning experiences impact on a parent's sense of self, their daily lives and their world perspectives (King, 2009). Transformative learning is described by Mezirow (2009) as the ability to transform mind-sets and meaning perspectives to a different set of assumptions or perspectives that make the individual more reflective and emotionally able to change. Our meaning perspectives are our frames of reference, our understanding of the world based on our habitus (Bourdieu, 1989). According to Illeris (2014, p.5), transformative learning is learning that "entails a qualitatively new structure or other capacity within the learner". Transformative learning is not about learning in the traditional school sense; it is about changes in learner behaviour and experience. Kegan (2009, pp.42-44) believes that transformational learning, when it occurs, is an epistemological change. Family literacy teachers need to understand parents' "epistemological complexities" or barriers to learning in order to overcome them. Epistemology, according to Kegan is "not what we know but our way of knowing." Belenky et al. (1997) in their research on "Women's Ways of Knowing" describe "epistemological perspectives" of how women view the world in five epistemological categories:

- **Silence** - a position in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority.
- **Received knowledge** - a perspective from which women conceive of themselves as capable of receiving, even reproducing, knowledge from the all-knowing external authorities but not capable of creating knowledge on their own.
- **Subjective knowledge** - a perspective from which truth and knowledge are conceived of as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited.
- **Procedural knowledge** - a position in which women are invested in learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge.
- **Constructed knowledge** - a position in which women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing (Belenky et al., 1997, p.15).

As all of the respondents participating in this research were women, this way of knowing about epistemologies of learning for women is valuable as it can explain women's identities, their sense of self and their role construction. As mentioned before, research on family literacy practices in the home has suggested that this role is gendered and usually refers to a maternal caregiver (Hegarty & Feeley, 2010, Timmons, 2008). The issue of power and feeling powerless, trying to overcome adversity in all its forms (poverty, housing, health, injustice), all have the effect of "silencing" women. The "silencing" of women in their children's schools has been achieved by the cultural deficit model of literacy. Women are silenced when they are blamed for their children's educational failures and their voices have been silenced because of their perceived inability to participate (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). The importance of relationships to women's transformational learning experiences cannot be underestimated. Women share their life experiences in a collective and collaborative learning experience; this supports the development of friendships, trust and transformative learning (English and Irving, 2012). Knowledge of the epistemological perspectives of women can strengthen the family literacy teacher's knowledge and understanding of parents lived realities. This allows women to move from a place of silence to a place where they are rooted in hopefulness (hooks, 2003). Education for women is hopeful; women become role models for other women in their community. I believe that through these three family literacy programmes I have witnessed transformational change in women's

lives and in how they perceive themselves as knowers. All of them told me as much in our interviews:

“Attending these programmes made me realise what I want to do with my life, I have the ability to be reading and I have the ability to be sitting in a room full of people and talking out loud, I have the ability to learn from the person in front of me teaching me, it just gave me the confidence to do what I wanted to do” (Parent interview 1, p.12)

“I’m just so happy that I did these programmes and I got the tips because I feel like a real mother and I have a great bond with my three children now. They love me and I love them. And they know I love them and I love giving them praise and they love getting the praise and they love spending time with me instead of me being a crank all the time”. (Parent interview 2, p.16)

“I felt learning for them was helping me. I was being re-taught and it gave me more confidence that I could go and talk to people, I was showing my children that you can still learn even though you’re older, that you can still be a part of something and feel good about yourself for learning more” (Parent interview 3, p.11)

“Well I thought the programmes were great because they helped me to learn more about myself and to help my child. I was able to socialize with other people too, it helped me gain confidence in myself as well as my self-esteem, something that I’ve lost through all the years but now I have regained it, I am able to plan to build my own future now”( Parent interview 4, p.11)

“Now my daughter only started primary school when I did Story Sacks and she loved the bag and books, and I was delighted because she was interacting with me. She never really interacted with me; she was all about her dad. I would just feed her and look after her and put her to bed, there was no playtime with mammy but after the course I read books during the day to her and then at night-time, she loved it.” (Parent interview 5, p.7)

“I can handle certain situations with my children now; I can speak to them properly. I can correct them properly, explain things to them and understand where they’re coming from.” (Parent interview 6, p.12)

“When things happen in my home now, I stand back a bit and think before I react, there’s different ways of approaching a situation and I’ve learned that from the Story Sacks and the Breakfast Buddies “(Parent interview 7, p.23)

In this chapter, I have outlined the themes that have emerged from the data as a result of the analyses. In keeping with grounded theory methodology, I have engaged with the literature relevant to these emerging findings. In the next chapter I discuss existing family literacy frameworks and introduce the new family literacy framework developed from the themes.

## Chapter 7: Framework for family literacy

Chapter 7 discusses existing family literacy frameworks and introduces the family literacy framework SPACES, which is a direct result of the analyses of the themes.

### Existing family literacy frameworks

The three family literacy programmes under investigation are based on the evidence of what works in children's literacy development. To recap: the balanced literacy framework developed by the American National Reading Panel (2000), maps out the four domains of literacy teaching that require attention – reading comprehension, reading fluency, writing and word knowledge. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) describes the balanced literacy framework as encompassing reading, writing, communication and oral language in print and digital forms that support children to create meaning and make sense of the world, on their way to becoming independent readers, writers and thinkers. This framework forms the basis from which the family literacy programmes were designed. Each family literacy programme contains elements of instruction for parents on reading comprehension, reading fluency, writing and word knowledge supporting parents to support their children's literacy skills using a balanced literacy framework.

The Four Resources Model (Gawn et al., 2009; Luke & Freebody, 1990) is a framework used to teach reading to adults and children. The four resources are:

- **Code breaking (decoding):** decode language at appropriate level, recognizing letters, sounds, words sentences.
- **Meaning making (comprehension):** apply knowledge of their world, other texts previously read, how language works.
- **Text use:** understanding text varies in different contexts, audience and content.

- **Text analysis (critical reading):** analyse and challenge text construction

(NALA, 2014; Gawn et al., 2009; Ludwig, 2003).

This model emphasizes the autonomy of the literacy teacher in adapting the model to learner needs. The Four Resources Model (Luke & Freebody, 1990, Gawn et al., 2009) draws on four practices for effective literacy instruction to children. This model has a social contextual approach to ensure that reading and writing are situated in cultural contexts. According to Papen (2016), literacy teaching should be balanced and integrated using the Four Resources Model. Being able to read means being able to decode written text, and understand, critically evaluate, what text means, and being able to apply it in different forms, in ways that support daily interactions with the world. In my opinion both the balanced literacy framework (2010) and the Four Resources Model (1990) are similar, with the exception of the oral language component of the balanced literacy framework.

The ORIM framework (Hannon, 1995) incorporates oral language, books, early writing and environmental print as the four strands of early literacy development. The foundations of being able to read and write start at home from an early age with parents reading stories and sharing conversations with their babies/ children. Hannon's (1995) ORIM framework is aimed at early literacy and early childhood providers. The ORIM framework provides a theoretical understanding of how parents can provide opportunities for their children's literacy development:

- **Opportunities:** parents can provide opportunities for their children to engage with environmental print, books, and nursery rhymes for phonological awareness, trips which provide opportunities to encourage talking.
- **Recognition:** it is important that parents show recognition to their children for any developments in their literacy learning for example praising children and displaying their work, sharing it with other extended family members.

- Interaction: children need parents to spend time with them doing literacy tasks for example making cards, shopping lists or parents showing children how to bake, write their name, playing word games with them.
- Model of literacy: parents can be literacy role models to their children by using literacy themselves, for example writing a shopping list, filling in forms, following instructions.

Hannon's framework for family literacy is admirable for its work with early years practitioners and families. However, oral language according to Hannon is "storytelling, phonological awareness and talk about literacy" (Nutbrown et al., 2005, p.38). While it is all of those things, I believe it is much more. Using the evidence based balanced literacy framework, family literacy teachers can support parents to support children's language development. It is very important for parents to be aware of the communication process and how that supports the development of children's language and thinking skills. Concepts from the "You Make the Difference" (2007) programme by the Hanen Centre were adapted for use in the programmes to support oral language development. The three family literacy programmes use these five key concepts to support children's language development, which have been adapted from the Hannon programme:

- For younger children, being aware of what children are interested in and extending their vocabulary. For example if a child says the word "bus" a parent might say "big blue bus".
- Providing scaffolding for children's attempts at new words, for example if the child says a word wrong, not correcting them, but repeat their sentence so they hear the right way to say the word.
- Ensuring understanding and meaning of words to include visual clues/ "acting the word out".
- For older children it is important to model using new words and give children the opportunity to say the new words. Thinking together about new words is important, "where might the word be used? In what context? Have you heard it before?"

- Making connections with other words that are similar but have different meanings for example the word scales could be explained like this “fish and snakes have scales that cover their bodies, just like our skin” and “scales can be found in a kitchen or bathroom, they are used to weigh things, like a kitchen scales or a bathroom scales. Remember when we were baking we used the scales to measure the flour?”

These ways of supporting oral language development are demonstrated to parents within the family literacy programmes, albeit not at the same time. These new ways of working with parents to develop their abilities to support their children’s oral language development can support both child and parent to bridge the gap between their primary discourse and their secondary discourse (Gee 1990). Differences in language spoken at home and language required by schools can, for some children, be difficult to traverse. Cregan (2008, p.32) in her research found that this language difference was associated with social class, with many children starting school unprepared. Cregan states that “facility with oral language is critically linked with the development of literacy skills”. Mercer and Littleton (2007) have stated that more needs to be done in terms of policy and teaching practice to support children to use language for learning.

Teaching instruction in Ireland in relation to oral language needs to change, the recent development by the NCCA on a new primary curriculum for junior, senior and first class children is a step in the right direction. I believe that family literacy teachers have an opportunity to develop parents’ capacity to support their children’s oral language development by using the balanced literacy framework. Whatever new framework is recommended for family literacy, this will be at the core. But it is not enough, so the framework I recommend extends it, incorporating the ideas for ecological systems theory.

## The family literacy framework – SPACES

From the beginning, the overarching aim for this piece of research was to develop a family literacy framework underpinned by best practices, which would provide structure and guidelines to school and parent partnerships. The data shows that when parents are involved in supporting their children's literacy development the spaces between children's and parents' literacy knowledge and know how is increased (Nixon, 2012) and the relationship between schools and parents is forever changed (Weiss et al., 2009). I have incorporated the authentic voices of parents involved in this research into this framework, utilizing what they told me worked for them. I hope I have done justice to their voices and experience in presenting it.



Figure 24: SPACES – A family literacy framework

The family literacy framework is made up of six key components and how they apply to parents and schools (Figure 24). The acronym SPACES was developed from the data. It represents the spaces that are evident in the relationship between parents and schools and clearly describes how family literacy programmes and parental engagement strategies can bridge the SPACES in both parents' and schools' knowledge and know how.

**Schools and parents a partnership approach:** Family literacy teachers working in partnership with school and home to develop relationships between parent, home and school. Relationships and relationship building are crucial to successful engagement with parents. Barrett (2008) emphasizes that relationships are critical to successful engagement with vulnerable families, although they are time intensive. Cortis et al. (2009) discuss the importance of relationship building, stressing the support it gives to parents to build self-esteem and helps overcome anxieties about participation. The engagement of parents is crucial to the success of family literacy programmes. Involving parents in a fun learning environment empowers parents in the school context by involving them in their child's education.

Key components needed for a partnership approach:

- Develop a parental engagement strategy in partnership with key stakeholders (to include parents).
- Develop and implement a 'How to' guide for parental engagement
- Build relationships by making positive connections between schools and families.
- Create meaningful interactions to create common understandings about education expectations and effective ways to support it.
- Schools to utilize parental involvement to support student learning/achievement.
- Develop parental capacity to support children's learning in school and at home.
- Support continuous learning – parents, children, and teachers playing an active role in developing knowledge and skills needed for learning.
- Build relationships and respond to change: parents able to adapt new skills to support the child's changing learning needs.

## **Parental confidence building: The how**

Parents want to help but often lack the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to support their children's literacy development. Home learning should be fun. Crucial to the design of the family literacy programmes is the underlying concept of family literacy and what it means. Heath (2010) describes two critical factors vital to the family literacy concept. Firstly, is the continued language interaction with children across the lifecycle, and secondly, is the pleasure and enjoyment of spending time with children on literacy activities. The three family literacy programmes are delivered to parents in school and community settings. The emphasis on engaging parents is to create a non- threatening, indirect and informal invitation to participate. This is done through a "fun way". According to Nixon (2012) what parents do with their children impacts their children's literacy development and is more important than who parents are.

Key components to build parental confidence in literacy activities with their children:

- Support parents to be aware of their "funds of Knowledge" (González et al., 2005) and build upon the skills they already possess.
- Develop capacity building programmes for parents that enable them to support their children's literacy development: for example: Story Sacks programme, Breakfast Buddies Programme, Incredible Books Clubs.
- Support parents to create a reading routine at home with their children by providing free resources, with clear explanation and modelled delivery to build parental confidence.
- Support parents to enjoy literacy activities with their children by creating a welcoming fun atmosphere on the programmes and having fun in family literacy programmes.

## **Assessment and evaluation: Evidence based family literacy programmes**

According to UNESCO (2011) there is an absence of “methodologically robust European research on family literacy initiatives”, meaning Meta-analyses conducted by European researchers rely on non-European studies for data. This creates large gaps in understanding of “how well programmes are implemented, particularly in disadvantaged households, and how important implementation quality is to success” (UNESCO, 2011, p.61). Parents vary in the degree to which they can support their children’s literacy development and the success of family literacy interventions is dependent on the home environment and the skills of parents (Saracho, 2000). Family literacy programmes, therefore, need a pre and post evaluation to ensure the family literacy practice is embedded and programme delivery is meeting the stated needs of the parents. As a result of this research a pre and post evaluation of these family literacy programmes were developed. The three family literacy programmes are interactive and culturally responsive programmes, so the pre and post evaluation forms were aligned with the specific family learning programme goals.

\*Family literacy pre and post evaluation forms available in appendix F & G.

## **Coaching & Resources: Creating a reading routine.**

Family literacy and the practice of reading and developing children’s literacy skills in the home require time and dedication. If parents are having fun performing the literacy activities with their child they will be more likely to continue the activity. As stated earlier, according to Heath (2010, p.38) “intangible are the rewards that reading together gives: social intimacy, laughter, fulfilment of curiosity and contemplation of the wonders of real and imagined worlds.” Morrow (2003) suggests that providing resources and materials to be used at home supports the programmes effectiveness, Stevens (2004) concurs, advocating that providing resources to parents creates a literacy rich environment at home which is conducive to learning.

Key components to create a reading routine:

- Provide free resources to parents that support their child's learning in the home with modelled approaches on how to use the resources provided
- High quality resources provided to parents to implement new practices and ensure they are embedded.
- Resources should include good quality story book with related literacy activities. Literacy activities should include opportunities for parents to support their children's reading, writing and talking.
- Develop competencies and coaching models for both parents and practitioners to ensure evidence based practice.
- Parents should be given time to reflect on their new skills at every programme. This sharing will support collaborative learning and reflective and reflexive practice.
- Opportunities for peer to peer learning included in all programmes

### **Environment for teaching and learning**

Parents engaged in the programmes are supported to enhance their family literacy skills with new ideas for fun learning activities and supplied with free resources to go home and practice the activity with their children. The design of the family literacy programmes is founded on a strengths based approach. Parents are viewed as valuable resources to their children's learning and a valuable part of the child's ecological system of support. A relationship of trust and mutual respect between the family literacy teacher and the parents helps raise participation rates (Weiss et al., 2009). Culturally responsive teachers make and build relationships with their students as individuals whilst understanding the sociocultural context of the lived environment (Klingner & Edwards, 2006).

### **Eight key elements of the teaching learning environment**

1. Multiple opportunities for teacher modelling of the literacy activities.
2. High quality coaching in family literacy activities.

3. Collaborative learning within the group on the literacy activities.
4. Ensuring tasks are culturally appropriate and achievable through planning and teacher knowledge of parent skills.
5. Creation and provision of free resources to parents so they have the tools to practise new skills.
6. Support parents' in their reflective and reflexive learning (one to one and group) by incorporating evaluation of each new activity at each programme.
7. Build upon parents' self-confidence and self-efficacy through a strengths based approach to learning.
8. Ensure the learning activity is delivered in a "fun" way so it is an enjoyable task and one which parents will enjoy sharing with their children.

**Strengths based approach: professional staff trained to engage parents**

The development of a suitable work force to support the framework, involves training programmes with follow on coaching. Utilizing the ecological systems theory within an overall family literacy framework enables professionals to be more holistic in their approach to children and parents so that there is a greater understanding of circumstances and environmental contexts that may apply (Gill & Jack, 2007). Applying the framework supports family literacy teachers to understand the worlds of the parents they work with, ensuring their learning needs are met. Having a greater understanding of learners' worlds is to look at learners' epistemologies and ontologies, their reasons for attending the family literacy programmes, and their lived realities at that moment in time.

Key competencies for all staff engaging parents:

- An innate belief in the power and ability of parents to learn and transform their lives.
- Understand Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and be able to apply it to their teaching environment.

- Understand social and contextual factors associated with areas of socio-economic disadvantage.
- Practitioners should have the following qualities when engaging parents and building relationships with them: strengths based approach, enthusiasm, passion, drive, commitment, empathy and a mutual respect for learners.
- Knowledge of creating course materials that are culturally appropriate and achievable for their parents, using a balanced literacy framework.
- Knowledge of how adults learn to include methodologies, multiple intelligence profiles and teaching skills.
- Create a fun learning environment that enables critical reflection, leading to transformative learning and the creation of a virtuous learning cycle for parents.
- Aware of barriers to participation and the efforts needed to overcome these barriers and to retain parents in programmes.
- Understand child literacy development to include language development, cognitive development and social and emotional development.

## **Conclusion**

The overarching aim for this piece of research was to develop a family literacy framework that included the voices of the parents who attended the three family literacy programmes. I will show in Chapter 8 how the themes from the analyses of the data in Chapter 5 have informed the creation of this family literacy framework. This framework is my theory, grounded in the data of respondents' voices. Charmaz (2014) describes her work as constructivist with the emphasis on keeping the researcher close to the participants, through keeping their words intact in analysis. I have tried in this framework to construct the worlds of participants involved in this research, to describe key elements and components that worked for them while attending the family literacy programmes. As a result of this research the family literacy framework will be complemented with training manuals

for the family literacy programmes and a training programme for professional staff to develop a whole school parental engagement strategy.

In this chapter I have discussed existing family literacy frameworks. I have introduced the family literacy framework SPACES, which is a direct result of the analyses of the themes. In the next chapter I will review the research questions and findings, discuss the limitations of this research, recommendations for practice and recommendations for future research. SPACES: The Family Literacy Framework is summarised in Table 14 overleaf.

**Table 14: Summary of key components of SPACES**

<b>Key Components</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>Schools</b>
<p><b>S</b> <i>Schools and parents: a Partnership approach</i> Family literacy teachers working in partnership with school and home to develop relationship between parent, home and school</p>	<p>Involving parents in the school and in life of child in school. Parents a key part of school community Parents as partners in identifying areas where support is needed.</p>	<p>Parental engagement strategy in place. Meaningful opportunities for parent involvement optimized. “How to guide for parental engagement” in place and utilized</p>
<p><b>P</b> <i>Parental Confidence building – the how</i> Parents want to help but often lack the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to support their children’s literacy development.</p>	<p>Parents are the experts on their child, their knowledge is respected. Their strengths and perspectives are starting points to develop their skills and support their needs.</p>	<p>Partnership approach encompassing a strengths based perspective is utilized across the school system.</p>
<p><b>A</b> <i>Assessment and evaluation</i> Family literacy programmes need a pre and post evaluation</p>	<p>Parents’ opinions and views on programmes respected and validated.</p>	<p>Pre and post evaluation forms collected and analysed. Changes needed are implemented according to the analyses of data and parent feedback Ensure evidence based delivery of the programmes</p>
<p><b>C</b> <i>Coaching and resources – creating a reading routine</i>  <i>Coaching and modelling reading routine to parents</i></p>	<p>Parents want to help and are willing partners in learning how. Opportunities for peer to peer learning included in all programmes High quality resources provided to parents to implement new practices and ensure they are embedded.</p>	<p>Coaching model used to coach parents new skills and allow them time to “have a go” in Family Literacy programme. Free High quality resources provided at programmes with modelled approaches on how to use the resources provided</p>
<p><b>E</b> <i>Environment for Teaching and learning what needs to be in place</i> Retaining parents in family literacy programmes</p>	<p>Parents enjoy attending programmes and actively seek out further opportunities to learn more. Parental confidence in embedding new family literacy skills evident.</p>	<p>Fun welcoming atmosphere created for parents attending programmes Key elements of teaching learning environment implemented.</p>
<p><b>S</b> <i>Strengths based approach: Professional staff</i> Develop suitable work force to support the framework. This would involve training programmes with follow on coaching to deliver.</p>	<p>Recognition that parents have already established “funds of knowledge” and literacy practices in their homes. Parents’ values, cultural traditions and literacy abilities are identified, understood and respected.</p>	<p>Practitioners recognize and build on parents existing skills. Practitioners have knowledge of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory and understand its relevance to their role.</p>

## **Chapter 8: Conclusions**

Chapter 8 reviews the research question and research methodology and addresses validity. It discusses the development of the family literacy framework and how it evolved from the analyses of the data. The limitations of this research and recommendations for practice and for future research are discussed.

I began the introduction to this research discussing the importance of family literacy and its benefits to the family. This research was situated in Ballymun, an area in Dublin designated as disadvantaged, and looked at participants attending the three family literacy programmes 1) the Story Sacks Programme, 2) Breakfast Buddies Programme and 3) The Incredible Book Club. The overarching research topic was to explore how family literacy programmes can enhance parental engagement with children's literacy, and the aim was to produce a framework that would guide family literacy practice and practitioners. Developing a family literacy framework which signposts the engagement of parents in family literacy programmes and the benefits they receive from attending will, I hope, highlight the role family literacy plays in the lives of families in Dublin and how it can support the eradication of education inequality in socio-economic areas of disadvantage.

### **Reflections on constructivist grounded theory**

Chapters 2 and 4 describe my reasons for choosing the methodology. I needed to be congruent to my epistemology and ontology but also needed the flexibility to be a part of the research. I was an insider in the organization delivering the programmes and I also had a working knowledge of living in the area, how could I reconcile both? Doing research on methodologies, I came across constructivist grounded theory and it interested me greatly. Constructivist grounded theory method considers the researcher and the respondents to be co-creators of the data; the researcher is a part of the process

“Social reality is multiple, processual and constructed, then we must take the researchers position, privilege, perspective and interactions into account as an inherent part of the research reality. It too is a construction” (Charmaz, 2014, p.13).

I began to look deeper into grounded theory as a method and to also look at the “constructivist turn” (Charmaz, 2014, p.12). There was a process, an order to what needed to be done with the data and it made sense to me that the research respondents and the researcher were co-creating the data together.

On reflection, the data collection methods - the questionnaire for an overview of participants attending the family literacy programmes followed up with interviews with parents and HSCL teachers involved in the programmes - was appropriate for the overall research design. Analysing the interview data was time consuming. There was initial coding, focused coding, memo writing, clustering, constant comparative method and theoretical sampling. The method required ongoing interaction with the data which supported me to be reflexive and really challenge my thinking on developing categories. I managed these quite well until I came to developing theoretical categories or themes. At this point I found Charmaz (2014) lacking in detail about developing categories/themes and checking them for validity. I was conscious of validity throughout the process and my reflexivity was in overdrive. Had I come to the right categories? How will I check for validity? I decided to apply thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p.6) “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data”. I then wondered if I was staying true to constructivist grounded theory methods by applying thematic analyses to verify my categories/themes, but thankfully Bryman (2016) states that thematic analyses is but another tool in the researcher’s toolkit for grounded theory, so I applied it to my data to support my selection of the themes.

One of the criticisms of grounded theory method is around the literature review. In other forms of qualitative research the researcher does their literature review before collecting any data, whereas in constructivist

grounded theory the literature review is done after the data has been analysed. Other forms of qualitative research are deductive and they are testing a theory that is already in existence, whereas I was using inductive research, I was creating a theory. So when I went to the literature I was supporting my themes developed from the analyses of the data. I enjoyed this process because it made me realize that all that time I had spent immersed in the data, developing the themes was worth it. The thematic view of findings added depth to my themes and validated the data collection and analysing process.

My original aim to include respondents' voices in the family literacy framework was achieved. Grounded theory appears to be the methodology of choice in nursing research and health research. I feel this particular method, constructivist grounded theory; can add much to educational and social justice research. The world and our lived realities are constantly changing. I am pleased to say constructivist grounded theory methodology seems to be moving with the times and those changes; I am delighted to have been a small part of it.

### **Addressing validity**

Before I began the research I had some concerns which I voiced in Chapter 1:

- My role as the developer and the facilitator of the programmes means I have insider knowledge of the programmes, will that cloud my judgement?
- Will it allow me to be objective in the research design?
- How will I ensure my own personal bias is kept in check during the research process?
- How do I ensure parents don't tell me what they think I want to hear?
- How will I ensure this research is valid?
- How will I develop the family literacy framework?

Reflecting on those questions now as I write the conclusion to this research, I can say I addressed those concerns by being reflexive in my approach, being ethical in collecting the data and also in my interactions with respondents. By writing about my philosophical approach and identifying my epistemology and ontology I stated my own personal values and was open to the data during analyses, I was able to develop a family literacy framework that I can disseminate.

In exploring the extent to which the framework below is valid, Mannion and Morrison (2007, p.198) state that threats to validity can be minimized at the design stage of the research, during data collection and when data is being analysed. Throughout this research process I have been in constant contact with my research supervisor discussing the research and any findings. These discussions aided my reflections and interpretations of the research process and findings and enhanced the ongoing validation process throughout this research journey.

During this research process I was constantly checking my approach for validity and kept a research diary. As a professional teacher we are trained to be reflexive in our practice so I was able to transfer reflexivity to my research. During the analyses of the data I was constantly checking that I was coding correctly and as I have already described I checked for validity when I applied thematic analyses to the categories/themes.

To further address validity in this research, I clarified my bias in my philosophical approach in Chapter 2. I have also triangulated my data in six different ways. I did this by

1. Collecting data from a questionnaire which informed the interview questions for both parents and HSCL teachers.
2. I conducted HSCL interviews to triangulate what parents told me in their interviews.
3. Data from the interviews with parents and HSCL teachers informed the development of the themes.

4. The themes that emerged from the analyses of the data were then used to explain their selection using published research in the field of family literacy.
5. I used rich descriptions from the interview process to highlight links with the research currently available on family literacy.
6. I combined current research on family literacy with the data from the interview process with both parents and HSCCL teachers involved, to develop the family literacy framework.

Charmaz (2014) developed criteria for validity for grounded theory studies. She discusses four criteria:

- **Credibility:** reflecting logic and conceptual grounding using the grounded theory methods such as coding, observations between categories.
- **Originality:** in reference to the significance of the study, are there new insights, is the research theoretically significant?
- **Resonance:** the need for the theory to have scope and relevance for those that use it: does it reflect the studied experience; are there links between the experience of participants and larger institutions?
- **Usefulness:** knowledge development and practical application, does the research add to knowledge?

The findings of this research are credible because the research design involving grounded theory methods provided good data, analysed thoroughly and systematically, providing new insights into family literacy practice and the authentic point of view of the parents who participated.

### **Developing the family literacy framework – SPACES**

As previously stated, from the beginning the overarching aim for this piece of research was to develop a family literacy framework that included the voices of the parents involved, to include what they told me worked for them. The family literacy framework is made up of six key components and how they apply to parents and schools (Figure 24). The acronym SPACES was developed from the evidence of the research, it represents the spaces that are evident in the relationship between parents and schools and clearly

describes how family literacy programmes and parental engagement strategies can bridge the SPACES in both parents and schools knowledge and know how. I incorporated the five themes that emerged from the analyses of the data into the family literacy framework:

- Barriers to participation – “I didn’t know what to do with a child in school”.
- Overcoming barriers to participation - "You feel like you’re worth something."
- Teaching–learning environment - "If parents really enjoy going to something then it must be good”.
- Cultural shifts between home-school-community -"I feel like it’s built a bridge or a root".
- Transformational learning -"I feel like a real mother."

### **Schools and parents – a partnership approach**

The first component of the framework “schools and parents – a partnership approach” is about the relationship between schools and parents and how crucial that relationship is and how it can support the school to overcome barriers to participation. This was included in the framework and has its origins in the themes “Barriers to participation”, “Overcoming barriers to participation” and “Cultural shifts between home and school” and is highlighted in these quotes:

“We tried a couple of times to get the parents to do Story Sacks and numbers were low but I think once the parents knew you and met you it gave a real push and a drive and it motivated me certainly to want to get you in to work with them. I knew it would be a big benefit” (HSCL interview 10, p.1)

“I didn’t know what it was to be a parent, I knew how to look after her but I didn’t know what it was like to be a parent with a child in a school. It’s a completely different thing and that’s where I was, I didn’t know what to do with a child in school.” (Parent interview 3, p.17)

“Being in the school doing the Story Sacks, the teachers were popping in and out saying hello and they were really proud to see the mammy’s of the kids in their class there and it was the confidence thing as well you know about sometimes you think teachers are staring at you but they were just as silly as us”. (Parent interview 1, p.10-11)

From just these three quotes we can see the HSCL perspective on relationship building and also the parent’s perspective on being unable to support her child and another parent’s perspective on how attending the

Story Sacks programme helped her build a relationship with the teachers in the school. Parents and schools working together in a partnership approach would overcome these barriers for the parent and also support the HSCL in building relationships with parents.

### **Parental Confidence building – the how**

The second component of the framework has its origins in the theme “Teaching learning environment”. This component is about creating that fun learning environment and supporting parents to develop a reading routine as is demonstrated in these quotes from parents and HSCL teachers:

“I wanted to be more confident and I wanted my children to like reading and to know that it’s good to read” (Parent interview 3, p.3)

“It’s not really a set up where they are going to learn something directly from a teacher that’s imposed on them. It’s active learning from other parents, they can bring in their own experience. If it’s not personalized it’s useless” (HSCL interview 9, p.9)

“Learning all the different things to do with the kids with their reading and their writing and stuff like that I just think it’s amazing.”  
(Parent interview 5, p.11)

From these three quotes it is clear that confidence building in parents is supported by a fun learning environment. Family literacy programmes can bridge the gap in parents’ knowledge and know how if they are delivered in a supportive way that builds parental confidence.

### **Assessment and evaluation**

This third component was developed from the thematic view of the literature in chapter 6. It became apparent that family literacy programmes vary in their approach and therefore their outcomes. As stated earlier, according to UNESCO (2011) there is an absence of “methodologically robust European research on family literacy initiatives”, family literacy programmes therefore need a pre and post evaluation to ensure the family literacy practice is embedded and programme delivery is meeting the stated needs of the parents. I have devised a pre and post evaluation for the three family literacy programmes under investigation as a result of this research. These evaluation forms are available in appendix F & G of this document

## **Coaching and resources – creating a reading routine**

The fourth component of the framework has its origins in the theme “teaching learning environment”. When conducting interviews with parents and HSCL teachers, reading and how to read became a prominent theme as is demonstrated here in these quotes:

“Using different voices, making it like really fun. Before it was I’ll read the story and then go to bed, you read to them and they fall asleep. You bore them to death.” (Parent interview 6, p.5)

“It was something different every single time that you went. It was giving you different ideas on what to do with your kids and giving you a bit of confidence for yourself to actually do these things. Sometimes I do think I don’t know how to maybe do certain things, you took confidence away to be able to do this” (Parent interview 7, p.9)

“I think that’s the most important thing about the Story Sacks and the Breakfast Buddies that fun element, that reading for pleasure, that reading doesn’t have to be about coming home with a school book doing reading for 10 minutes and that it’s forced. It can be fun and it can be informal and I think that parents sometimes feel a bit daunted in relation to that and I think we broke down some of those barriers and it brought other elements into it as well ” (HSCL interview 10, p.5)

Family literacy and the practice of reading and developing children’s literacy skills in the home require time and dedication. If parents are having fun performing the literacy activities with their child they will be more likely to continue the activity.

## **Environment for teaching and learning**

The fifth component of the framework has its origins in the theme “teaching learning environment”. Overcoming barriers to participation does not end when the parent joins the programme. The family literacy teacher or HSCL teacher is responsible for creating the right learning environment which will support parents to stay in the programme, but also to embed the new family literacy practices into their family learning activities in the home.

“I just think by their participation it’s the signal that they are actually enjoying it, it definitely gives people confidence who don’t have any, a little step further where you see they want to go to the Breakfast Buddies. They’d never have done that maybe without the Story Sack “(HSCL interview 9, p.7)

“What I notice is when they come to story time the children tell me “oh my mammy does that with me” you know if I’m explaining something or if I say “what is the first thing we do with our book” and they will say “we hug it” “ my

mammy does that with me at home “ so the children are making me aware that this isn't just happening in Story Sacks that they are doing this at home, like they are only dying to tell you “ oh I read that story with my mammy” so those things are happening at home “ ( HSCL Interview 8, p.6)

“We all sit in little groups but it's great that there's no clique. You know what I mean everybody is just friendly and welcoming, all the staff and we just have great fun and great banter and we're learning. We don't even realise we're picking up tips, but we are” (Parent interview 6, p.11)

“It's just something different, it's fun. You make it exciting. You make it relevant to whatever age group. . You always have something for the smaller children something for the older children. Just lots of great tips and advice and fun ways of learning.” (Parent interview 6, p.10)

### **Strengths-based approach - Professional staff**

The sixth component of the framework is a strengths based approach and this has its origins in all of the themes. A strengths based approach will support engagement, relationship building with the school, retaining parents in programmes and encouraging them to learn, embedding new family learning practices in their home learning environment and perhaps discover new things about themselves along the way:

“I remember it was fun, they loved the fact that they got the breakfast, the relaxed atmosphere and there are so many little things I suppose. it's the picture they painted I suppose and curiosity got the better of me and I mean if parents really enjoy going to something then it must be good “ (HSCL interview 8, p.5 )

“It's not like being in school and someone telling you “this is what you're doing and you're doing it wrong, this is the way you should be doing it.”It's not at all like that, it's all about encouraging you and different ways of doing it and getting your children more involved with yourself and your getting more involved with them and then the benefits of it because they'll come and sit down and talk to you then and tell you things.” (Parent interview 7, p.36)

“The facilitators here always make you feel welcome or if you come across with a problem or an issue they'd never ever say “oh no that's totally wrong I wouldn't do that now this is what I'd do” it's just worded differently and just makes you feel really at ease and comfortable you always feel like you're able to come and speak to any of them.” (Parent interview 6, p.20)

“It is the camaraderie, like the people that were there and the facilitator she just made you feel so at ease and I think she was well able to read people, that she knew if you were nervous and she'd find out what you liked, you were brought in. You weren't left sitting there, everybody was included” (Parent interview 3, p.7)

“If someone makes you feel comfortable you're going to feel comfortable and open up and I have to say these programmes have helped me an awful lot. I've come out of myself as such and doing things with the kids to help them along.”(Parent interview 5, p.13)

As can be seen in these quotes the strengths based approach was a key component to creating a fun, relaxing learning environment where parents felt comfortable to learn from each other and the facilitator on the programme. The strengths-based approach addresses many barriers to participation by creating a supportive learning environment for parents engaged on the programmes and supports the development of relationships between the home and school.

I have shown here how the themes from the analyses of the data in Chapter 5 have informed the creation of this family literacy framework. This framework is my theory, grounded in the data of respondents' voices. Charmaz (2014) discusses using grounded theory to transform knowledge; I hope that the application of this family literacy framework will support me to do just that. My journey through grounded theory has transformed me. I have a different worldview, a different way of knowing.

### **Limitations of the research**

This research was a small scale research with N=30 respondents to the questionnaire and N =10 interview respondents. All of the respondents were women, however, as stated earlier, Timmons (2008, p.97) asserts that "family in family literacy is gendered and refers to a maternal caregiver". Hegarty & Feeley (2010) agree stating that it is usually the mother who is prescribed the role of literacy teacher, Gorrard & Smith (2007) concur, adding that women's future plans for career and education are often put on hold to support children. Although there might be a gender limitation to this research the fact still remains that these family literacy programmes worked for these women.

Unfortunately, there was no way of tracking the literacy attainment of the children of parents involved in these family literacy programmes. However, there is evidence in the accounts of parents and HSCL teachers of the attitudinal change of children towards books. There is also evidence of

transformed practice of parents and the embedding of new family literacy skills through their accounts.

## **Recommendations for practice**

### **The role of the Home School Community Liaison Teacher**

The current arrangements for HSCL teachers require them to be in the HSCL role for five years after which they return to the classroom. Therefore the knowledge gained by the HSCL teachers over the five years goes back into the classroom with them, leaving the new HSCL teacher to start all over again. Having worked in a community change initiative in partnership with 11 schools, my recommendation would be to have a position of a central coordinator for an area that can support and develop the practice of the HSCL's in the area or even region.

### **Training for teachers on parental engagement.**

A module on teacher-parent engagement in teaching colleges should be a core module for teaching colleges. In my experience working in 11 schools with teachers and HSCL teachers, they have reported feeling ill-prepared to build relationships with parents and encourage parental support of children's literacy skills.

### **Family literacy evaluations**

Family literacy evaluations that include pre and post questionnaires should be mandatory in all family literacy programmes to inform Irish and European family literacy programme evidence. This will ensure best practice in all family literacy programmes and inform "value for money" studies for government investment.

### **A family literacy dedicated organisation**

In line with the Irish Government's National Literacy Plan, a dedicated family literacy office/organisation similar to those set up in America

(National Centre for Families Learning, [www.familieslearning.org](http://www.familieslearning.org)) or Canada (ABC Life literacy Canada, [www.lifeliteracy.ca](http://www.lifeliteracy.ca)) to promote the role of the family in literacy. Ireland and the Irish Government currently fund NALA and their website [www.helpmykidlearn.com](http://www.helpmykidlearn.com). However, in light of the overwhelming evidence to support family literacy interventions, it is my opinion that more can and should be done to promote family literacy and parent participation. As parents in this research stated, their understanding of family literacy and how it should be implemented in the home were very limited.

“I didn’t know what it was to be a parent, I knew how to look after her but I didn’t know what it was like to be a parent with a child in a school. It’s a completely different thing and that’s where I was, I didn’t know what to do with a child in school.” (Parent interview 3, p.17)

In my opinion, as good as websites are, there is no substitute for personal, collaborative, strengths-based support in a family literacy classroom for a parent, “Learning care skills need to be learned and resourced” (Feeley, 2014, p.167).

“Just because through Story Sacks and Breakfast Buddies I learned how important it was for children to pick up a book and read and to even be able to write a shopping list or read the signs on the road or whatever so even though I felt silly I felt it was an important thing that my children should learn”. (Parent interview 1, p.7)

“To sit there and actually read with her when I would have been like ‘ah I don’t have the time’ or whatever. It’s not like that anymore, like now and again I won’t have time but I find myself making the time and trying to make an effort with her because she loves it” (Parent interview 5,p.19)

“I just feel really good about myself when I’m walking out of Breakfast Buddies, I don’t know what it is, like everything about it I enjoy you know? I just feel really good when I’m walking out, walking home, really good and positive about things. If I’m after learning something new, whatever it is, I’m after learning something, you’re taking something away, it just makes you feel good about yourself. As I say the information you get and bringing the packs home there’s a great excitement actually bringing it home to the kids they love it” (Parent interview 7 p.23).

From my work in Ballymun it is evident that each ETB has the potential to make better links with the primary schools and the HSCL teachers in its area. A dedicated family literacy organisation could support the implementation of better links and perhaps offer training to HSCL teachers and family literacy teachers on working in partnership from a strengths

based perspective to engage and retain parents on family literacy programmes.

### **Education inequality**

Equality in education is an essential human right, a right that allows access to other rights, to include economic, health and well-being (Baker et al., 2009). If NALA, the NPC and the ETB were to lobby the Irish Government on behalf of parents and children experiencing educational disadvantage, highlighting the benefits of family literacy programmes, perhaps it could be the beginning of the end or at the very least, be a major instrument in breaking the cycle of intergenerational educational disadvantage.

### **Deficit language of “hard to reach”**

My final recommendation is for all involved in education provision to stop using the deficit term “hard to reach parents”. What families need is a strengths-based approach, a change in perspective from schools, and an ecological approach to engagement.

### **Recommendations for future research**

My recommendation for future research is for an investigation of the application of the family literacy framework. This could be done as a whole school approach to parental engagement and family literacy. This research could link the framework to children’s literacy skills by looking at the literacy skills of children whose parents attend before and after the programmes, alongside a control group of children whose parents are not attending the family literacy programme.

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## **Appendix A: Information for participants.**

### **Research project on family literacy programmes in Ballymun.**

- ❖ Lána McCarthy is studying for a Masters in Research in Waterford Institute of Technology.
- ❖ Lána McCarthy wants to find out about your experience at the \_\_\_\_\_  
(Story Sacks Programme/ Breakfast Buddies Programme/ The Incredible Book Club.)
- ❖ If you would like to get involved Lána would like to meet you for a one to one interview, at a time that suits you to talk about the family literacy programme you have attended.
- ❖ If you decide to take part you are free to change your mind and withdraw from the research at any stage even after the interview.
- ❖ During the interview you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.
- ❖ Your name and anything else that might identify you will be changed. Your name will never be used or disclosed to anyone.
- ❖ If you have any concerns or questions regarding this study please feel free to contact me at any stage.

Lána McCarthy

## **Appendix B: Participant consent form**

Please tick your response:

1. I have read and understand the participant information

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

2. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss my role in the study

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

3. I have received enough information about this study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

4. I agree to take part in this study

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

5. I understand I can withdraw from this study at any time

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

6. I agree to have my interview taped

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Participants signature:

Researchers signature:

## Appendix C: Parent questionnaire

This questionnaire is part of a research project on Family literacy programmes .

Thank you for taking part.

1. Age \_\_\_\_\_
2. Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_
3. Nationality \_\_\_\_\_
4. Marital status (Please tick)  
Widowed \_\_\_\_\_ Married \_\_\_\_\_  
Co-habiting \_\_\_\_\_ Single \_\_\_\_\_  
Divorced \_\_\_\_\_ Separated \_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you have children Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

**Age of children**

- Under 5 yrs. old
- Between 5 & 10 yrs. old
- Between 11 & 15 yrs. old
- Between 16 & 20 yrs. old
- 21 years and older

**Number of children**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

6. At what age did you leave school?
7. Please tick which, if any, of these state exams you took:  
Junior cert  
Leaving cert  
Leaving cert applied  
Other  
None
8. What is your Mother's highest education attainment?
9. What is your Father's highest education attainment?
10. When you left school what was your main occupation?
11. What is your main occupation now?

12. Please tick which of the Family literacy programmes you have attended:

Breakfast Buddies Programme

Incredible Book Club

Story Sack

13. Why did you come to this family literacy programme?

14. How did you find out about this family literacy course?

15. What was the most enjoyable thing about this course for you?

16. What was the least enjoyable thing about this course?

17. As a result of doing this course have you learned any new ideas to help your child with

Homework Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Learning at home Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Reading Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Writing Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Talking Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

18. What, if anything will you do differently as a result of this course to help your child with

Homework

Learning at home

Reading

Writing

Talking

19. Do you wish to comment further on any of the family literacy programmes you have attended?

**Thank you for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire.**

The research project will also focus, through interviews, the experience of parents on family literacy programmes. Would you be willing to take part in an interview? If yes, will you leave your contact details at the end of this form?

Thank you

Lána

## **Appendix D: Interview guide for interviews with parents:**

### **Initial questions**

1. Tell me about how you decided to go to (insert family literacy course title)?
2. If you can remember, what were you thinking? How did you happen to go?  
Who, if anyone influenced you to go? How did they influence you?
3. What was your first initial experience like?
4. Why did you keep going? What made you go back? Was there one particular thing or a series of things? Can you name them?
5. How would you describe how you viewed family learning before you went to (insert family literacy course title)?
6. What were the types of things you learned at (insert family literacy course title)?
7. How would you describe the person you were then?

### **Intermediate questions**

8. Can you tell me your thoughts and feelings when you learned about \_\_\_\_\_ in family learning?
9. What happened next?
10. How, if at all, have your thoughts and feelings changed about family learning?
11. What positive changes have occurred in your life since going to (insert family literacy course title)?
12. What negative changes have occurred in your life since going to (insert family literacy course title)?
13. Tell me how you go about family learning at home with your child, what do you do?

14. Can you describe a typical day now when you are using family learning practices?

15. How would you describe the person you are now?

**Ending questions**

16. Could you tell me how your views on family learning may have changed since doing the (insert family literacy course title)?

17. How have you grown as a person since (insert family literacy course title)?

18. Were there any changes in your relationship between you and your child and between you, your child, the school and community?

19. Is there something that you might not have thought of before that occurred to you during this interview?

20. Is there something else you think I should know to understand your family literacy practices better?

21. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Adapted from Charmaz, K. (2014) *Constructing Grounded Theory*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) London, Sage.

## **Appendix E: Interview guide for interviews with Home School Community Liaison Teachers:**

1. Tell me about how you decided to ask parents to go to (insert family literacy course title)?
2. If you can remember, what were you thinking? Why did you want parents to go?
3. Did parents talk to you about their experience at (insert family literacy course title)?
4. Was there one particular thing or a series of things that parents told you about? Can you name them?
5. Have you seen positive changes occurring in the family learning practices of parents who have attended (insert family literacy course title)? Can you name them?
6. Could you tell me have your views on family learning and parental engagement changed since observing the (insert family literacy course title)?
7. Is there something that you might not have thought of before that occurred to you during this interview?
8. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

# Appendix F: Family literacy pre evaluation questionnaire



## youngballymun Family Literacy Programme Evaluation

### Pre programme questionnaire

<p>1. How often does your child read at home?</p> <p>Never <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Frequently <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Daily <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>2. If your child reads at home, does someone read with them?</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>No <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>If yes, who? _____</p> <p>3. If you read with your child, do you have a reading routine?</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>No <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>4. Do you talk to your child about –</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td>Hugging books</td> <td>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No <input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>The love of reading</td> <td>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No <input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>The blurb on book</td> <td>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No <input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Authors and illustrators</td> <td>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No <input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Questions about books</td> <td>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No <input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> </table> <p>5. How often do you spend time with your child on reading, writing and talking activities?</p> <p>Daily <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Once a week <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Once a month <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Never <input type="checkbox"/></p>	Hugging books	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	The love of reading	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	The blurb on book	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Authors and illustrators	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Questions about books	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>6. How often do you do these activities with your child?</p> <p>Write notes or shopping lists</p> <p>Never <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Frequently <input type="checkbox"/> Daily <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Play word games like Hangman or word searches</p> <p>Never <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Frequently <input type="checkbox"/> Daily <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Write stories</p> <p>Never <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Frequently <input type="checkbox"/> Daily <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>7. Do you:</p> <p>Explain new words to your child to ensure understanding</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Enjoy spending time with your child on reading, writing and talking activities</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>8. How would you describe reading, writing and talking with your child?</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td>A bit boring</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>A chore</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Fun</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Exciting</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> </table> <p>9. Have you participated in any of the following programmes:</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td>Ante natal course</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Ready Steady Grow (baby clinic)</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Baby massage course</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Talk and Play Every Day group</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Hanen You Make the Difference</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Story Sacks</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Breakfast Buddies</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> </table>	A bit boring	<input type="checkbox"/>	A chore	<input type="checkbox"/>	Fun	<input type="checkbox"/>	Exciting	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ante natal course	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ready Steady Grow (baby clinic)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Baby massage course	<input type="checkbox"/>	Talk and Play Every Day group	<input type="checkbox"/>	Hanen You Make the Difference	<input type="checkbox"/>	Story Sacks	<input type="checkbox"/>	Breakfast Buddies	<input type="checkbox"/>
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### Background questions

<p>How old are you?      Are you:    Female <input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>How many children do you have?</p> <p>What age/s are your child/ren?</p> <p>What is the highest level of education you have completed?</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td>Primary education</td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>Left before Junior Certificate</td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>Junior/Group/Inter Certification</td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>Upper Secondary (left before the Leaving)</td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>Applied Leaving Certificate</td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>Leaving Certificate/A-Levels</td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>Non-degree qualification (diploma)</td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>Primary Degree</td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>Post-graduate qualification</td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>Other (please specify)</td><td></td></tr> </table>	Primary education	<input type="checkbox"/>	Left before Junior Certificate	<input type="checkbox"/>	Junior/Group/Inter Certification	<input type="checkbox"/>	Upper Secondary (left before the Leaving)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Applied Leaving Certificate	<input type="checkbox"/>	Leaving Certificate/A-Levels	<input type="checkbox"/>	Non-degree qualification (diploma)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Primary Degree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Post-graduate qualification	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please specify)		<p>Can you tell me the type of household you live in?</p> <p>Lone parent <input type="checkbox"/>      Dual Parent <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>What is you and/or your partner's work situation?</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="text-align: left;">Tick the box that best describes your situation/ partner's situation</th> <th style="text-align: center;">I am</th> <th style="text-align: center;">My partner is</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr><td>Home maker, looking after my family</td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>In full-time paid employment</td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>In part-time paid employment</td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>Unemployed</td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>A student</td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>Retired</td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>Unable to work (illness or disability)</td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>Paid State-supported training</td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>Unpaid State-supported training</td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td><td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr><td>Other (please specify)</td><td></td><td></td></tr> </tbody> </table>	Tick the box that best describes your situation/ partner's situation	I am	My partner is	Home maker, looking after my family	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	In full-time paid employment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	In part-time paid employment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unemployed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	A student	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Retired	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unable to work (illness or disability)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Paid State-supported training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unpaid State-supported training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please specify)		
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# Appendix G: Family literacy post evaluation questionnaire

*youngballymun* Family Literacy Programme Evaluation

Today's date

Sessions attended

Post programme questionnaire

<p>1. How often does your child read at home?</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Never <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Frequently <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Daily <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>2. If your child reads at home, does someone read with them?</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Yes <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">No <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">If yes, who? _____</p> <p>3. If you read with your child, do you have a reading routine?</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Yes <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">No <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>4. Do you talk to your child about –</p> <table style="margin-left: 20px; border: none;"> <tr> <td>Hugging books</td> <td>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No <input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>The love of reading</td> <td>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No <input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>The blurb on book</td> <td>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No <input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Authors and illustrators</td> <td>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No <input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Questions about books</td> <td>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No <input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> </table> <p>5. How often do you spend time with your child on reading, writing and talking activities?</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Daily <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Once a week <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Once a month <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Never <input type="checkbox"/></p>	Hugging books	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	The love of reading	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	The blurb on book	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Authors and illustrators	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Questions about books	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>6. How often do you do these activities with your child?</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Write notes or shopping lists</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Never <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Frequently <input type="checkbox"/> Daily <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Play word games like Hangman or word searches</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Never <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Frequently <input type="checkbox"/> Daily <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Write stories</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Never <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Frequently <input type="checkbox"/> Daily <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>7. Do you:</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Explain new words to your child to ensure understanding</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Enjoy spending time with your child on reading, writing and talking activities</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>8. How would you describe reading, writing and talking with your child?</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">A bit boring <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">A chore <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Fun <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Exciting <input type="checkbox"/></p>
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<p>What difference, if any, did the course make for you: _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Do you have any other comments about the course: _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>																