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**Parental Engagement:**  
**A study into the**  
**involvement of parents of**  
**early years' children**

By

**Lynne McKenna**

*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of*

**DOCTOR OF EDUCATION**

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School of Education, University of Durham 2008



24 JUN 2009

## **Abstract**

### **Parental Engagement:**

**A study into the involvement of parents of early years' children.**

**Lynne McKenna.**

This study examines the use of parental involvement within early years area based initiatives designed to 'raise standards, widen participation and promote social inclusion'. The imperative to involve parents in communities labelled as 'disadvantaged' is explored with reference to one particular community in the north east of England. All three initiatives, a Family Numeracy programme, an Education Action Zone and a Sure Start programme have specific targets to reach in terms of involving parents in an attempt to meet the governments' three key objectives for education.

This study consists of two phases and involves analysis of Key Stage One and Key Stage Two Mathematics Test results from twenty four children alongside an interview programme which involves forty two interviews.

While it appears that initiative overload is occurring in this small community, interestingly this is not a concern of the parents who participated in the study. For parents involved in the initiatives, aspirations for their children were paramount. The ways in which early involvement in the initiatives impacted upon the parents' personal development as learners, upon family life, community regeneration and parenting, reinforces the value of those early years area based initiatives which encourage parental involvement. However it is the changing roles, responsibilities and recognition of parents, which adds weight to the idea that a new paradigm of parental involvement is emerging in the twenty first century.

## Table of Contents

Table of Contents	i
List of Tables	iv
Declarations	v
Statement of Copyright	vi
Acknowledgements	vii

Chapter/Section	Chapter/Section Title	Page Number
<b>Chapter One</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1	Introduction	1
1.0	The Research Focus	1
1.1	Background to the Study: The community involved	5
1.2	An overview of three early years based initiatives and my involvement	7
1.2.1	Family Numeracy Programmes	7
1.2.2	Education Action Zones	7
1.2.3	Sure Start	8
1.3	Overview: Parental Engagement in early years initiatives	9
<b>Chapter Two</b>	<b>Analysis of the literature 1: The changing epistemological basis of parental involvement.</b>	<b>11</b>
2.0	Introduction	11
2.1	An emerging paradigm of parental involvement	11
2.2	The historical perspective of parental involvement	14
2.2.1	The notion of a deficit model of parental involvement	17
2.2.2	Is parental involvement always a good thing?	21
2.2.3	The notion of a constructive model of parental involvement	22
2.3	Government policy: its influence on the epistemology of parental involvement	23
2.3.1	Educational Policies	25
2.3.2	Health Policies	27
2.3.3	Economic Policies	28
2.3.4	Social Policies	28
2.3.5	The problem with policy?	29
2.4	Models of Parental Engagement	31
2.4.1	Involvement or Interference?	35
2.5	Overview: A new paradigm?	36
<b>Chapter Three</b>	<b>Analysis of the literature 2: New Labour's Three Key Objectives for Education</b>	<b>38</b>
3.0	Introduction	38
3.1	New Labour's Three Key Objectives for Education	38
3.2	The raising standards agenda	40
3.2.1	The involvement of mothers and fathers in raising the educational achievement and well being of their children	42
3.2.2	The relationship of parental involvement to raising standards	45
3.3	Widening Participation: access to education and training	49
3.4	The Social Inclusion Agenda	51
3.4.1	Community	53
3.4.2	Community regeneration	54
3.4.3	Disadvantaged communities	56
3.4.4	The 'disadvantage' discourse	57
3.4.5	The 'education' discourse	59
3.4.6	The 'good parent' discourse	61

9.7	Future Research Possibilities	212
9.8	Overview	212
	Bibliography	
	Appendices	

### **List of Tables and Figures**

Table 1.1	Figures from the 2001 census	6
Table 3.1	Benefits of parental support in homework	47
Figure 5.1	Original research design plan	89
Table 5.2	Proposed time frame	90
Figure 5.3	Focus of parental interviews	92
Figure 5.4	Ethical checklist	102
Table 5.5	Phase One of the research: Research findings (codes) to emerge	110
Table 5.6	Phase Two of the research: Research findings (codes) to emerge	111
Figure 5.7	A proposed model for conducting research into early years area-based initiatives	113
Table 7.1	Comparison of national and local family numeracy programme	127
Table 7.2	Analysis of Mathematics Key Stage 1 Results	129
Table 7.3	Analysis of Mathematics Key Stage 2 Results	130

### **Appendices**

Appendix 1	Parents and Children consent form
Appendix 2	Professionals and Practitioners consent form
Appendix 3	Parents Family Numeracy questionnaire
Appendix 4	Pilot Programme baseline results recording pro-forma
Appendix 5	Parents home mathematics questionnaire
Appendix 6	The Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 Mathematics SAT results- raw data

3.5	Overview	62
4.0	Introduction	64
4.1	The development of early years interventions and the introduction of early years initiatives	65
4.1.2	Initiative overload?	71
4.1.3	The evidence based practice approach: the influence of the three initiatives in this study on future service provision	72
4.2	Family Numeracy Programmes: an initiative	73
4.2.1	The impetus to involve parents: a key feature of the family numeracy initiative	75
4.2.2	Findings from the pilot programmes	76
4.2.3	Family Numeracy Overview: Key concepts	77
4.3	Education Action Zones: an initiative	77
4.3.1	The impetus to involve parents: a key feature of the EAZ initiative	78
4.3.2	Disseminating good practice	81
4.3.3	EAZ Overview: Key concepts	81
4.4	Sure Start: an initiative	82
4.4.1	The impetus to involve parents: a key feature of the Sure Start initiative	83
4.4.2	Notions of partnership and empowerment	84
4.4.3	Sure Start Overview: Key concepts	84
4.5	Overview: a mini meta-analysis	85
<b>Chapter Five</b>	<b>A Research Framework</b>	<b>86</b>
5.0	Introduction	86
5.1	Proposed research question	87
5.2	Hypothesis generating research: working within an interpretive paradigm	88
5.3	A Research design Plan	89
5.4	Research methodology	94
5.4.1	The Ethnographic Interview: the main source of data collection	100
5.5	The contribution of ethics to the research strategy	101
5.5.1	Methodological Issue: Objectivity as a researcher	102
5.5.2	Methodological Issue: When does conversation become research?	103
5.5.3	Methodological Issue: Measuring the measurable or measuring the meaningful	104
5.5.4	Ethical Issues	106
5.6	Analysis of the literature	107
5.7	Proposed methods of analysis	107
5.7.1	Grounded Theory	107
5.7.2	Theoretical sampling	108
5.7.3	Progressive Focusing	109
5.7.4	Open Coding	109
5.8	Overview	111
<b>Chapter Six</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>114</b>
6.0	Introduction	114
6.1	Phase One of the Research	114
6.1.1	Analysis of children's mathematical test scores	116
6.1.2	Family Numeracy Parent Interviews 2005	116
6.1.3	Family Numeracy Children's Interviews 2005	116
6.2	Phase Two of the Research	117
6.2.1	An addition to the research process: The Fathers	118
6.2.2	The 'Life History' Interviews	119
6.2.3	The Second Parents Interviews	119
6.2.4	An addition to the research process: Professional and Practitioners	120
6.3	Management of the Interviews	121
6.4	Validity Reliability and Rigour	122
6.5	Confidentiality and Anonymity	123

<b>Chapter Seven</b>	<b>Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Results Arising from Phase One of the Study</b>	<b>125</b>
7.0	Introduction	125
7.1	The Children’s Mathematical Progress	125
7.1.1	The evaluation of the Pilot National Family Numeracy Programmes	126
7.1.2	Analysis of the family numeracy children’s mathematics test scores	128
7.1.3	Evidence based practice and short term funding arrangements	133
7.2	The findings from the Family Numeracy Mothers Interviews	135
7.3	Generating categories and themes to code the data	135
7.4	Data Display: Five main themes	136
7.4.1	Parents perceived impact of involvement	138
7.4.2	Relationships and involvement in the school	139
7.4.3	Parents understanding and support of numeracy development	141
7.4.4	Parental involvement and personal development as learners	146
7.4.5	Family life and parenting styles	147
7.5	The four cross cutting issues	149
7.5.1	Parents experiences of schooling	149
7.5.2	Self- esteem and confidence	151
7.5.3	Teacher and parental roles	152
7.5.4	Parental aspirations	155
7.6	The findings from the children’s interviews	156
7.6.1	Confidence in numeracy	158
7.6.2	Interest in numeracy	160
7.6.3	Attainment in numeracy	162
7.6.4	Ideas about learning	163
7.6.5	Relationships with parents	164
7.7	Overview	166
<b>Chapter Eight</b>	<b>Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of results arising from phase two of the study</b>	<b>169</b>
8.0	Introduction	169
8.1	Images of the initiatives	169
8.1.1	‘Involvement’, ‘participation’ and ‘partnership’	170
8.1.2	Involvement and Non-involvement	176
8.1.3	Parenting skills	177
8.1.4	A set of activities	187
8.1.5	Duplication of services	188
8.1.6	The community and its residents	190
8.1.7	Community as a ‘construct’ and community as ‘lived experience’	191
8.1.8	‘Developing’ or ‘upgrading’ a community- is this regeneration?	195
8.1.9	A publicity campaign	195
8.2	Overview	196
<b>Chapter Nine</b>	<b>Conclusions and recommendations</b>	<b>198</b>
9.0	Introduction	198
9.1	Summary of research findings	199
9.2	From Ethnography to Reflexivity: an attempt to structure theory	200
9.3	Initiative Overload?	201
9.3.1	Registering attendance or impacting upon family life?	202
9.3.2	Short-term funding and quick fixes	203
9.3.3	Joined up thinking	205
9.4	A new paradigm of parental involvement	206
9.4.1	The role of parents within a changing society	206
9.4.2	Encouraging parents back into the workplace	207
9.4.3	Achieving a ‘work/life’ balance	208
9.5	The contribution of parental engagement work	209
9.5.1	Initiatives: What works best for the families involved?	211
9.6	Limitations of the study	211
9.7	Future Research Possibilities	212

## **Declarations**

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in a university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis does not contain any material, previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

**Signed:**

*Lynne McKenna*

**Name:** Lynne McKenna

**Date:** 28<sup>th</sup> April 2008

## **Statement of Copyright**

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L. McKenna, 2008

## **Acknowledgements**

Writing this thesis has been the most challenging experience of my career thus far. As with most mature students who work full time and study part time, 'life changing events' occurred during the course of my doctoral studies. I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dr Tony Harries for his insightful support, guidance, encouragement and understanding throughout the process of conducting this study.

I would also like to thank Professor Patrick Easen for his constant belief and guidance throughout this process and indeed my entire teaching career thus far. Thanks also to Dr David Bolden. I would also like to sincerely thank the parents and children from the community in this study for their participation and contribution to this research.

Special thanks go to Michael, my husband for his never ending confidence in my abilities and his support with child rearing and dog walking while I embarked on the 'writing up' of this study. Extra special thanks go to Georgia, my lovely daughter for being so understanding and patient whilst I finished this work. You can have me back now.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this to my dad. I know you would have been proud.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.0 The Research Focus**

The main focus of this thesis is to analyse the past ten years of government policy and practice of providing early years area- based initiatives to support families in areas regarded as socially and economically disadvantaged. The initiatives in this study include a pilot family numeracy programme, an Education Action Zone and a local Sure Start Programme. Each initiative has been designed to improve the life chances and have an impact upon educational standards for children considered to be living in disadvantage.

This study is placed in the context of government policy, which clearly identifies the idea of using parental involvement as a mechanism in early years area based initiatives, to raise standards, promote social inclusion and widen participation. In an attempt to examine the extent to which New Labour's three key objectives for education are being met and whether serial involvement in early years initiatives is contributing to a developing phenomenon; this research will focus on contemporary examples of parental involvement, with reference to government policy and expectations. Particular attention will be given to the families' perspectives of the policies designed and implemented on their behalf.

The notion of using parental involvement as a mechanism for social, cultural, economic and educational change will be examined throughout this study. The idea that the term 'parental involvement' contributes to what Easen (2000) describes as 'illusory consensus' will also be explored. The government's ultimate aim of introducing such interventions appears to be based upon the key premise that the children involved in the various early years area based initiatives will experience a sound start to their early education and as a consequence of involvement in such initiatives, families will have more opportunities socially, educationally and economically than had they not been involved. (DfEE, 1997a, DfES, 2003a and DfCSF 2007a).

Indeed, Tony Blair, Prime Minister, in the Foreword to the Green Paper Every Child Matters placed the child at the centre of New Labour's social policy:



*"For most parents, our children are everything to us: our hopes, our ambitions, our future."*

(DfES, 2003a, p01)

This notion of 'supporting families' and encouraging parental involvement via government policy appears to be based on three commonly held views. Firstly, the view that parental support for learning in the early years will engender a positive long lasting attitude to learning, resulting in greater educational achievements for the children than had there been no involvement of their parents (raising standards). The second view, which is interlinked and inseparable from the first, centres around the lifelong learning agenda and works on the aim of involving parents in their children's early learning, and providing the catalyst for parents' further learning (widening participation) or indeed parents' subsequent employment (promoting social inclusion). Recent government policy for children and families has been formulated with both these two views and New Labour's three key educational objectives, at the heart of its agenda. The third view which is currently the focus of government policy, involves the notion that agencies need to work together to provide children with the care and education they need to flourish. (DfES, 2003a).

Arguably, this phenomenon can also be described in terms of a 'social investment state' (Dobrowolsky, 2002) with the dominant characteristic being investment in the child as worker of the future, achieved through anti-poverty and education measures where the notion of partnership between parents and the state predominates. This theory of investing in the individual has a history going back to at least the 1960's. The idea of education as investment and being 'good' for society is a recurring theme in the literature.

While the term initiative overload could be used to describe the recent wave of early years area based initiatives designed to contribute to the achievement of New Labour's three key objectives; this thesis focuses on three area based early years initiatives in one small community, all charged with the imperative to involve parents in an attempt to raise standards, promote social inclusion and widen participation. All three initiatives were introduced to this community after the New Labour Government won the UK General Election in 1997, and involve a pilot Family Numeracy project, (1997) an Education Action Zone (1999) and subsequently, a Sure Start programme (2001). The three

initiatives, the idea of involving parents and indeed the notion of intervention itself form the backdrop to this research.

The focus on one small community provides the opportunity to examine to what extent the government's aims of countering social exclusion, widening participation and raising educational standards were and are being met. It also provides the opportunity to examine the impact of two of their initiatives, purported to form the '*cornerstone of government policy*' (DfEE, 1998a) on one community in an attempt to examine both the lessons learnt locally at the micro level and the possibilities for replications and expansion nationally at the macro level.

However, evidence from the USA with the Head Start programme demonstrated that this type of approach on its own does not appear to work. Similarly, a study of 35,000 children in England between 2001 and 2006 appears to suggest that the children were no further advanced now than they were before New Labour's overhaul of education for pre-primary school youngsters (Merrell and Tymms, 2007). It is one of my contentions throughout this study that part of the UK government's current policy should be about addressing these shortcomings.

It is my view that supporting families in this way has resulted in initiative overload and has resulted in disjointed provision. This presents us with three main areas of contention. The first issue for me involves the way in which some communities are labelled as 'disadvantaged'. The initiatives designed by policy makers in an attempt to counteract economic disadvantage do not take account of the families' perspectives for which the policies have been designed and implemented. Similarly, the policies themselves do not distinguish between communities which are labelled as 'economically disadvantaged', but as revealed by this research, possess 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986).

The HM Government publication, *Improving the Prospect of People Living in Area of High Deprivation (2000)* outlines the characteristics of people living in such communities. The report indicates that people living in disadvantaged areas are less likely to work, more likely to be poor, have a lower life expectancy, live in poor housing in unattractive environments with high levels of anti-social behaviour and often receive poor education and health services.

However, a positive aspect of my level of involvement in one such community has illustrated just how positive, powerful and culturally enriched a community can be in areas where government initiatives describe them as 'economically disadvantaged'. Hoban and Beresford (2001, p315) recognising this dichotomy, ask:

*"What is new about a regeneration policy that seeks to focus exclusively on poor neighbourhoods? Such a policy continues to assume that by seeking to regenerate some of the human resources within a defined geographical area, for a limited period of time and with a limited pot of money, it is possible to turn neighbourhoods around."*

The second issue concerns the short- term nature of funding such initiatives. Integral to their inception, early year's area based initiatives appear to carry with them an expectation that their impact can be measured within a short space of time. The emphasis on the short- term nature of these initiatives appears to be on providing unrealistic short- term quick fixes. We need to ask therefore why successive governments base their policies on limited (in terms of time) practice which could loosely be described as 'evidence based' rather than that evidence based practice which is embedded and longitudinal.

Dyson and Robson (1999) and Lupton and Sheppard, (1999) have examined the effectiveness of government policies which promote change through locally led inclusion projects and which are funded by an array of short-term sources. They consider that this approach is likely to result in initiatives that make little impact, which end as soon as the funding is stopped, thus wasting the efforts and enthusiasm of parents, professionals and children. Perhaps most importantly, they claim that this leads to opportunities for replication being lost.

Thirdly, as my research has demonstrated, many short- term funded early years area based initiatives are superseded by the next initiative before completion, confusing and often infuriating families and practitioners but perhaps most importantly, de-motivating communities to engage with the next *new* initiative. One consequence of interventions which are overly concentrated in '*areas of disadvantage*' is that the succession of initiatives fail to be sufficiently '*joined up*' to have any lasting impact on

residents' quality of life (Stewart et al., 2001) A further consequence of all of this is that there is little research being undertaken which examines the cumulative effect of serial involvement in early years area based initiatives.

The emphasis of this research, therefore, is not upon the benefits and or disadvantages of early year's area based initiatives *per se*, but rather use the examples of these three initiatives to raise questions and challenge assumptions that underpin the current rhetoric about parental involvement, raising standards, widening participation and promoting social inclusion. I argue that there is some deep thinking to be done about New Labour's thinking about families and their ideas about the nature of support that families living in socio-economically deprived areas might need.

### **1.1. Background to the Study: The community involved**

The community involved in this study is one of the smallest wards in a borough in the north of England. In terms of housing indices this ward ranks as one of the worst in the borough. When considering employment statistics it is rated in the worst 5% nationally, having one of the highest unemployment rates in mainland UK. It is not uncommon to have several generations of one family who are either unemployed or who have never been employed at all. Within the area 15% of those unemployed were aged 50 and over, 15% had never worked and 34% were long-term unemployed. ([www.tyne-wear-research.gov.uk/twri/](http://www.tyne-wear-research.gov.uk/twri/))

Data supplied by the Northumberland, Tyne and Wear Strategic Health Authority reveal that during the period of August 1<sup>st</sup> 1999 and 31<sup>st</sup> August 2004 there was a total of 647 live births in this area (an average of 129 births per year).

In addition this ward is rated in the worst 10% nationally in terms of income, health and child poverty indices. In terms of basic literacy and numeracy the Basic Skills Agency has estimated that 24.7% of the population aged 16-60 years have low literacy whilst 28.72% are estimated to have low levels of numeracy. The following table provides an overview of the economic activity for the area.

Resident Population aged 16 to 74	7507
Housing tenure owner-occupied/privately rented	60%
Housing tenure local authority dwellings	32%
Gender breakdown	47% Male 53% Female
Average Age:	37.1
Children aged 0-4 years (comprise 6.9% of the total resident population)	520
Ethnicity	96.4% (7,231) White
Total number of households	3,447
Employed	52.2. %
Unemployed	7.5%
Economically active full-time students	2.0%
Economically active students	2.7%
Retired	12.2%
Looking after family/home	8.8%
Permanently sick or disabled	10.6%
Other economically inactive	4.0%

**Table 1.1: Figures from the 2001 census**

While the table provides us with statistical information about this community, it does not provide us with information on what was known about the parents in this community. With the demise of heavy industries such as ship- building and coal mining, this community had and continues to have large-scale unemployment. The large majority of the parents are one-parent families, under twenty- five years of age and generally have low self esteem and low confidence. These parents are poorly qualified, if qualified at all and because of their own negative school experiences, are very suspicious of any efforts to involve them in the education of their children. While the media generally portray parents in poor communities as facing difficulties on a daily basis, the parents in this community however, actually felt that they were coping quite well despite the many stressors in life. With networks of informal support, these parents frequently call upon their own mothers, relatives, friends and neighbours as a source of help. The ‘community spirit’ in this area is evident by the many support

networks available to these young parents. Despite media stereotypes, this research revealed that families living in this 'disadvantaged' area are remarkably resilient and positive and they have a pride in their neighbourhood despite its deficiencies.

## **1.2 An overview of three early year's area based initiatives and my involvement**

This section provides a brief overview of my involvement with the three initiatives which have been operating in the community since 1997 and provide brief contextual information about the initiatives themselves. The literature surrounding the three initiatives is examined in chapter four of this thesis.

### **1.2.1 Family Numeracy Programmes**

During 1997-1998, as family numeracy project co-ordinator for this borough, I developed one of fourteen national pilot family numeracy projects funded by the Basic Skills Agency, with a brief to encourage parents to take an active role in their children's numeracy development but also to address their own numeracy needs.

The aims of the pilot project were to investigate the most effective methods of raising the level of home support for numeracy, offering a quick start and immediate gains in numeracy for 3-5 year old children at risk of under attainment, and offering a restart for their parents' numeracy learning and an impact on their numeracy level.

While the pilot project received funding of £10,000 from the Basic Skills Agency, matched funding of £5,000 was provided from the local education authority to devise and develop a family numeracy project. This type of 'project mentality', which only serves to emphasize the short-term nature of such projects was addressed to some extent in the Ofsted Family Learning Survey (2000: pp8-9), with the recommendation that every effort is made to end the pattern of short-term funding for such work. The rationale for this was the importance of the relationship of such projects to the social inclusion agenda.

### **1.2.2 Education Action Zones**

In June 1998 the New Labour Government introduced a radical £75 million programme to drive up educational standards. This programme consisted of the establishment of 25 Education Action Zones (EAZs). The zones were intended to raise standards in disadvantaged areas, through programmes

linking educational innovation with wider social initiatives (DfEE, 1998a). The government stated that EAZs were most likely to be successful when the whole community concentrated its effort in partnership across sectors.

One of the themes of the EAZ was to develop partnerships with parents. Due to the success of the pilot Family Numeracy Project, the EAZ director (who was also a member of the Family Numeracy Project steering group), decided that this approach should be adopted in nurseries and reception classes throughout the EAZ. The theme 'Developing partnerships with other stake-holders' was concerned with the development of family learning to give parents the skills to support their children's learning at home (in doing this parents would be empowered by developing their own learning and parental skills) and to support children's improved attainment by equipping parents to give support at home.

Between April 1999 and July 1999 teachers from 16 schools 'shadowed' me (EAZ Family Learning co-ordinator) as I delivered the Family Numeracy Scheme in four schools. Ten workshops were operational in the four schools over a period of ten weeks. Between September 1999 and December 1999, thirteen of the teachers ran the scheme in their own schools, based on the model they had observed during the previous term. The rationale behind this EAZ programme centred around the ideal of sustainability, the idea being that schools would have a teacher in each school able to deliver family numeracy and as a consequence, EAZ schools would then be less dependant on an outside service 'visiting' their school to offer family numeracy courses. The thinking behind this was that schools could adapt and incorporate family learning and offer further provision once funding was withdrawn as they would have the skills and expertise to do so. Halpin (2004, p83) offers a cautionary note.

*"..In the absence of funding from other sources, very resource-intensive initiatives will be difficult to sustain,"*

### **1.2.3 Sure Start**

In 1999, with a £450 million budget over three years, the National Sure Start programme was launched with the aim that the health and well-being of families and children before and after birth be improved, so that the children are given the greatest chance of the "best start" in life and that they may flourish in

the future. It was introduced as a programme to support children, parents and communities through the integration of early education, childcare and health and family support services.

In 2001, as I began working with the evaluation team at Northumbria University, I found myself as lead evaluator for the local evaluation for Sure Start in the community involved in this study.

In the same way that the Basic Skills Agency's Family Numeracy programmes were aimed at socially and economically deprived communities, both EAZs and Sure Start have a requirement for agencies to work together with families, to develop high quality community services in areas regarded as suffering from social and economic deprivation. As a consequence, it appears that the families in this community have a history of serial involvement in projects aimed at addressing economic and associated disadvantage.

### **1.3 Overview: Parental Engagement in early year's initiatives**

As this introduction has highlighted, my interest in parental engagement in early years area based initiatives is a long- standing one of ten years. Since 1997 as Local Authority Family Numeracy Project co-ordinator my involvement with the community involved in this study began. Due to my subsequent involvement in two further such initiatives in this small community, I began to accept that the term 'parental involvement' was not adequate to describe the growth of parental involvement activity in the twenty first century. It appeared that a new phenomenon was developing and I became interested in the impact of parental engagement in early years initiatives.

The existence and indeed the suspicion of an emerging phenomenon of a new paradigm to describe parental involvement provided the 'testable prediction' (Fraser et al, 2003), or the hypothesis for this research. This research therefore is an attempt to answer the following proposed research question:

*What impact does serial involvement in government initiatives, which use parental involvement as a mechanism to raise standards, widen participation, and promote social inclusion, have on the children and families and on notions of community/area regeneration?*

This research uses three in depth literature reviews to examine the three main concepts which underpin this study. The changing nature of parental involvement is examined alongside raising standards, widening participation and promoting social inclusion. The way in which early years' area -based initiatives have emerged as a strategy to address the New Labour governments' approach to meeting its three key objectives for education is also explored. In the second chapter, the changing epistemological basis of the paradigm of parental involvement is analyzed with reference to the historical perspective, alongside government policy which has been introduced to promote parental involvement. Recent research into various levels of parental activity will also be considered.

Chapter three examines the New Labour Government's three key objectives for Education. The objectives of raising standards, widening participation and promoting social inclusion are considered alongside the role played by incorporating parental involvement into each of the three objectives.

Chapter Four examines the emergence of early year's area-based initiatives and examines each of the three initiatives in this study in turn. In particular, the impetus to involve parents in each initiative is examined as a key feature of each of the initiatives.

Chapter five outlines the research approach used in this study, with chapter six outlining the specific methods and procedures used in phase one and phase two of the study with specific reference to analysis of the data collected.

Chapter seven presents discusses and analyses the findings from phase one of the research which revisited the families from the original initiative in this study, the parents and children who had been involved in one of the fourteen pilot family numeracy programmes in 1997. Chapter eight presents discusses and analyses the findings from phase two of the research which involved interviewing mothers who had been involved in the Education Action Zone and mothers involved in the Sure Start programme. Alongside this, the decision to subsequently incorporate the interviewing of eight fathers from the Sure Start initiative and six professionals involved in all three initiatives is discussed. This study ends with chapter nine, which summarizes the key findings from this study and makes recommendations for the future.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Analysis of the literature 1: The changing epistemological basis of parental involvement.**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

This study provides three literature analysis chapters. This analysis of the literature will examine the historical perspective of parental involvement alongside a consideration of the notion of deficit and constructive models of parental involvement. Government policy will also be examined in an attempt to uncover its influence on the current epistemology of parental involvement. Educational, health, economic and social policies will be examined and key policy problems in relation to promoting parental involvement in early years' area based initiatives will be identified. Penultimately, this chapter will consider the development of the idea of a parental involvement continuum, where all parental activity can be placed. Finally, this chapter will consider whether we can describe current attempts to involve parents as involvement or interference.

#### **2.1 An emerging paradigm of parental involvement?**

The emergence of a new paradigm of parental involvement appears to have gathered impetus since the New Labour government came to power in 1997. The epistemological basis of the paradigm has been influenced by government policy and subsequent interpretation of this policy. As a result, a proliferation of policy initiatives aimed at encouraging parents to become more involved in all aspects of their children's lives, has emerged. Particular emphasis has been concerned with parents' taking responsibility for their children's education, development and well-being at home and in school, community and society contexts.

Analysis of the parental involvement literature has revealed that the term 'parental involvement' is being employed in contexts beyond both home and school. Although historically the term was used to describe schools' attempts to involve parents, it is more recently being used to describe parents' involvement in their children's lives per se. (Hannon, 1999, Henderson and Berla, 1994, Weinberger, 1996 and McKenna, 2007).

The involvement of parents in their children's education rose to prominence in recent years as parents were included in the 'choice' debate (Vincent, 2000). Information about schooling alongside the notion of choice has served to ensure parents feel more included in their children's education. Sure Start and its subsequent expansion into Children's Centres have taken parental involvement, family learning and parenting support into new and developing contexts.

Parental involvement studies have long debated the use of confusing terminology to describe the ways in which professionals work with parents. Lochrie (2004) considers caring and learning to be mutually supportive and work with parents, whether in the fields of family learning or parenting support, should actually be considered all part of the same phenomenon.

While Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) claim that, *'there is no universal agreement on what parental involvement is,'* they concede that there are two broad strands. They identify the two strands as *'parents' involvement in the life of the school' and 'their involvement in support of the individual child at home and at school.'*

In an effort to understand why parental involvement has become so important at the end of the twentieth century, Alexander (1997, p09) suggests that as *"children spend less than 15 per cent of their waking time in school between birth and leaving age and that parents and carers are responsible for the remaining 85 per cent."* this has contributed to the impetus of parents taking a greater interest in their children's lives outside of the home context.

We are being made increasingly aware that parenting and parental involvement influences a child's well being and life chances. Williams, Williams, and Ullman, (2002), report that most parents believe that the responsibility for their child's education is shared between the parents and the school.

Feinstein and Symons (1999) have found that parental involvement in a child's schooling between the ages of 7 and 16 has more influence on attainment than family background, size and parents' own educational level. However, they also found that the extent and form of parental involvement is strongly influenced by family social class. Paradoxically, Robson's (2003) research reveals that no matter what the social class of their parents, it is participation in leisure time activities that has a

positive effect on children's potential educational attainment, earnings potential and civic engagement in later life. The importance given in extended schools to engaging parents in education is highlighted by the emphasis placed on family learning and parental involvement activities. Alongside this, the impact of the role parents play in children's achievement and well being is acknowledged with the publication of the Unicef report (2007, p11), which examined the well being of children in twenty one nations of the industrialised world. Revealing that educational well being and family relationships are two of the main dimensions ensuring a child's well being, the report concludes that *'the educational resources of the home, in particular, play a critical role in children's educational achievement.'*

School effectiveness research has consistently revealed that parental involvement in children's education raises attainment at school (Mortimore, 1991, 1995; Reynolds, 1998; Hargreaves, 1990; Fullan, 1991 and Thrupp 2001.) While Desforges et al, (2003) reveal that parental involvement has a significant effect on pupil achievement throughout the years of schooling, Brighthouse and Woods (1999) list the development of parental involvement as a factor to improve schools. Claiming that we expect too much from teachers and schools to make up for parental support, Alexander (2005) argues that we cannot expect schools to cope with all children and parents, unless we radically change the nature and role of schools.

While NFER (2001) research reveals that where parents and children consider homework and home learning to be an important part of school life and that this has a positive impact on achievement at secondary school level, Williams et al (2002) reveal that very often parents do not possess the necessary skills to support their children's learning.

The emergent research from family learning initiatives and programmes has demonstrated that learning in families can act as a trigger to lifelong learning and participation in the community (Alexander 1997, Smith, Haggart and Dutton 2005, Banbury, 2005).

In the same way, the changing role of fathers in their children's lives deserves particular attention. Whereas Keating (1999) maintains that we actually mean the involvement of mothers when we discuss the idea of involving parents, Buchanan and McCoy (1999) suggest that fathers' involvement supports

the life chances of their children. Their research reveals that men who spend as little as five minutes every day with their children have a greater chance of producing confident adults.

All of this therefore, contributes to the idea that it is timely to re-conceptualize parental activity which has previously been confusingly referred to as 'parental involvement', 'family learning' and 'parenting support'. A further aim of this chapter is to examine whether all of this parental activity is contributing to the development of a new paradigm of parental involvement.

## **2.2 The historical perspective of parental involvement**

The process of involving parents in their children's education has been slow. Limited research into the effects of parental partnership; reluctance by the teaching profession to relinquish their teaching role; and the development of the notion of 'parental choice' have contributed to the pace of development. However, as ideas about parental involvement have developed alongside changing political attitudes and emerging research into the effects of parental involvement and its relationship to the needs of society in the twenty first century; a parental involvement paradigm has emerged as a key player in educational, social and economic policy directives.

This interpretation of parental involvement gathered momentum in the late 1960's when the effects of parental attitudes to learning were acknowledged in the Plowden Report (CACfE, 1967). Subsequent reports such as the Bullock Report (DES, 1975), the Warnock Report (DES, 1979) and the Thomas Report (DES, 1985) embraced the notion that parents could have much to contribute to the education process giving impetus to the movement of parents working in schools.

During the 1970's and 1980's a number of successful home-school schemes and initiatives evolved. The growing idea of parents as tax- payers and therefore consumers of education and the realization that parents had a right to be kept informed about their child's development alongside the idea of parents as a child's first educator gathered momentum. As studies on learning in the home environment were published, (Tizard and Hughes (1984), Athey (1990), Aubrey, (1993) and Pugh, De'Ath and Smith (1994), research began to show than the home could provide an effective learning environment.

While the Plowden Report (DES, 1967) advocated greater emphasis on home-school links, there was also a strong emphasis on offering parents information and support rather than exploring genuine partnerships between home and school. This approach has been the challenge most frequently taken up by schools but is also regarded as a compensatory approach to the involvement of parents. This deficit view of parents can be considered to reinforce parents' perceptions of teachers as the professional 'who knows best'. This approach also reinforces what Crozier (1999) refers to as 'the working class parents' view of schooling' and their role as passive. This view is based upon the assumption that school achievement varies for some children because their families lack the specific skills firstly, to develop the important early foundations for future learning and secondly, to support their children's education once they are in school.

The research base around '*working class*' parents, has much to offer to the development of a new parental involvement paradigm for the twenty first century. As has already been stated, the three initiatives in this study all had the imperative to involve parents. The initiatives were all located in an area described variously as 'disadvantaged', 'socio-economically challenged' and the term 'working class' parents was widely used by managers and practitioners to describe the parents. The national expansion of those initiatives which promote family learning, parental support and parental involvement is unprecedented and leads Crozier (1999) to argue that social class influences the nature of parental involvement, teacher attitudes about parental involvement and parents' confidence and knowledge about involvement. Epstein (1990) considers that all parents, whatever their social background, care about the education of their children. While Hallgarten (2001, p 18) considers parental involvement to be a 'lever to maximize the potential of the already advantaged', Crozier, (1999) asserts that working class parents tend to take a more fatalistic view of their children's education in terms of their own role as their social-class location has a direct impact on their ability to intervene in their child's schooling and to participate as 'active consumers'. And yet, there is much research to suggest that parental involvement at all stages of a child's schooling is important regardless of the social class of parents (Desforges, 2003). Page 18 of this study discusses the way in which the term 'working class' is used in this study with the term 'difference' replacing the perceived 'deficit' in relation to working class culture.

As in the three initiatives in this study, the challenge to include the views of working-class parents' in educational development is ever present. Interestingly, Hanfin and Lynch (2002, p 37)), concurring with Crozier (1997) argue that in such educational initiatives *'knowledge of parental needs and wishes have been presumed and parental compliance taken for granted.'*

An example of this very phenomenon appears in the Hanafin and Lynch study (2002) which included interviewing thirty- five working-class parents in an effort to gauge their views on their involvement in their children's education. These parents, rather than being passive, expressed their frustration and anger at their exclusion from decision- making about matters that affected them personally and financially, such as compulsory extra- curricular subjects, school uniform, P.E. gear and text book choices. Perhaps, as Crozier (1997, p 189) argues, this example offers us a unique insight into why working-class parents become 'passive' when it comes to their children's education. Arnold (2000) offers an interesting contribution to this debate and considers that *'It becomes clear why the amount of parental involvement in this and other studies correlates with staff attitudes towards parents.'*

However, the New Labour government appears to have embraced the potential of parental engagement work, recognising the contribution parents can make as their child's first and most enduring educator. Alongside this came the acknowledgement of the link between parents' own experiences of the education system, their attitudes and expectations and their children's achievement. The flurry of government initiatives aimed at raising standards such as the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1997b), the National Numeracy Strategy (DfEE, 1998b) the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (DfEE, 2000); Excellence and Enjoyment (DfES, 2003b) and Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003a) all emphasize the positive impact of parents being involved in their children's learning.

Reluctance by teachers to relinquish their teaching role provides a further explanation for the slow involvement of parental involvement. As the late 1970s saw previous public respect for many professions, not just teachers, diminish, Beck and Young, (2005, p183) describe, how this was characterised by *'unprecedented challenges: to their autonomy, to the validity of any ethical view of their calling, to their relatively privileged status and economic position, and to the legitimacy of their claims based on exclusive possession of specialized knowledge.'*

The rise in questioning whether our public services and the professionals working in them were performing adequately alongside a growth in dissatisfaction in public sector pay and the resurgence of the unions enabled the then conservative government to introduce a 'target led' approach to public services alongside a 'comparative' approach to evaluating effectiveness where hospitals and schools appeared in local and national league tables. In education, the introduction of new curricula in the form of the National Curriculum, for all age groups, placed many teachers under great strain.

Ball (1990) uses the phrase '*discourse of derision*' to describe this culture of running down the teaching profession. He cites both the government and the media as the main exponents of the message that teachers are no longer to be respected simply because of their profession. He asserts that the current programme of prescriptive educational reforms introduced in recent years have been allowed to be introduced because of the lack of esteem the general public has for the teaching profession. Similarly, he argues, some teachers themselves have begun to regard themselves in this way. Beck and Young (2005, p193) examine the ways in which the teaching profession in particular, has been subject to '*strenuous efforts by government and its agencies to impose new modes of professional training...*'

Helsby (1996) found that one in three teachers made some reference to a perceived loss of status over time. As a result of these changes, Birenbaum- Carmelli, (1992, p 62) considers the status of teachers with an un-secure social position has resulted in some of them feeling vulnerable to being overruled by 'prestigious parents'.

### **2.2.1 The notion of a deficit model of parental involvement**

Dyson and Robson (1999) discuss three ways in which education cannot be divorced from its social context. Firstly, they argue that education cannot compensate for society and cannot overcome the effects of the family, community and social class background. Secondly, they discuss the idea that some social class backgrounds are potentially disadvantageous but that education can offer an escape route. Thirdly, they discuss the ways in which education can serve, not merely remove 'able' children from their communities and that families are not seen as a source of disadvantage but as capable of making a positive contribution to schools and communities. These three features make a useful contribution to the emergence of both a discourse which describes a constructive notion of parents and

a discourse which explains the deficit notion of the way in which some parents are viewed. In the three initiatives in this study and reflected in the literature base surrounding parental involvement (Vincent, 1996, Crozier, 1999) a discourse is shared which is unified by common assumptions about parents.

Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) used the term 'deficit perspective' to describe the perspectives of some practitioners and social policy makers in relation to the negative views they may hold about the role of men in society. In the same way, Vincent (1996) alludes to the ways in which the perceived social class of parents is a crucial aspect in the ways parents are viewed by professionals. In her study, she found evidence that some teachers maintained deficit views of the abilities and interests of working class parents in relation to education. The deficiencies were often discussed in terms of cultural differences, poverty or non-traditional family organisation. Brain and Reid (2003, p 293) in their study of parental involvement in an Education Action Zone discuss the tension at the heart of promoting parental involvement in deprived areas:

*"At the same time, schools are increasingly urged to help develop the social and cultural capital that parents and families in deprived areas are assumed to lack."*

However, it is Hanafin and Lynch (2002, p 36) who offer a unique contribution to the discourse surrounding the 'deficit' view of parents:

*"More recently, the term 'difference' has replaced 'deficit' in relation to working class culture. Educational disadvantage has been attributed to discontinuities between home and school environments, such discontinuities being seen as differences rather than deficiencies."*

This re-defining of the term 'deficit' is helpful as it offers a positive connotation and more accurately reflects the parental activity in this study. To view the background and the lives working-class families lead as 'different' rather than 'deficit' presents us with a different approach in terms of discussing the possibility of a wide range of roles these parents can have access to when it comes to their children's education.

There appears to be two main themes to the notion of a deficit model of parental involvement.

The first theme encompasses the ways in which the deficit model is discussed in terms of the 'one size fits all' argument. This is apparent in government policy (DfES 2003a) and in research literature (Driessen et al, 2005) where parents are viewed largely as a homogeneous group. The second theme is concerned with the alternative viewpoint that parental involvement is not necessarily always considered to be a 'good thing' (Bailey, 1993). Interlinked, these two main themes contribute to the notion that parents are viewed in a compensatory way; that somehow professionals are required to 'support' parents to develop their skills in parenting, encouraging them that to become involved in their children's learning will make them 'better parents'. Long (1986) discusses that although teachers claim to be encouraging parental involvement, instead they seem to be seeking to make parents comply with teachers' wishes and views. Hall (1996, p23), writing about Family Literacy initiatives expresses concern that some projects seem overly concerned with telling parents '*what they ought to do.*'

Interestingly, in terms of the subject matter of this research, MacNaughton, Rolfe and Blatchford, (2001, p140) use the experience of research into the USA Headstart programme to explain the notion of a deficit model.

*"Research based on a deficit model involves the use of statements or norms developed with one group of participants and applied to another group."*

Headstart programmes were initiated in the United States in the 1960's in areas of poverty to provide compensatory early education experiences for children living in deprived areas. However, findings from research were not particularly encouraging. St Pierre et al, (1994) reported that where they found positive effects, those effects were generally small. However, the programmes in the United States had imposing socio-economic aims. Participation was linked to social security benefits and while parents participated on the courses for as long as they wished, the partnership aspect was not strongly emphasised with the focus firmly on the children's progress rather than the parents' participation.

Cannella (1997, p111) discusses the ways in which cultural, socio-economic, racial, and ethnic differences were considered to be deficits.

*“Headstart would provide an environment in which ‘disadvantaged’ children would become like their middle class peers, would be prepared cognitively for first grade.”*

A deficit model of parental involvement is often perpetuated in the media. While Vincent, (1996) discusses the way in which some teachers maintain deficit views of the abilities and interests of working class parents, Feiler (2005) considers that there is a ‘thin line’ between acknowledging that poverty affects children’s achievements and adopting the type of interventions which have been designed to compensate for parents’ lack of skills. He agrees that this promotes a deficit view of parents. Simpson and Cieslik, (2002, p124-5) further explore this idea:

*“First, parents are assumed to be largely a homogeneous group. Secondly, because of this homogenisation, it is assumed that most parents are lacking the intelligence, correct values and motivation necessary to participate at a higher level.....Thirdly, as a result of the above, it is further assumed that parents and others....are ripe for manipulation and shaping through parenting courses and the imposition by educational professionals of an ‘expert’ discourse, with its allegedly superior knowledge.”*

Easen, Kendall and Shaw, (1992, p282) argue that this is based on a simplistic approach to adult learning and that there has been an assumption that parents will be able to rear their young children more effectively if professional workers tell or show them how to do it.

In the initial Education Action Zone Action Plan, parents were depicted as not having the necessary educational knowledge or parenting skills to contribute to their children’s educational success (STEAZ action plan, 1999). This appears to be a common feature of the ways in which parents were viewed when EAZs began. In their analysis of three EAZs, Simpson and Cieslik, (2002, p126) found that there was:

*'evidence showing that a deficit model of parents has been constructed and articulated as a problem.....to be made amenable to diagnosis and treatment'*

Power and Gerwitz (2001, p48) in their evaluation of three EAZ action plans claim that in all three action plans *'deficit sentiments are still there.'* And that *'in none of these three applications are parents mentioned within the 'strengths and opportunities' section. They always appear under 'weaknesses and challenges'.*

Vincent, (2000, p32) explains the relationship of professionals and parents, as one in which parents *'are clearly positioned as the subordinate, less powerful group'*. Hannon (1999) while supportive of the idea of family literacy practices found that where parents become involved in their children's literacy development, there is a danger that the schemes represent a deficit view of families which in turn marginalizes both their parenting and literacy practices.

### **2.2.2 Is parental involvement always a 'good thing'?**

The second theme of the notion of a deficit model surrounds the idea of parental involvement as not necessarily or automatically a 'good thing'. Easen, Kendall and Shaw, (1992) discuss the ways in which the enthusiasm for the benefits of working with parents, once reinforced by government action was virtually unchallenged and was embraced as being a 'good idea'. Not everybody is convinced of the benefits of parental involvement and this is reflected to a small extent in the literature. Gewitz (2001) discusses the way the New Labour government's attempts to eradicate class differences by re-constructing and transforming working class parents into middle class parents. Bailey, (1993) is scathing of attempts to involve parents and considers that parents are being used as tools to bring about educational change. His main argument considers the way in which parents are viewed in a homogeneous way. He argues that while schools are encouraged to become more 'middle class' in their orientation, this has the potential to alienate all parents regardless of their social class. Vincent, (2000, p135) discusses the way in which this approach mitigates against the involvement of those parents living in 'disadvantage', as these parents are *'often too concerned with survival issues and working strategically within and around welfare (benefits) systems to have the energy and the agency available for interactions with the education system.'*

This leads McGrath and Woodhead (1998) to conclude that parental involvement is simply the latest educational fad and like other such fads before it, it will end up in oblivion. However, the literature and recent government policy reveals that this is simply not justified and that parental involvement is very much a priority in the twenty first century. The New Labour government have introduced a raft of child focused strategies to improve children's lives. Sure Start (Glass, 1999), the Children's Workforce Strategy (DfES, 2005c), the move towards outcomes based interventions linked to the Every Child Matters framework (DfES, 2003a) and the move towards integrated working to safeguard and promote well-being for children linked to the Common Assessment Framework (DfES, 2006) all promote the development of parental involvement and activity.

### **2.2.3 The notion of a constructive model of parental involvement**

The premise of a constructive model of parental involvement is based upon the perception that parental involvement is perhaps the most unique and irreplaceable influence on children's learning (Hallgarten, 2001). Supported by evidence from educational, social and medical research, this contributes to the idea that the family has an important role to play in the development of learning in the early years. Haggart (2000, p14) bluntly considers that it is in the national interest to invest in parenting and family life because of the contribution families make to the economic and social wealth. However Whalley, (2001) considers that the very idea that settings are at a stage where they can consider the improvement of parental involvement is encouraging. This is particularly important when considered alongside the Desforges and Abouchar (2003) research, which claims that the effect of parental involvement on pupil achievement in the primary age is greater than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools. Alexander (2005, p50) extends this argument and discusses that as educational failure is strongly associated with lack of parental interest, schools have a responsibility to *'create relationships of mutual respect and honesty with children, parent , carers and families; enable parents and the people who work with them to really understand the importance of parent as educators and what that really means in practice and to ensure that parents have the information and support they need, for parenting as well as learning.'*

MacNaughton (2001) discusses the quality of parental involvement experiences and considers that when parents and teachers exchange and share ideas about teaching and learning, they are contributing to a '*co-construction of expertise*'. The potential contribution families can make to economic and social wealth, the acknowledgement that parental involvement is a main influence on children's achievement in school and the resultant co construction of expertise have all been acknowledged in recent government policy ( DfES 2003a, DfES 2004, DfES, 2006) which has focused on supporting families and encouraging parental involvement.

### **2.3 Government Policy: its influence on the epistemology of parental involvement**

As Baldock, Fitzgerald and Kay (2005, p40) explain, policies '*are not created in a vacuum but develop within a historical, cultural and ideological framework.*' Historically, parents have appeared in policy documents within discourses that position them as 'others' (Hughes and MacNaughton, 2000).

However, with the introduction of the Children's Act in 2004 (DfES), a strengthened view of parents was posited. Terms such as 'parental responsibility' and 'parental rights' alongside the introduction of early year's initiatives such as the Basic Skills Agency's Early Start Project (Brooks at al, 2004) gathered momentum. In the same way, the research base into the impact of parental involvement, (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; Goldman, 2005 and Harris and Goodall, 2007) has ensured that parents have risen to prominence on the political agenda during the last two decades. Weinberger, Pickstone and Hannon (2005, p 07) assert:

*"It is not a new policy idea to intervene early in the lives of young children to enable them to do well or to 'thrive' or 'flourish' (in words used by Sure Start) later in life."*

Hill, Davis, Prout and Tisdall, (2004, p77) provide a possible explanation as to why children are '*one of the most governed groups by both the state and civic society. They are some of the highest users of state services – for example, health, education, and social security- and thus a primary focus of state intervention.*'

Williams (2004, p407) recognises that this is a significant shift in policy. Where once children were deemed to be the responsibility of parents, state intervention is now the norm.

Alongside social research which has revealed the need to tackle the long term problems associated with the social exclusion of children (Hill, Davis, Prout and Tisdall, 2004), recent government policy has sought to address the issue of supporting parents and children with the introduction of policy initiatives across several government departments. This policy objective manifested itself as soon as New Labour came into power in 1997 with the publication of Excellence in Schools (DfEE, 1997a) which stressed the importance of schools and parents working together to raise standards. As has already been discussed, this resulted in the expansion of many family learning initiatives and the subsequent creation of funding. Subsequently, the Laming report (Laming, 2003) which resulted in the publication of the white paper Every Child Matters (DfEE, 2003a) argued for a more universal approach to children, proposing prevention and early intervention, rather than just targeted protection. One of the central themes underpinning these policies is parental involvement in the processes.

Alongside the recognition that schools must do more to engage with families and their communities, potentially through the Extended Schools initiative, government policy also appears to acknowledge the significance of parenting for family learning and the failure to prioritise it in the past:

*“Parenting has a strong impact on a child’s educational development, behaviour and mental health. In the past, public policy has paid insufficient attention to supporting parents and helping families to find solutions for themselves.”*

*(DfES, 2003a, p39)*

However, policy initiatives which are aimed at providing services that respond to the requirements of children and families with low income levels and with an emphasis on the preventative nature of these services are not a new concept, nor are they exclusive to the United Kingdom. In the USA, where historically there has been an increase in the focus of involving parents in an attempt to counter disadvantage the research is very similar to the early findings from the UK. The impetus for the Sure Start programme model to use area based early childhood interventions was influenced by evidence from the US Head Start programme. Despite early criticism and concern about quality and effectiveness, inadequate funding and imprudent expansion, Head Start and Early Head Start are broadly seen as successful. Head Start remains the most recognised and extensive programme linking

co-ordinated, multi agency provision of health, education and social services for families. In the United Kingdom, policy makers incorporated efficient evaluation measures within the Sure Start initiative, including the latest Children's Centre development from the onset. However as McAuley et al (2006, p19) argue '*countries differ in their culture, history, values, intervention approaches, policies and programme structures. Those differences can be crucial in determining whether evidence from one country is applicable to another*'.

Glass (2001) urges caution in using international evidence for analysing child and family policy in the UK. He maintains that an analysis of policy should consider what aspects of policy are transferable and what may be culture dependent.

Dex and Joshi (2005) discuss that while there are a number of initiatives, all of which are designed to encourage parents to enter and remain in paid work, in an attempt to end child poverty, there appears to be incongruence with this approach. On one hand we have policies designed to support families, however that support is dependant on removing parents from the home and placing them in the workplace. The debate about who is best placed to care for children in their early years continues. The UK, though, has had one of the lowest rates of lone parent employment in Europe and it is this factor that some current Government policies are aiming to address. There is now increasing pressure on lone mothers to return to paid employment. As they are more likely than others to use formal childcare, the development of such care is an important aspect of the Government's aim. Specific government targets include integrating 70% of lone parents into employment, from the current rate of 50%. It is hoped that this will assist the halving of child poverty by 2010, and alleviate the demand on the benefits budget. Women are increasingly expected to work outside the home when their caring obligations allow

### **2.3.1 Educational Policies**

A number of policy initiatives have sought to engage families and communities in supporting children's learning. As Greany (2005) explains, New Labour sought to stimulate innovation in many different ways. *Excellence in Schools* ( DfEE, 1997a) stresses the importance of schools and parents working together to raise standards and highlights the potential for creating a culture of learning in a locality, for widening participation in education and training for the adult population, for helping to

build strong communities and for reinforcing the role of the family. The green paper *the Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998c) reinforced the role of the family and emphasized that 'community adult and family learning' are viewed as 'essential in the learning age. The white paper *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999a) reinforced this point. Education Action Zones (EAZ's) (DfEE, 1998a) emphasized the importance of parental involvement for raising standards and achievement for the children involved, but also the importance of fostering the idea of wider community learning which improves the skills of adults, enhancing educational aspirations in the locality. The National Childcare Strategy (DfEE, 1998d) sought to increase affordable childcare and education as a way of reducing child poverty by helping parents to take up work.

Policy and practice in this area have been underpinned with the publication of the green paper *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003a). While parental involvement, parenting support and family learning are explicit in these policies, they are not represented consistently across education policy. *Every Child Matters* (2003a, p 02) supported the expansion of family learning and parental involvement with the following statement:

*"We believe that good quality family learning should become a universal service because of the multiple benefits it offers children, parents and families."*

However, this has not been fully reflected in either government policy or indeed funding. It is through the Children's Centre programme and the Extended Schools Service that parental engagement activities are discussed as a universal service which should be offered to all families. The idea that this is desirable is reinforced by recent research, Cummings, Todd and Dyson (2000), Wilkin, Kimder, White, Atkinson and Doherty (2003) and DfES (2005a) suggest that greater parental involvement in children's learning and participation in leisure and recreational activities would promote greater interaction between family members. Further to this *Excellence and Enjoyment* (DfES, 2003b, p 02) states that:

*"We believe that parental engagement work should support parents in helping their children to learn, through family learning projects and also support for parenting skills."*

This shift towards the transference of power to parents is important. It can also be used to explain why the evolution of parental involvement has been slow. In order for the power balance to be changed a dominant group (government, school and society) has to concede some power and control and other groups (parents) have to accept and use this. It seems that parents in the twenty first century are finally being given some control and power when it comes to their children's education.

### 2.3.2 Health Policies

It is not just in educational policy that the notion of supporting families and involving parents has manifested itself. Within the health policy area, families appear to be viewed either within the context of children who require intervention in their health or as a support mechanism for individuals experiencing mental health problems. Parental involvement and family learning has not been fully developed to engage families on important health related issues. There appears to be a missed opportunity here where the involvement of parents could be harnessed perhaps through family learning programmes to support parents and children in making healthier choices. One of the objectives from the 2002 Comprehensive Spending Review (2001) discusses the need to *'halt the year-on-year rise in obesity among children under 11 by 2010'*.

The Department of Health 2004 document 'Choosing Health, Making Healthy Choices Easier' and the ODPM 2004a document 'Mental Health and Social Exclusion' exemplify the government's commitment to supporting families to make informed choices in relation to their health. Working on the premise that the family is the foundation on which community and society are built, the Government created a Ministerial group on the family chaired by the Home Secretary. The resulting consultation document on the family identified the family as an institution believed to be under stress and sought to create a new approach to supporting the family. It identified the needs and interests of the child as paramount together with the priority of providing improved support for parents to bring up their children. *Supporting Families* (DoH, 1998) set out the Government's vision of how better to support families and respond to crises if appropriate.

The promotion of 'joined-up thinking' has resulted in several cross departmental initiatives. As a consequence there are currently two major cross-departmental initiatives which target particular ages of

childhood: Sure Start focusing on the under fives and the Children's Fund focussing on five to thirteen year olds. Sure Start (HM Treasury, 1998) is the result of a cross-departmental review of services for young children, which emphasised that the early years are the most important for child development. Sure Start began in 2000 under the departmental supervision of the Minister for Public Health, although attempting to put into practice 'joined-up thinking'. The idea behind Sure Start was to deliver a variety of quality service provision for young children and their families across localities. Alongside this was the provision of a comprehensive community-based programme of early intervention and family support intended to have long-term benefits on child and family development and social inclusion.

### **2.3.3 Economic Policies**

The treasury has introduced a range of positive measures to help working parents. Working with the Department of Trade and Industry, the Department of Work and Pensions, the Department for Education and Skills and the Department of Health, have introduced Working Tax credit, extended maternity leave and pay, paid maternity leave, the rights for workers with young children to work part-time and unpaid leave to look after dependants. New rights, to parental leave and leave for dependants, were introduced in the UK in December 1999 by the Employment Relations Act 1999. The Department of Trade and Industry have introduced the Right to Parental Leave and Flexible Working which enables fathers to take two weeks paternity leave on the birth of their children and gives parents the right to request, and employers a duty to consider, flexible working arrangements so that they can more easily manage the demands of work and families. Parents are also entitled to 13 weeks unpaid leave for each child, which can be taken before the child's fifth birthday. The Ten Year Strategy for children (HM Treasury, 2004) and the consultation document Work and Families (DTI, 2005) both acknowledged the contribution of the involvement of parents.

### **2.3.4 Social Policies**

In their research, Cara and Aldridge (2003) and Duke (2004) consider the roles of parental involvement and family learning in engaging local people in learning. The idea of 'learning communities' as a tool to help tackle social exclusion and disadvantage within communities is examined in the 2004b DfES document, Launch of Learning Communities Test beds. Similarly, the idea of drawing on the skills

and knowledge already present within communities to support individual and community development is discussed. Within this policy area, there is a suggestion of a cyclical relationship between the involvement of parents and learning communities. Contributing to neighbourhood renewal and tackling social exclusion, parental involvement and family learning can be considered to be instrumental in engaging parents in learning and community involvement in a non-threatening way.

Within the widening participation strand of social policy, there is a general aim of engaging those under-represented groups in learning (Social Exclusion Unit 1998).

The Neighbourhood Renewal Programme (ODPM, 2001) acknowledges that whole-community regeneration is increasingly recognised as the key to breaking the cycle of disadvantage and seeks greater collaboration between services and greater public participation.

### **2.3.5 The problem with policy?**

Public policy is striving to address the ways in which we can support families in a period of great change. However, Coffield, et al (2007) consider that in recent times we have witnessed ways in which policy impacts on practice, but argues that practice does not impact on policy. The governments' homogeneous view of families (DfEE, 1999a) where children are considered simply as 'workers of the future' (Dobrowolsky, 2002) alongside a raft of policies designed to involve parents could be viewed as problematic in terms of developing a strategic approach to supporting the changing needs of families in the twenty first century.

While apparent that the government does not appear to have an understood and commonly shared definition of 'families', we are currently witnessing a variety of changing family patterns. The Green paper *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003a) discusses the way in which families in the twenty first century have more uncertainty and risk, more single parents without supportive family networks, and clear evidence that homelessness, unemployment, poor parenting, poverty provide negative outcomes for children.

However, the homogeneity of families appears to be a myth which is consistently perpetuated in government policy (DfEE, 1999a). This view is often shared among practitioners who are called upon

to work with families. It could also be suggested that the egalitarian notion of 'supporting families' will only work if people play their allotted role. This requires parents to act in an almost subservient, dependent manner with the professional playing the role of the supporter who 'knows best'. Graham (2007) however, considers that when professionals embark upon parental involvement work, the aims and objectives should be transparent and that professionals do not promote the 'professionals know best' culture that has hindered partnership working in the past.

There is also debate about the terminology used when referring to 'parental involvement', which often masks a 'deficit' approach to the involvement of parents. An analysis of the literature surrounding parental involvement and presented in chapter two of this thesis revealed that words such as 'parental', 'participation' and 'involvement' are readily used without adequate definition. They can have a multitude of meanings depending on the perspective of the user. The sharing of common terminology builds illusory consensus and affects our understandings of both rhetoric and research (Easen, 2000). Researchers may be using the same words but meaning very different things. To avoid masking differences between the aims and practices of parties involved in initiatives designed to encourage parental involvement, we need to clarify the use of words such as 'parents' which is often used when in reality we are talking about mothers and both 'involvement' and 'participation' when in effect we mean attendance at early years centres. (Keating, 1996).

An adjunct to this is the '*disturbing absence of men involved in family learning*' (Ofsted, 2000). The importance of fathers' involvement in family learning is increasingly recognised by practitioners and policy makers (Goldman, 2005). Changing notions of the roles fathers play in their children's lives (McKenna, 2007) have contributed to the idea that fathers as well as mothers need to be included in the development of a new parental involvement paradigm. Acknowledging that fathers' interest in a child's schooling is strongly linked to the child's educational outcomes, Flouri, Buchannan and Bream (2002) found that boys whose fathers' spend as little as five minutes a day with them grow into confident adults.

Davies, (1991) has defined parental involvement from a shifting perspective. As society restructures itself, as communities and schools restructure, parental involvement is also being transformed. There

has been a widely held belief that parental commitment to their children's learning will improve the quality of that learning. The correlation between parents' own experiences of education and their attitudes towards and expectations of their children's achievement has been acknowledged as of even greater significance than school improvement. (OECD, 1997) Key findings from Desforges' DfES funded research (2003) reiterate this point and claim that:

*“Parental involvement in a child's schooling for a child between the ages of 7 and 16 is a more powerful force than family background, size of family and level of parental education.”*

An examination of the intentions behind the policy developments has the potential to take us in several directions. However, Dobrowolsky's analytical framework (2002) identifies this trend of the development of a liberal welfare state in terms of a 'social investment state', with the child as citizen-worker-of-the-future, achieved through anti-poverty and education measures in which a notion of partnership of the state with parents is central. The overall aim is to maintain competitiveness in the global economy.

In an attempt to chart the development of parental involvement and examine its role in meeting New Labour's three key objectives for education, the following sections serve to outline the historical perspective of parental involvement, provide a rationale behind contemporary notions of parental involvement. This chapter then goes on to examine the correlation between the developing phenomena of parental involvement and its role in social regeneration.

#### **2.4 Models of Parental Engagement**

As the notion of parental involvement evolves a whole new language has been developed to describe the characteristics and the range of parental engagement work. Various described as models, stages, ladders or continuums, a new discourse has emerged. The classification of various levels of parental engagement work is a useful but not a unique contribution to the field of parental involvement. Indeed there have been various precedents for this.

Hornby, (2000) explores the various models of parental involvement within the educational context. These models are useful as a starting point to consider the way in which professionals and parents

interpret the issues of power and control which necessarily prevail in any discussion about partnership. He maintains that each approach to parent-teacher relationships are defined by a different set of assumptions, goals and strategies and that the approaches range from those which attempt to minimize parental involvement to others which actively promote it. Hornby (2000) considers that the six most common models are the protective, expert, transmission, curriculum- enrichment, consumer, and partnership models.

According to Hornby, (2000, p18) the most common model of all parent-teacher relationships is the protective model where parental involvement is seen as *'unnecessary and potentially damaging interference in the efficient education of children.'*

In the curriculum-enrichment model, there is the assumption that parents have an important contribution to make to their children's education and development. Hornby (2000) considers that while this is a novel way of involving parents in their children's education. Its major drawback is that it requires teachers to allow parents to have a major input and this can be threatening for many teachers. This issue is also considered in the introduction to this chapter where Ball's (1999) discussion of the concept of a discourse of derision is discussed.

The partnership model, where *'teachers are viewed as experts on education and parents are viewed as experts on their children'*, (Hornby, 2000, p19) is considered to be the most appropriate model for relationships between parents and teachers. Family Learning and Parenting Support theorists (Whalley, 2001, Wolfendale, 1983) refer to 'parental partnership' as an extension of parental involvement and this blurring of the terms is confusing to both families and practitioners alike. Perhaps one of the reasons the concepts have been indistinguishable is because they all lack understanding and inclusion of the issue of power? The term 'partnership' infers that the previously dominant group has to concede power and control and the other groups have to accept and use this.

Weinberger, Pickstone and Hannon (2005, p195) discuss the way in which a six stage ladder of parental involvement was devised as they evaluated a local Sure Start Programme. While the ladder was considered to be *'only one way to describe parents' developing involvement'*, the use of a

measurement tool is useful to contemplate at this point in this study as it informs the subsequent discussion about a parental involvement continuum. Weinberger's six stage ladder consisted of stage one where parents were informed about what Sure Start had to offer. Stage two offered parents the opportunities to start taking advantages of the opportunities offered by Sure Start. Stage three began to introduce the notion that Sure Start was also somewhere where parents could take advantage of training opportunities such as parenting courses, confidence building courses and play and learn together days. At stage four of the ladder, parents were offered the opportunity to become involved in the management of the programme and were offered opportunities to join the Parents' Forum and the Partnership Board. At the penultimate stage, stage five, parents were encouraged to use their new found skills and confidence to volunteer in some capacity within Sure Start. Stage Six of the ladder is described as the stage parents reach when job opportunities are available or further training accessible. The use of a tool, in this case a ladder, to measure involvement is useful but not unique. The following four examples of attempts to measure involvement are illustrative of attempts to categorize the involvement of parents.

In my unpublished Masters dissertation (McKenna, 1998), I discussed the possibility of a three stage model to engage parents. I suggested that in an effort to introduce the notion of working in partnership with parents, schools and early year's settings might consider stage one of the model as the introduction of homework packs, consisting of number and literacy games, which could be borrowed on a regular basis. As a good place start, homework packs serve to introduce parents to the idea of parental partnership without requiring them to have direct contact with school or childcare setting. This also serves the purpose of gradually familiarising parents with the two way interaction necessary to support their children's learning at home as well as at school or nursery. In my experience the second group of parents to access the family numeracy project enrolled onto the course as a direct result of having had access to the family numeracy take home packs. Stage two would incorporate an intervention project such as family numeracy which involves parents and children working together on a planned structured programme which impacts upon the learning of both the children and the parents.

Stage three in this model involves the school or the setting in consultation with the parents involving themselves in an audit of future needs. Whether parents have accessed the take home packs or have

successfully completed a family learning programme, settings need to consider what development activities they could offer to further engage parents. During the family numeracy pilot, it became apparent that the parents would benefit from a series of workshops to keep them up to date with how to support their children's learning across all areas of the curriculum. These workshops proved to be very successful and largely attended by past family numeracy parents who appeared to have rekindled their interest in learning but were particularly inspired by the idea of learning how to support their children's learning and development. Stage three of my model also looks at ways in which practitioners can support parents to address their own learning needs. In my experience the parents who had initially been reluctant to address their own numeracy skills began to identify their own needs in terms of basic skills towards the end of the course. As their confidence developed, they became more relaxed in the school environment and as they relaxed they began to learn at their level. Stage three of my model also incorporates ways in which parents can be supported to develop their own personal learning and development. Of course this would not apply to every parent. Not every parent wants to develop their own skills to such an extent but would rather continue to support their children's learning.

In the same way Weinberger (2005) devised a ladder to describe parental involvement, Raikes et al, (2002) identified five stages of father involvement. In stages one and two father involvement was not seen as a priority. However at stage three, a designated father involvement co-ordinator was appointed with the specific objective to promote father involvement. At stages four and five, the fathers were supported both in their role as fathers but also in their personal development. Pugh et al (1987) identified parent-teacher relationships as ranging along a continuum from non-participant, through support, participation and partnership to control. It is clear that partnership is less than parent control and more than parent support, but I would argue that the difference between participation and partnership in current government policy and practice is not clearly specified.

In my book chapter 'Engaging with Men' (McKenna 2007 in Schneider et al), fathers' levels of participation is described in various ways. Formulating the terms 'Active Contributor', 'Partaker of services', and 'Behind the Scenes Contributor' to describe the way in which the men in this study engaged with the service was useful. It helped to clarify the various roles and choices the fathers had

when making decisions about their levels of involvement. This devising of terms to describe parental activity was also useful as it began to highlight the ways in which parents want to be involved not just as users of services but as members of the community with contributions to make. Ladders, continuums and stages as measurement tools are useful if when encouraging parental involvement and engagement, parents are informed that they can become involved at different levels of ladders, continuums or stages, can step on or off at any time and can use these tools to plot a developmental path or a sideways path or a static path.

#### **2.4.1 Involvement or Interference?**

While viewed by some as an interference, (Gerwitz, 2001, Kirby, 2006), New Labour has introduced a raft of policy initiatives, all featuring the imperative to 'support families' and thus promote a more proactive model of parental involvement with the aim of raising achievement in schools, promoting social inclusion in our communities and widening participation in school terms.

Recognizing in 1997, that the United Kingdom had one of the highest rates of child poverty in Europe, with one in three children living in poverty, New Labour have committed themselves to halving child poverty in ten years and to be on the way to abolishing it in a generation ([www.labour.org.uk](http://www.labour.org.uk)).

Identifying that work is the best route out of poverty, the New Labour rhetoric claims to have reformed tax and benefits in an attempt to introduce decent family incomes. Similarly, extended employment opportunities and the attempt to support parents in their parenting role by introducing high quality public services all contribute to the idea of a government committed to supporting families, as a central aim of their policy objectives. Alongside this, there is the prevailing discourse surrounding the balance of work and family life. British parents currently work the longest hours in the European Union.

However, this has currently come under scrutiny in the light of several reports (UNICEF, 2007) which have indicated the impact that this is having on family life.

Recent initiatives such as Skills for Life (DfEE, 2001, 2003 and 2004e) have focused on the poor basic skills of adults and sit within a context of widening participation and social inclusion. The Skills for Life strategy is viewed as instrumental in the up-skilling of individuals and communities in attempts to improve economic competitiveness. Initiatives which use family learning opportunities and promote

parental involvement in this way are considered to encourage involvement and help to develop relationships between children, their parents and communities.

## 2.5 Overview: a new paradigm?

In this chapter, I have examined the historical perspective of parental involvement alongside a consideration of the notion of deficit and constructive models of parental involvement. A review of the historical perspective of parental involvement is pertinent to this study as it provides a framework to analyse subsequent and current developments in the field. This analysis of the historical perspective actually serves to provide a summary of a version of a continuum of parental involvement which marks the way in which the shifting perspective of a deficit view of parents is evolving to a developing perspective of a constructive view of parents. To compare a time where parents were viewed as being deficit because of cultural differences, poverty or alternative family organisation, to a time where the involvement of parents is a central theme in education, health, economic and social policy, illustrates developments in thinking about the status of parents by both the state and by professionals involved with working with children and their families. Government policy in relation to 'involving parents' and 'supporting families' has been examined in an attempt to uncover its influence on the current epistemology of parental involvement. A proliferation of policy documents, most notably, Every Child Matters (2003a) have contributed to the appearance of this government as caring and child-centred. However, this comes under scrutiny in Kirby's (2006, p04) study 'The Nationalisation of Childhood'. She compares Blair's idea of a '*new frontier for the Welfare State*' (2005 PM's speech commending the Childcare Bill to the House of Commons) to the Marxist concept of '*the collectivisation of childcare*'.

*"The Government justifies its programme of universal intervention on the grounds that it wants to see every child fulfil his or her potential"*

Kirby (2006) argues that this is intended to '*create a direct relationship between child and state, with objectives determined by the government, not by parents. The role of parents would, in effect, be subsidiary to the state.*' She has two main contentions: one, that current policy is effectively displacing

the primacy of parents and secondly she maintains that the governments' determination not to 'stigmatise' vulnerable families, '*is dangerous and is likely to put more children at risk and leave the most needy even further behind.*'

Earlier in this chapter, the idea of a new taxonomy of parental engagement was considered with contributions by Pugh, (1987) and Weinberger, Pickstone and Hannon (2005). As part of the historical perspective of parental involvement, the notion of a developing parental involvement continuum seems to mark the stage we have currently reached with parental involvement in the twenty first century. Similarly, an examination of whether involving parents has resulted in involvement or interference also sets the context for this study. Where, Kirby, (2006:04), argues that this is actually interference and is resulting in a '*nationalisation of childhood*', government policy continues to rely on the idea that promoting parental involvement and outlining the rights and responsibilities of parents in relation to their children's education and well being can be an effective mechanism to encourage social and economic change.

This all therefore contributes to the notion that a new phenomenon is emerging and that it is time to re-conceptualize work with parents and to consider a new paradigm of parental involvement. As already outlined at the beginning of this literature analysis, this study provides three analyses of the literature. The first analysis has been concerned with investigating whether a new paradigm of parental involvement is emerging in the twenty first century. Analysis of the parental involvement literature not only provides a framework to analyse subsequent and current developments in the field, it also serves to contextualise the experiences voiced by parents in this study. The following literature review in chapter three considers the ways in which parental involvement has the potential to contribute to New Labour's three key objectives for education: raising standards, widening participation and promoting social inclusion. This will illuminate why parental involvement has become such a policy objective and a central paradigm at the beginning of the twenty first century. Chapter four considers the manifestation of early years' area based initiatives which have been employed in an attempt to meet the governments' three key objectives for education. All three analyses of the literature serve to contextualize the study and contribute to the formation of interview questions in an attempt to see if the parents in the community in this study are experiencing the phenomena to emerge from the literature.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Analysis of the literature 2: New Labour's Three Key Objectives for Education**

#### **3.0 Introduction**

In this chapter, the emerging paradigm of parental involvement has been considered alongside the New Labour governments' three key objectives for education. This chapter advances the idea that a new paradigm of parental involvement is emerging by investigating the rhetoric behind the raising standards, promoting social inclusion and widening participation mantra of the current government's education policies. While this chapter provides an analysis of the three key objectives for education, contributory issues are also examined. In a slight twist to the usual examination of the raising standards agenda, the role of parents in their children's education and well being both at home and school alongside an exploration of the nature of both mothers' and fathers' involvement is explored. Changing notions of fatherhood are explored with reference to the ways in which fathers are being encouraged to become more involved in their children's development and well being. The relationship of parental involvement to raising standards is examined to try to understand why the focus on parental involvement has gathered momentum in the past ten years.

The idea that the widening participation debate is predominantly concerned with accessibility to further and higher education and training is examined, to illustrate how restrictive such a narrow definition actually is for the participants of this study.

This chapter uses the literature to explore the New Labour approach to promoting social inclusion. Specific reference will be made to the idea of community as a construct and community as a 'lived experience'. Within the social inclusion debate, an examination of the term 'community' as opposed to the term 'locality' is used to inform the development of the idea that the notion of community regeneration coexists with the discourses of 'disadvantage', 'education' and 'good parenting'.

#### **3.1 New Labour's Three Key Objectives for Education**

With the election of 'New Labour' in 1997, the restructuring of the welfare state has remained a priority, supported by both educational and social reform. The introduction of interventionist early years initiatives aimed at the regeneration of disadvantaged communities, raising standards of

education and reducing social exclusion have been a feature of New Labour policies and have been designed to contribute to constructing a 'new' Britain. Indeed, a whole new terminology associated with New Welfarism has emerged and includes phrases such as '*partnership working, social inclusion, widening participation, raising standards, citizenship, community empowerment, economic and social regeneration, joined up thinking, neighbourhood renewal*', to list but a few (DfEE 1997a, DfEE 1998d, DfES 2003e, DfEE 2003a, and DfCSF 2007).

Successive governments have claimed that their policies could contribute to making Britain 'Great' again. However, while past Conservative governments stand accused of *an absence of national policy* (Hoban and Beresford, 2001), Tony Blair, (SEU, 1998, p07) has reasoned that previous Labour policies have failed, resulting in a dependency culture, because:

*"Too much has been imposed from above, when experience shows that success depends on communities themselves having the power and taking the responsibility to make things better."*

New Labour's commitment to social regeneration has resulted in a 'Third Way' approach to social policy (Giddens, 1998) and the development of a new welfarism (Clarke et al, 2000) where social spending is seen as an investment in human capital and as the enhancement of individual opportunities (Taylor- Gooby, 1997). However, Giddens (1998) considers that the social investment model promotes the idea that social welfare should be achieved with the development of individual and community resources rather than the direct provision of economic maintenance. An example of such investment in human capital is the current social policy agenda which can be described as both interventionist and inclusive. Integral to this commitment to social regeneration is the idea of community involvement and empowerment:

*"Unless the community is fully engaged in shaping and delivering regeneration, even the best plans on paper will fail to deliver in practice."*

*(SEU, 2000:05)*

Evidence from research has supported this. Evaluation of the impact of the 29 Early Excellence Centres, (Bertram, et al, 2002) with 25% of the families characterised by multiple stress factors including unemployment, criminality and poverty, found that two thirds of the families questioned felt their participation had reduced their sense of isolation. Similarly, McGivney (2000) examining the relationship between community based pre schools, adult learning and capacity building in socially excluded areas found that the benefits for adults (86% of those questioned) included new social contacts.

This thinking was exemplified with Tony Blair's proposals to deliver new funding programmes targeted at 'poor neighbourhoods', the promotion of 'community self help' with 'dynamic local leaders' (SEU, 1998:10), 'social entrepreneurs' (SEU, 2000) and 'neighbourhood managers' (DETR, 2000a). However and perhaps most importantly the development of local initiatives has been advocated and is to be linked with wider social, educational and economic policies. This approach is in line with Halpin's (2004, p84) suggestion that:

*"...Area-based approaches to educational regeneration cannot hope to succeed if they ignore the macro-political context in which they operate."*

Levitas (2004) considers that New Labour policy reflects a belief in labour market participation as the most effective route to social inclusion. Consequently, New Labour's three key objectives for education raising standards, widening participation and promoting social inclusion (DfEE, 1997a) have resulted in a proliferation of various early years area based initiatives designed to support families in areas regarded as socially and economically disadvantaged. Alongside this, has been the impetus to promote parental involvement within such initiatives as a means to achieve the three objectives. The following sections in this chapter will examine the ways in which parental involvement has been employed.

### **3.2 The Raising Standards Agenda**

One of the ways in which the New Labour Government has attempted to reduce inequalities and raise levels of education, has been to introduce educational initiatives in disadvantaged areas (DfEE, 1997a,

1998a, 1999a, 1999b). However, the contradictions of developing initiatives to raise standards in areas of disadvantage was highlighted by Tomlinson (1997) as he revealed that market forces were helping to create failing schools and that policies directed towards 'failing' schools had a negative effect on standards. This was still being pursued by Blunkett in 2000:

*"no child is preordained to fail, by class, gender, ethnic group or home life"*

The tension in schools to raise standards alongside promoting parental involvement is discussed by Dyson and Robson (1999, pvii) as they describe the:

*"crusade for standards which requires schools to build on their 'core business' of curriculum delivery, and a broader social exclusion agenda which implies a more extended community role for schools."*

As schools are under increasing pressure to explore ways of effectively working with parents and the potential of all homes, particularly socially and economically deprived homes, as contexts for learning are increasingly highlighted. As David (1999, p122) explains the publication of the White Paper Excellence in Schools in 1997 aimed to bring family and parental involvement into the public sphere. She goes on to assert that this has served to bring *'all families and their children into the public arena to enable them all to participate on an equal basis.'* While David is welcoming of this development, Reay (1998) and Vincent (1996) describe the alienation felt by working-class mothers in attempts to involve them in their children's primary schools.

One of the ways in which this perceived alienation is being countered is the growing awareness of the importance of the family as an important site for learning. Goleman (1996, p189-90) explains that:

*"Family life is our first school for emotional learning; in this intimate cauldron we learn how to feel about ourselves and how others will react to our feelings... ..not just through the things parents say and do directly with children, but also in the models they offer for handling their own feelings."*

The current interest in raising standards by encouraging parental involvement and family learning is apparent by the recent glut of both government policies in this area, curriculum guidance and recent research which serves to support the policy. However, my research revealed that the ways in which mothers and fathers are encouraged to become involved in the 'raising standards' discourse varies. That this task is immense should not be underestimated. The scale of the problem is outlined in the 2007 Cassen and Kingdon report. This report which examines low educational achievement in the UK, presents a gloomy picture. Their report revealed that nearly half of all low achievers are white British males. They found that white British students on average are more likely than other ethnic groups to persist in low achievement. Similarly, they found that eligibility for free school meals is strongly associated with low achievement, but significantly more so for white British pupils. Other indicators related to low achievement such as levels of unemployment, single parent households and parents with low qualifications alongside poor reading and writing scores at primary school are all revealed to be significantly associated with later low achievement.

### **3.2.1 The involvement of mothers and fathers in raising the educational achievement and well being of their children**

As has already been discussed in chapter two the term 'parental involvement' is contentious. The reality of school based involvement has historically and currently involves mothers rather than fathers. As Keating (1996, p32) asserts:

*"Most parental involvement programmes are based on the assumption that mothers are not in paid employment and are free, able and willing to be involved in school activities."*

However, as Unicef (1993, p2) report:

*"The time parents have available for their children has been squeezed by the rapid shift of mothers into the paid labour force."*

Reay (1998) notes that the result of this ungendered view of parental involvement has resulted in mothers actually becoming hidden from view. While marginalisation of women appears to be common

place, Martin and Vincent (1999) in an attempt to discover what motivates parents to become volunteers in schools, found that the mothers in their study described their involvement as having a positive benefit to their children. In the same way, David, et al, (1993) found that mothers studying in Higher Education justified this in terms of benefiting their children. The task therefore, in supporting the education and development of their children has and largely continues to come under the category of 'role of the mother'.

An interesting recent development in the raising standards discourse is the current emphasis on the involvement of fathers in their children's well-being and education. Positive father involvement in their children's learning is associated with better educational, social and emotional outcomes for children (DfES, 2004b; Goldman, 2004). However, Chawla-Duggan, (2006, p94) reveal that:

*“Despite increased interest in the role of fathers in children's development, there are very few studies in the UK that have determined exactly what early childhood practitioners are currently doing to involve fathers in the area of children's learning”*

Projects such as Sure Start, based predominantly in areas of economic and social hardship, have, as one of their aims, the imperative to reach 'hard to reach' citizens in these communities. 'Men', or more specifically, 'fathers' have been identified as a 'hard to reach' group. They have been highlighted as a group of people who need to be targeted to support family learning and development. Fathers have become central figures on the policy agenda but often in the context of absence from, rather than presence in, their children's lives, Lewis (2000). Sure Start projects all have, as one of their aims, the intent to increase the involvement of fathers in the physical, intellectual and social development of babies and young children and have expectations of increasing male involvement in their projects. Alongside the potential contribution 'fathering' can make to the social inclusion agenda, it is widely considered that the involvement of men is a significant factor in children's later educational achievement. (Goleman, 2004). Despite such emphasis, however, visible participation of males in the projects remains limited both locally and nationally (Bertram et al, 2002, Lewis; 2000, Burghes et al; 1997).

The literature has revealed that although there is limited research into fathering (Meyers, 1993, Cameron et al, 1999), the involvement of men is an important factor for future success of children (Buchanan and McCoy, 1999, Flouri et al, 2002). Men are not often taking responsibility for childcare (Cadell, 1996) and where this does happen, childcare is not seen as a great opportunity (Lewis, 2000). One key predictor of fathers' involvement with their children is their own education (Roggmann et al, 2002) and their perception of their role (Goldman, 2005).

Meyers (1993) noted that because there have been few studies on fathers with regard to their participation within the family and in childcare projects, community initiatives have little research to enlighten them about how to proceed. Whilst trying to encourage fathers to participate in the work of Sure Start projects, and in family life at home, we still have a very sketchy idea of what kinds of things might be helpful for fathers to participate in, why they might want to participate, and whether participation might have any beneficial affect on their family life. Ghate et al (2000) when investigating family centres found that centres were more concerned about having an identifiable strategy for working with fathers than the rationale behind that strategy.

Studies undertaken over recent decades suggest that whilst fathers do now spend more time caring for their children, mothers still spend more time with their children than fathers (Burghes et al, 1997). Buchanan's research (1999) has suggested that fathers' involvement supports the life chances of their children. The major dilemma is still how to get fathers involved and what the nature of that involvement should be. It is considered desirable to encourage men to attend early year's projects. The start up guidance for Children's Centres (DfES, February 2003e), continues this trend. It suggests that Centres should increase the involvement of fathers and have specific strategies to do so. The interventionist, inclusive approach to involving men in Sure Start can be considered an example of investment in human capital and as the enhancement of individual opportunities.

While Lewis (2000) considers that there are major cultural and social obstacles to be overcome before fathers can be fully included in mainstream family services that have been traditionally targeted and been used by mothers, he recommends that there should be early identification of fathers as a priority and programme wide commitment to fathers involvement and not simply just a target to be reached.

He goes on to recommend that there should be a strategy for involving fathers, provision of services especially for fathers and the presence of dedicated staff member.

Ghate et al, (2000) suggests that centres need to reduce the levels of female dominance in centres but offers no solution as to how this could be achieved. They suggest that centres make a positive commitment to recruit fathers, work at better promotion of the centres stressing the inclusive nature of services for both parents and reconsider the type of activities so activities offered appeal to men as well as women. They also urge centres not to rely on men's groups as the only activity catering to men as they do not have universal appeal.

### **3.2.2 The relationship of parental involvement to raising standards.**

School effectiveness research consistently points to parental involvement as a correlate. Hargreaves and Hopkins (1991) discuss eight organisational factors of effective schools, and lists parental support as one of them. Phi Delta Kappa, (1980) assert that fostering high levels of parental contact and involvement is associated with effective learning. Similarly, Levine and Stark, (1981) found that a good school curriculum is associated with co-ordinating homework with the curriculum and improving parental involvement in their children's learning. In the 1990's there has been an important push towards this, as research into the effectiveness of parental involvement became more dominant. The political underpinning of the change in relationship between schools and parents is all about accountability and the emphasis on raising academic standards. Reports and education acts have reinforced this giving parents a greater choice of schools and more say in how those schools are run. In a climate of raising standards, parental involvement is considered by many schools as crucial to the development of children's learning.

An acknowledgement of the debate about the influence of schools in comparison to the influence of the family can be found in the work of Coleman et al, (1966), Jencks et al (1972). Although this body of work consistently points to the home as an effective learning environment, school effectiveness research (Mortimore, 1986, 1991; Reynolds, 1988; Hargreaves, 1990; Fullan, 1991 and Thrupp 2001.) has become an area of research influencing practice and policy. The home learning environment, parental involvement and parental support as a correlate to school effectiveness is discussed by both

Stoll and Mortimore, (1995) as one of their eleven 'complementary factors' for school effectiveness; and Ofsted, (1999, p89) use parental involvement as one of their criteria for inspection:

*"The good school sees parents as a rich resource with an important contribution to make and helps them to support their children's learning."*

One of the more contentious ways in which parents have been involved in their children's education has been the re- introduction of homework. David, (1999) considers that the New Labour governments' approach to homework is contradictory as it appears to pursue a tradition moralistic approach to family life. Brain and Reid (2003, p 205) in their discussion of the Education Action Zone's imperative to involve parents in their children's education explain that:

*"The programmes developed in schools constructed the role of parents as partner in the standards agenda, regardless of whether parents accepted this agenda."*

The idea that children should continue their school day at home with the completion of homework as a means to further improve the educational attainment of young children was given authority with the publication of the 1996/1997 Ofsted Annual Report (Ofsted, 1998) which noted that:

*"Homework is important at all stages in a child's education."*

However, in their DfEE funded research, Farrow et al (1999) found that homework itself does not result in an improvement in pupil performance. In the context of this discussion, therefore, it is important to consider, with reference to the literature whether the introduction of homework is an effective way in which to engage parents and whether this type of parental involvement actually does raise standards.

The perceived purposes advantages and disadvantages of homework are outlined by Cowan and Hallam (1999) who discuss the impact of homework practices which promote academic learning assists in the development of generic skills and the benefit of homework to children, families and schools.

This blithe acceptance of homework as a ‘good thing’ is a view widely disseminated in government published literature. Indeed in the foreword to the DfES (1998e, p 2) homework guidelines, Blunkett, the then Secretary of State for Education outlines the ways in which homework is effective in raising standards:

*“ A good, well organized homework programme helps children and young people to develop the skills and attitudes they will need for successful, independent lifelong learning.”*

Subsequent to this, the Standards Site (accessed 10/12/2003)

([www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/homework/parentalsupport/benefits\\_ps/](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/homework/parentalsupport/benefits_ps/)) lists ten benefits of parental support in homework. These are reproduced in the table below:

- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Contact can be established with all parents, irrespective of the nature of catchment areas</li><li>2. Fathers become more involved in their children’s education</li><li>3. Parents provide a significant amount of quality time with their children</li><li>4. Parents become more knowledgeable about the school curriculum</li><li>5. Parents become more involved in the assessment of children’s progress</li><li>6. Inequality of educational opportunity is reduced</li><li>7. Esteem between parents, pupils and teachers is enhanced</li><li>8. Family Learning opportunities are enhanced</li><li>9. Homework underpins Home School Agreements</li><li>10. Raising Standards- when parents reinforce the work of the school at home, there is a potential for raising standards further.</li></ol> |
|---|

**Table 3.1 Benefits of parental support in homework**

Cowan and Hallam (1999) also discuss the disadvantages to homework which include parents putting too much pressure on their children and parents not being familiar with current teaching approaches.

They also discuss the possible negative impact on family life in terms of disruption and causing friction. However, their biggest criticism of homework is its potential to reduce time for involvement in community activities and the way in which it has the potential to polarize opportunities for children from different economic circumstances.

David, (1999) considers that the New Labour governments' approach to homework is contradictory as it appears to pursue a tradition moralistic approach to family life. Brain and Reid (2003, p205) in their discussion of the Education Action Zone's imperative to involve parents in their children's education explain that:

*“The programmes developed in schools constructed the role of parents as partners in the standards agenda, regardless of whether parents accepted this agenda.”*

However, the ways in which some homework practices have evolved can certainly be regarded as contributing to not only involving parents but also raising standards. For example, the introduction of the Homework guidelines (DfES, 1998e) has in some instances resulted in the setting up of homework clubs. Some inner city schools have set up such clubs at their local Premier football clubs. As an incentive, children attending the clubs are allowed a kick-around after completing their homework. It might be suggested that initiatives such as this have gone some way to raise standards in schools as they have helped struggling pupils catch up in class. According to the National Foundation for Educational Research, Sharp, Keys and Benfield (2001) found that such incentives have had a marked effect in improving literacy and numeracy standards amongst slower learners. In the same way, the introduction of family numeracy home take home packs in two of the initiatives in this study provided a link between the activities and home contexts. Weekly feedback from the home activities which could be loosely described as homework, helped to develop recognition of the learning that was going on in the home (Brooks, 1998).

Research from Hallam (2004) summarizes the possible potential of homework as a strategy to raise standards. She suggests that homework is potentially useful in contributing to learning when it is clearly related to classroom work, when tasks are interesting and varied, where teachers provide appropriate feedback and parents, teachers and pupils are committed to it.

A continued interest in the involvement of parents in their children's education has been recently supported by a proliferation of educational policy documents, highlighting the importance recent governments are giving to the role of the family in raising standards in our schools. The

acknowledgement that parents can support their children's learning has been reflected in both policy and practice, resulting in a situation where we are currently witnessing a changing discourse of parental involvement.

### **3.3 Widening Participation: access to education and training**

The Green paper 'The Learning Age: A renaissance for New Britain' (DfEE, 1998c, p8) discussed the way in which investment in human capital *'will be the foundation of success in the knowledge based economy of the twenty first century.'*

In response to this, the New Labour government aimed to have 50% of adults between 21-30 to attend higher education by 2010 and to have 40% of the workforce to have University level of education by 2020.

The Leitch report (HM Treasury 2006, p103) considered that this will aid in:

*"Developing a responsive, flexible skills system that delivers the skills employers need is an essential pre-requisite for meeting a world class ambition for skills."*

However, The Dearing Report (1997) found that there were population groups who were under-represented in higher education *'notably those from socio-economic groups III to V, people with disabilities and specific ethnic minority groups'*. It recommended that priority of funding was given to those institutions that demonstrated a commitment to widening participation.

Similarly, findings from the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU, 1999a) revealed that teenage parents are a group most likely to be trapped in poverty and unemployment and *'be trapped in it through lack of education, child care and encouragement.'*

While the white paper 'The Future of Higher Education' (DfES, 2003c) reassessed the state of higher education, it focused upon funding, quality and management. The paper proposes the need for funding streams independent of the government, the abolishment of tuition fees for all students but particular support for those students from disadvantaged background. A further aim included enabling more

people to enter higher education. The paper argues that this would not only benefit individuals but would meet the economy's need for a workforce with the higher skills necessary to meet the nature of changing roles within the workplace. In *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003d, p8), research showed that *'30% of children whose parents are in unskilled occupations achieve five or more GCSE's, compared to 69% of children whose parents were in professional managerial or occupations.'*

The Higher Education Act (DfES, 2004g) outlined the governments' commitment to encourage universities to widen participation to include students who may not have considered entering higher education such as those living in disadvantaged areas.

However, encouraging these groups of people into further or higher education and training is not an easy task. As McGivney, (1999b) found in her research into the low participation rate of men in post-compulsory education the group least likely to have undertaken learning in the three years are people who had left school at 16 or younger without qualifications. Interestingly, this research also gave an insight into the motivational differences between men and women in these socio-economic groups. Where men were motivated by instrumental, work-related reasons, women appeared to be motivated by self-development and the expansion of their interests.

In an effort to have an impact on these groups of society, the government have been trying to raise the number of young people entering higher education. In 2001 the government encouraged universities to focus on widening access, in a bid to boost the number of poorer students enrolling on degree courses. While changing young people's attitudes to entering higher education who would potentially take advantage of the widening participation agenda opportunities, the prospect of changing the attitudes of parents from the lower socio-economic views is daunting. In relation to the context of parental engagement work, the New Labour Governments' (The Labour Party 1997) intention to 'widen participation' as one of the three aims for education is worthy of discussion. As has already been discussed in chapter two, the emphasis on the early years area based initiatives in this study has examined notions of parental engagement and the imperative to involve parents. However, underlying this imperative are the governments' three key aims for education which are 'raising standards, widening participation and promoting social inclusion'. The ways in which each initiative has not only

encouraged parental involvement but has also promoted the three key aims for education is apparent in each one. Haggart (2000) explains that projects which encourage family are important because of the contribution they can then make to the national wealth. The idea that engaging parents can impact upon the government agenda is closely linked with the development of cultural capital.

Vryonides, (2007, p 868) discusses the ways in which cultural capital is:

*“Operationalised as parental knowledge required for successfully engaging with various educational processes and assessing various options and opportunity for progressing to higher education.”*

However, Coffield et al, (2007, p 739) argue that there is much work still to be done and claim that there are *‘huge cultural changes required to create a learning society in the UK.’* One of the cultural changes resultant from the results of this study is the notion that widening participation as a concept is defined by its narrow definition of encouraging people into further or higher education. Although two of the original family numeracy parents progressed to train as nursery nurses, this experience does not appear to be a common response to parents’ engagement in early year’s initiatives. Indeed the findings from the Ofsted (2000, p7-8) Family Learning Survey found that the educational standards achieved by parents involved in family learning work resulted in *‘progression for over 50% of participants to further education and training or more challenging jobs than they had previously had’*

### **3.4 The Social Inclusion Agenda**

The policy of ‘social inclusion’ has dominated the British political discourse of the New Labour governments of 1997 and 2001. Hill, et al, (2004, p79) discuss that there *‘two overlapping meanings of social exclusion are apparent in the UK’.*

*“The first is broadly equivalent to relative poverty.... The second sense of social exclusion refers to the way in which certain groups are marginalized, omitted or stigmatised, usually on account of a visible feature that differs from the majority and which the majority finds hard to accept.”*

In 1997 the New Labour Government formed the Social Exclusion Unit to develop an integrated approach to tackling social exclusion. The current '*multi faceted strands of social inclusion policy*' (Tett, et al. 2003) incorporate local initiatives linked with wider social, educational and economic policy. Smith, Haggart and Dutton, (2005) recognise that government policy identifies young parents, along with young people generally, as a group that is vulnerable to social exclusion. Crofts (2005), considers that while young parents are often identified as being in need and that extra support is targeted at them, no-one consults with these young parents on the types of support they might need. Smith et al, (2005) discuss the way in which policies that focus on the exclusion of vulnerable young people tend to see pregnancy and parenthood as a risk factor, contributing to the notion of disadvantage that prevents young people achieving their full potential.

Similarly, acknowledging that young people are not engaging with education and training, SEU published '*Bridging the Gap: New Opportunities for 16-18 year olds not in education or training*' (SEU, 1999a). This report identifies the scale of non-participation and describes its impact on young people's lives. Social exclusion in later life, where these young adult are more likely to be unemployed, dependent on benefits, to live in unstable family structures, and to be depressed about their lives is the result. Similarly, the scale of teenage pregnancy in the UK, higher than any other western European country, is discussed in '*Teenage Pregnancy*' (SEU, 1999b). This report recommends that young parents need to be encouraged to complete their education and training in order to be able to support themselves and their families.

In an effort to 'reach' these young people before social exclusion and its resulting consequences, the message is clearly emerging that schools need to tackle these issues and that investment is needed to promote social inclusion in schools as schools themselves cannot achieve this without support.

As home-school relations are increasingly being regarded as a key professional task with both legal and contractual requirements, schools are under increasing pressure to explore ways of effectively working with parents in an attempt to help the government tackle social exclusion in general. Therefore schools are expected '*to work with other agencies to prevent social exclusion taking place and to help reintegrate those who have been socially excluded into mainstream society.*' (Tett, et al, 2003).

Acknowledging the ways in which in those schools and children's centre's who have the capacity to offer family learning opportunities, Dench, Hillage and Coare's (2006) research illustrates the way in which such area based approaches are responsive to parents' education and training needs. They also consider that the Lifelong Learning approaches to parent employability where family learning and parental engagement initiatives are offered are an effective way of improving parental employability. However, Lindsay et al, (2007, p161) argue that:

*“attention must be paid to accessibility and one-to-one support using an empowering approach.”*

In an effort to contribute to our understanding of social inclusion, four key discourses are discussed in the next sections of this chapter. Whilst acknowledging that the four key discourses are not exclusive to notions of social inclusion, ideas of 'community', 'disadvantage', 'education' and 'good parenting' are explored in an attempt to consider how these notions relate to each other and to the wider social inclusion agenda.

### **3.4.1 'Community'**

The commonly subscribed to impression that we actually live in 'communities' in the 'old fashioned' sense of the word is worthy of discussion at this point. With the current rhetoric surrounding 'community regeneration' and 'social cohesion', Cooke, (1989) argues that the word we should be using is 'locality' rather than community. Believing that the term 'community' is inadequate as it is too broad in its spatial reach and too narrow in its social connotations, Cooke (1989, p 296) argues that the term 'locality' is a strong candidate for filling the gap:

*“Localities are not simply places or even communities: they are the sum of social energy and agency resulting from the clustering of diverse individuals, groups and social interests in space.....They are bases for intervention in the internal workings of not only individual and collective daily lives but also events on a broader canvas affecting local interest.”*

Although there has been little research examining the impact of communities on working class children (Connolly and Neill, 2001), Reay (2000) discusses the way in which community plays a much more

restrictive role in shaping working class children's mobility and future aspirations in comparison with middle class children. Connolly and Neill (2000) concur with this and argue that children's educational aspirations are significantly mediated by their experience of the local area in which they live.

In Family Numeracy Programmes, practitioners were required to work in '*areas of socio-economic deprivation*' (Brooks, 1998). Similarly, one of the key objectives of Education Action Zones was to '*empower people and communities through engaging local people in the development and delivery of policies*' (Blunkett, 1999, p 02). Sure Start programmes and latterly the introduction of Children's Centres have been situated in areas designated as '*of in need*'. However, as Power et al, (2004, p 462) discuss '*policies targeted at disadvantaged communities have the potential to both include and exclude*' and warn that '*exclusionary processes can be compounded when the nature and cause of disadvantage is inadequately grasped.*'

Therefore, it appears that whether we choose to label areas as 'communities', 'neighbourhoods', 'areas' or 'localities' is actually superseded by a far more important debate surrounding the language around disadvantage, regeneration, and exclusion and their relationship to the social inclusion agenda.

### **3.4.2 Community regeneration**

The debate surrounding the use of terminology, particularly 'community' versus 'locality' is useful in that it serves to frame the context of this study. Regardless of the extent to which we engage in the debate about the correct term to use, and whether we describe the places where we live as communities or localities is negated by the New Labour government's insistence to use the term 'community'. As Gilchrist (2003, p16) explains '*..there is an associated assumption that the experience of 'community' is in itself a good and desirable aspect of human society.*'

It is with reference to community regeneration, that the term 'community' is most persistently used. As Hoban and Beresford (2001) explain, where in the past the emphasis had been on physical regeneration of area, the New Labour government sought to create opportunities for local people. The community regeneration agenda is very closely linked to the social inclusion agenda.

As ten years of policy dictates illustrate, the idea that communities can be regenerated has gathered momentum with the New Labour administration. In 1998 the New Labour policy on neighbourhood renewal was launched, arguing that previous policies had not worked and that new approaches were needed:

*“..unless the community is fully engaged in shaping and delivering regeneration, even the best plans on paper will fail to deliver in practice.”*

(SEU, 2000,p 05).

Hoban and Beresford (2001) discuss the way in which proposals included new funding programmes targeted at ‘poor neighbourhoods’ in an effort to engender ‘community self- help’. Policy dictated that ‘dynamic local leaders’ (SEU, 1998,p10) ‘social entrepreneurs’ (SEU, 2000) and ‘neighbourhood managers’ (DETR, 2000a) would ensure that community regeneration would happen, complementing the social inclusion agenda. Although the introduction of key personnel to drive the regeneration agenda forward is a key feature of the idea behind community self-help, Hoban and Beresford (2001, p134) urge caution asserting that:

*‘There is a real danger here that a policy that seeks to rely on the promotion of individual leadership, whether in the form of ‘entrepreneurs’, ‘managers’ or ‘community leaders’, may actually work against the overall intention to empower local people.’*

Simpson, Wood and Daws (2003) discuss the way in which community initiatives historically depend upon individuals to drive the agenda forward. Building on ‘local strengths’ to promote community participation; the authors consider that it is those individuals from the communities who take ownership of both the problem and the solutions, who have the potential to drive the regeneration of communities forward.

Alexander, (2005, p49) acknowledges that the government has recognised the importance of parents as educators through the introduction of community based initiatives such as Sure Start, family learning

programmes and the extended schools programme. However, he maintains that *'it is local people, community groups, schools and councils that will actually make the difference.'*

Perhaps most importantly the imperative to introduce local initiatives was also linked with wider social, educational and economic policies. In the same way that 'parenting support advisers' were introduced to support those parents' considered to be 'failing' their children, the introduction of the 'social ambassador' was heralded as support for communities and a tool for regeneration. Where once policies were described as demonstrating 'joined up' thinking, it appeared that the implementation of social, educational and economic policies had much to contribute to the social inclusion agendas.

### **3.4.3 Disadvantaged communities.**

The initiatives designed by policy makers to counteract disadvantage and regenerate communities in an attempt to promote social inclusion are most often placed in communities which are considered to be impoverished, disadvantaged, and deprived.

Diamond (2004, p183) discusses those who label particular neighbourhoods as *'lacking social capital'* and suggests that professionals may be misreading the situation and that *'invisible capacity'* may exist in terms of strong networks of community and voluntary sector groups, social entrepreneurship in the informal economy and well established networks. He goes on to further suggest that such groups may be ignored or not seen because they do not *'fit the preferred model.'* Vyronides (2007) concurs with this and uses the term *'familial social and cultural capital'* to describe the ways in which parents in *'disadvantaged'* areas engage and mobilize resources and networks for the benefits of their children's future educational and occupational prospects. In this context 'poverty' which is the most structural of all things; employment, housing and income, has been framed individually so that individuals can *'climb out'* but only if they act as individuals. This then points to the fact that those most *'in need'* appear to have been touched least by any of the policies designed and implemented on their behalf.

Coffield et al (2005), suggest that this is resultant of policy makers whose measures are either *'misinterpreted'* or *'under'* or *'over-interpreted'* by institutional leaders and practitioners in the *'front line'*. Mannion (1996, p 01), believes that *'bottom-up'* locally based approaches *'permit policies to be*

*more socially inclusive and help ensure the social stability and cohesion without which economic growth and structural adjustment will be obstructed."*

However, questioning the notion that it is possible to 'turn communities around' and whether such approaches will actually impact on social inclusion, leads Hoban and Beresford (2001, p315) to be sceptical about the impact of policies which simply focus on poor neighbourhoods.

#### **3.4.4 The 'disadvantage' discourse**

Simultaneously, the effects of socio-economic deprivation on educational achievement have been highlighted. In *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE 1997a, p 04) and in *Excellence and Enjoyment* (DfES, 2003b p 37) the contribution parents' make to their children's education is given prominence in terms of the effects success in education can have on a child's future prospects. While Power and Whitty (2001, p45) acknowledge that '*economic injustices lead to educational inequalities*', Lareau (1989) considers that social background can provide an advantage for some children. However, Sylva (2000) and Desforges' (2003) research have shown that activities which involve parents can override parental class factors.

In their examination of poverty in the UK, Smith and Middleton, (2007) explain that moment in time studies underestimate the scale of poverty in the UK and that such studies tend to differentiate between the 'poor' and the 'non-poor'. Their research highlights different types of poverty as transient, persistent and recurrent and that while most people who enter poverty leave quickly, a minority experience persistent poverty and many others experience recurrent episodes of poverty because income mobility tends to be short- range. They emphasize the finding that poverty in one generation increases the chances of poverty in the next and that educational attainment is the best way of mediating the risk of poverty over the life course.

The notion that there is a link between education and economic growth has been prevalent in educational policy since its inception. Successive governments have used the cost benefit theory where 'rates of return' are recognized as indicators of the effectiveness of education systems. An example of this is evident in the Basic Skills Agency Family Literacy (1995) and Family Numeracy (1997) initiatives. Both initiatives embraced this notion of a link between education and economic growth by

promoting the idea that as parents develop their own literacy or numeracy skills, alongside learning how to support their children's learning, they have the potential to re-enter the workforce.

However, there are two issues with both the policy and the subsequent practice of providing this kind of support for certain kinds of families. We are reminded that these initiatives are designed to support families in areas of social and economic deprivation and that one of the main goals for such provision is to raise the standards in our schools and of our workforce and stop the cycle of disadvantage that has perpetuated in these areas. Secondly, the families for whom these initiatives have been designed to support, there is the tension between re- entering the workforce and being 'good parents' which often involves staying at home to look after their children while they are young. As Edwards and Duncan (1997) discuss, many young mothers hold beliefs about bringing up their children, influencing their decision to resist pressures to take low paid employment in the absence of high quality child care.

A positive aspect of my level of involvement in this community has illustrated just how positive and powerful a community can be in areas where government initiatives describe them as 'economically impoverished'. An example of the positive and powerful nature of the community can be found in the Community Education Survey for this small area published in August 2002. The survey which examined existing adult education provision and local learning needs found that local residents possessed a good knowledge of local sources of advice and guidance. Residents possessed a high level of interest in learning, with two thirds indicating that they were interested in undertaking some form of learning in the future.

In its briefing paper, *Child Poverty and Education*, the National Children's Bureau and the action group End Child Poverty (no date) claim that "*The correlations between poverty, social class and poor educational attainment are strong.*" They proceed to state that "*Poor children are less likely to flourish at school. School leavers with poor educational attainment are more likely to become poor adults, and in turn their own children are more likely to be brought up in poverty.*"

Acknowledging that "*The level of the mother's education correlates particularly strongly with success at school.*" the briefing paper suggests that:

*“The Government should review existing programmes for enhancing the educational opportunities for young mothers in poor areas,”*

The potential of all homes, particularly socially and economically deprived homes, as contexts for learning are increasingly highlighted and the potential of parental involvement and family learning programmes are being acknowledged.

As Halpin (2004, P83) demonstrated in his research:

*“One of the central difficulties in this regard is the cultural and long-standing structural compartmentalisation of agencies that work with and seek to alleviate the conditions of the poorest members of society... (which) results in a tendency for schools and their employees to interpret low achievement among pupils coming from economically less-well off families in terms that are exclusively about schooling.”*

While Every Child Matters (DfEE, 2003a) proposes universal prevention and early intervention, rather than just targeted protection, the aims of ending child poverty and enabling every child to reach its potential is paramount. As Williams (2004) suggests, education is discussed as the basis to employability which in turn is discussed in terms as an insurance policy against poverty and social exclusion. However key to this is the notion of parents as partners, responsible for ensuring their children’s education and employment.

### **3.4.5 The ‘education’ discourse**

As discussed in the previous sections, a rationale behind the development of many educational initiatives has been their link to the social inclusion agenda. Gorard (2000) maintains that since New Labour came to power in 1997, there have been over 600 educational interventions which have resulted in very little effect. There is an acknowledgement that multiple interventions and initiatives are considered to make little contribution to educational and social objectives. (Paterson, 2003, Hine, 2005, Merrell and Tymms, 2007)

However, education itself is recognised as having a positive effect on earning potential, educational attainment and civic engagement in later life (Robson, 2003) and that improving educational outcomes for one generation is a key factor in helping to break this cycle of deprivation (DWP, 2002). As has already been discussed, parental involvement in children's education is increasingly regarded as key factor for success. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) recognise that parental involvement in early intervention programmes have been found to equate with better outcomes for the child and that parental involvement has a significant effect on pupil achievement throughout the years of schooling.

One of the key findings from the EPPE project (2002), a longitudinal study which has monitored 2,800 children's progress from pre-school to entry into reception class, found that parental involvement has a significant impact on children's cognitive development and literacy and numeracy skills. Initiatives such as family literacy and family numeracy programmes which aim to involve parents in their children's learning alongside developing their own skills have contributed to improvements in children's literacy and numeracy, parents' literacy and numeracy and the parents' ability to help their own children. (Brooks, 1996, 1998)

Where parents are not involved in their children's education, the results can be equally as overwhelming. The research into the involvement of men has much to contribute to this debate. For example, Horn and Sylvester (2002) found that children with involved fathers avoid high-risk behaviours compared to children who have uninvolved fathers. Similarly, Buchanan and McCoy in a project called 'Tomorrow's Men' found that fathers who devoted time to their sons, even as little as 5 minutes each day, were giving them a far greater chance to grow as confident adults.

Flouri (2002) found that fathers' involvement in the lives of their children was an important factor in the future success of children in terms of their social and educational development.

Labour's educational policy has been described by Paterson (2003, p176-177) as both '*social democratic developmentalism*' but also '*ideological*', attempting to '*build social capital in order to achieve social inclusion*'. The imperative to bring parents with equal worth, mothers and fathers into the education system cannot be viewed as simply inclusive or developmental. The social inclusion aspect of this approach is significant.

### 3.4.6 The 'good parent' discourse

In the same way that the rationale behind the development of many educational initiatives has focused on links to the social inclusion agenda, the current pre-occupation with the promotion of 'good parenting' is underpinned by the notion of its contribution to the social inclusion agenda. However, David (1999) questions this focus and considers that it demonstrates a '*patriarchal*' approach.

In the same way, the National Family and Parenting Institute, alongside the consultation document Supporting Families, (DoH, 1998); appear to present parents as needing state intervention to rear children. 'Good parenting' currently enjoys a high media profile, with a proliferation of television programmes dedicated to this theme. Intervention from 'experts' is the norm with everyone having an opinion on what constitutes 'good parenting'. When the government announced its intention to introduce Parent Support Advisers in 600 areas, the following headline appeared in The Sunday Times on March 5<sup>th</sup> 2006:

*"It's official: the nanny state really has arrived."*

As part of the government's respect agenda, the '*Respect Action Plan*' launched in January 2006, heralded the introduction of parenting support advisers aimed at anti-social families who can bring misery to their neighbourhoods. The area where this particular study was conducted has subsequently been confirmed as one of the forty eight respect action areas nationwide. The expansion of the Children's Centres programme is aimed at offering structured parenting programmes, outreach and home visiting, targeted support. The rhetoric surrounding this development centres round the notion that more highly trained and qualified staff will be employed with staff seeing themselves as partners.

Similarly, Children's Trusts have been charged with consulting parents. The then Prime Minister Tony Blair gave his clearest commitment to supporting parents yet with the following statement:

*"People must be properly trained to work with parents"*

(DfES guidance Dec 2005)

David, (1999) discusses the way in which the government have attempted to provide advice and support for families, reduce poverty, help families balance work and home and support families to tackle problems in family life such as domestic violence and teenage pregnancy. Vincent (2000) however, notes that the New Labour government of 1997-8 has provided advice and guidance on a variety of parenting issues such as bedtimes, homework, personal and collective responsibility for one's immediate community, parenting in general and home-school relations. While David (1999) considers that it is important to celebrate the new public direction for families, she cautions that there is concern about the balancing of home and work.

With a current and rather rigid emphasis on 'good parenting,' the expected contribution to the social inclusion agenda cannot be under-estimated. The idea of reciprocal obligation and mutual responsibility for children is at the heart of New Labour policy.

### **3.5. Overview**

Alongside a myriad of initiatives designed to raise standards, widen participation and, promote social inclusion, it is the significance attached to parental involvement which is pertinent to this study. This chapter alongside analysing the literature to explore New Labour's three key objectives for education also contributed to the process of progressive focusing (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) which has been employed in this study to gather themes from the literature to inform the development of research questions to be used in the interview process. As a consequence, parents involved in family learning programmes within the initiatives were specifically asked questions around the notion of involvement and its contribution to raising standards. Similarly, acknowledging that the parents in this study are exactly the sort of young adults discussed in the Dearing report (1997) who are currently being targeted to encourage them into further and higher education or into further training opportunities, parents interviewed were asked a series of questions designed to uncover why they were reluctant and unconfident when considering entry into further and higher education.

Inherent within the three key objectives is the notion that key personnel from the community will drive initiatives forward thus contributing to social inclusion. The idea of supporting families in communities with the introduction of 'dynamic local leaders' (SEU, 1998b, p 10) and 'neighbourhood managers' (DETR, 2000b) alongside the idea of supporting families in the home with the introduction

of 'parenting support advisers' in six hundred areas (DfES, 2005b) appears to be offering a two pronged approach to tackling social exclusion. As Alexander (2005, p49) asserts, the introduction of Every Child Matters has as one of its main aims to strengthen support for parents and families. However, he advises that '*..it is the local people, community groups, schools and councils that will actually make the difference.*'

This is particularly interesting with reference to this study as many of the parents interviewed expressed concern that their time was limited with work home and family commitments and that their required involvement in initiatives was often an added pressure. For some of the parents who chose employment within the initiatives, the experience was an uncomfortable one.

## Chapter 4

### Analysis of the literature 3: The emergence of early years' area -based initiatives

#### 4.0 Introduction

The New Labour pre-election mantra of “Education, Education, Education” has resulted in a continuation of a re-formation of the education system. With a proliferation of Acts, regulations, initiatives and guidance; it is not surprising therefore, that Ball (1999, p195) remarks:

*“Whatever else one would want to say about Labour’s educational policies, there is certainly no shortage of them”*

Each of the initiatives in this study had an imperative to involve parents. As Brooks, (1998, p3) explains, the family numeracy initiative had three aims of:

*“raising the level of home support for numeracy; offering a quick start and immediate gains in numeracy for 3-5 year old children at risk of under-attainment and offering a restart for their parents’ numeracy learning and an impact on their numeracy level”.*

In its Action Plan, (1999), the Education Action Zone in this study outlined three main themes, one of which included *‘Developing partnerships with other stake-holders’*. The theme aimed to *‘develop family learning a) to give parents the skills to support their children’s learning at home (in doing this parents are empowered by developing their own learning/parental skills) and b) supporting children’s improved attainment by equipping parents to give support at home’* (Appendix 1).

This theme was developed within the context of the aim to *‘help combat social exclusion, support family learning and help raise parents’ expectations.’* (DfEE, February 1999c.)

The Sure Start initiative, with five national objectives, includes the interestingly worded objective of *‘strengthening families and communities.’* All objectives have at their core, the imperative to involve families *‘to enhance the functioning of children and families by improving services provided in the local programme area, which have high levels of deprivation.’* (Melhuish et, al, 2005)

The influx of early years intervention programmes which include parental involvement within their remit, prompt Moran et al (2004, p3) to note that its development *'has grown from a trickle to a flood.'* The rationale behind this imperative, consistently refer to the aims of raising standards, promoting social inclusion and widening participation.

In this chapter, the development of early year's initiatives will be examined alongside the imperative to involve parents. The idea of 'invited' as opposed to 'imposed' initiatives will be examined in an attempt to rate success of implementation and impact on the partakers of the initiative. The short-term nature of initiatives will be discussed with reference to the influence the initiatives involved in this study have had on future service provision. The chapter will also provide a mini meta analysis of the three initiatives. The use of a mini meta-analysis is useful at this point in the study as it provided a mechanism to not only classify, tally and compare the three initiatives (Pawson, 2004) it also provides a way to discuss similarities between the themes emerging from each initiative and then serve to highlight those themes and key differences which are distinctive to each initiative.

The nature of the three initiatives involved in this study will be explored in an attempt to track the rationale behind their inception, development and impact. The impetus to involve parents as a key feature of all three initiatives in this study will also be examined.

#### **4.1 The development of early years' interventions and the introduction of early years' initiatives.**

The range of government initiatives combined with practice developments and research has led to the nature of these initiatives and the concept of intervention being explored by both policy makers and educational researchers. Whalley (2000) recognises that *'By 1997 the need to involve parents actively in their children's education was high on the political agenda.'* And that *'Supporting parents and training parents were identified as major tasks for early childhood educators in all settings.'*

As Baldock, Fitzgerald and Kay (2005) explain, although the New Labour government had a positive approach to the development of early year's services, the government was wary of making financial commitments. Baldock et al (2005) list five major elements to the development of New Labour's approach to early year's policy: tackling poverty, promoting partnership, encouraging expansion and experiment, the central role given to education and better regulation.

Early childhood intervention to address social exclusion and to maximise children's development is a key theme within Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003a) and the subsequent Change for Children (DfES, 2004f) which has the imperative to '*reform children's services for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*' and give early intervention a high priority. Alongside this, in the National Service Framework for Children (DH/DfES, 2004) the government provide clear direction to all agencies that they are required to work with families. The government have recognised the impact poor parenting and the adverse effects of child poverty on a child's life. As a result there has been a huge investment in anti-poverty and child-focused strategies to improve children's lives. The government has introduced a raft of strategies to address these issues since the inception of Sure Start (Glass, 1999). Amongst these are the Children's Workforce Strategy (DfES, 2005c); the move towards outcomes based interventions linked to the Every Child Matters Framework (DfES, 2004f); Working family tax credit and the drive towards integrated working to safeguard and promote well-being for children linked to the common assessment framework (DfES 2006).

Although the government is providing a framework of support for children to be lifted out of poverty, the amount of effort in engaging with parents who have never experienced work within the family and are focused on their survival and their own needs should not be under-estimated.

Whilst interventionist studies stress the importance of early intervention for younger children, Wolfendale (2000) considers that intervention has four goals. The aims include sustaining families in supporting their children's development; promoting children's development through the early years' curriculum and other learning opportunities; promoting children's confidence and coping skills and finally preventing the emergence of future problems. Goodson et al (2000) discuss three reasons why early interventions are so popular with researchers and policy makers. These three factors concern the ways in which children's early development lays foundations for later learning alongside the notion that if we improve children's early experiences we increase the likelihood that their later development will be enhanced. The last factor examines the way in which poverty is considered a deficit in children's early experiences and the ways in which interventions are poised to alleviate such disadvantage. Goodman and Sianesi (2007, pp147-8) consider that:

*“..investments in human capital before the age of five appear to have had long-lasting and positive effects...”*

The growth of interest in both early intervention and the role parents and families can play has historically led to early intervention programmes such as Portage (Cameron, 1986) which specifically engages parents as co-educators. The earlier historical perspective of parental involvement outlined in chapter two provides a detailed journey through those intervention programmes which have employed parental involvement as a mechanism for change.

The Labour Party's 1997 General Election Manifesto *New Labour Because Britain Deserves Better* (Labour Party, 1997) detailed the role educational initiatives would play in raising achievement in schools. Many of these initiatives were then introduced in the new government's first White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997a). The idea that these initiatives would impact not only upon school standards but also upon community regeneration gathered impetus. The governments' aim to *'promote the potential and experience that exists within all sections of the community'* (DfEE, 1998a) signalled the Governments' intention to make links between raising educational achievement and regenerating communities. In the same way in 2002 as the unified Sure Start Unit was established within the DfES, it heralded the use of early intervention in Sure Start designed specifically to target disadvantaged families whose children may be 'at risk' and to improve outcomes for children through parental education programmes. Interestingly, Whitehead and Clough (2004, p215) discuss the way in which we have witnessed a shift from centralized control over education policy *'towards education initiatives which have sought the direct involvement of local communities.'*

Simpson and Cieslik, (2002, p120) consider that one of the area- based initiatives discussed in this study, EAZs, can be considered to be an example of a *'comprehensive community initiative'*, and explain that such comprehensive community initiatives in the form of EAZs, *'have been set up to respond to the dynamics of the neighbourhood.'*

However, the introduction of such initiatives does not as yet appear to have yielded the required or indeed the expected results. While Gorard, (2000) asserts that there have been over six hundred

educational initiatives since New Labour came to power, he claims that this has had very little effect. Tomlinson (2003) questions whether the plethora of initiatives by the New Labour government actually improved educational standards. Hodgson and Spours (1999, p133) question the effectiveness of initiative led reform. Acknowledging that it has the potential to make a practical difference to the most excluded groups in society, they argue that it *'has neither the power to challenge the structure of the education and training system as a whole, nor to alter its overall effectiveness.'*

Merrell and Tymms, (2007) in their six year comparison of almost 35,000 children found no change in developmental levels of pupils entering primary school in the period, despite the introduction of several new early years' initiatives. They did, however consider that it is still too early to measure the effects of the Every Child Matters proposals.

Alongside the rapid change in the area of children's services over the past decade, there have been a raft of different initiatives, strategies, policies and legislation all designed to help achieve the Every Child Matters outcomes and which also encompass the three key objectives for education. The pace of this change and the initiatives this brings with it is unlikely to slow down due to the imperative to improve services for children and families. This is indicative of a time when the needs of children and families are placed at the fore front of policy and practice. This important shift in thinking aims to provide services within a preventative system. This thinking very clearly recognizes early years and schools as being the base for early intervention and prevention within disadvantaged communities. The launch of the first ever National Children's Plan (DfCSF, 2007b, p 5) has five underpinning principles:

1. Government does not bring up children- parents do- so the government needs to do more to back parents and families;
2. All children have the potential to succeed and should go as far as their talents can take them;
3. Children and young people need to enjoy their childhood as well as grow up prepared for adult life;
4. Services need to be shaped by and responsive to children, young people and families, not designed around professional boundaries; and
5. It is always better to prevent failure than tackle a crisis later.

While initiative led reform has its critics, some of whom are discussed above, unless there is a change in government in the United Kingdom, early years initiatives will continue to be a feature and will continue to influence the shape and delivery of children's services.

Acknowledging that interventionist research strongly emphasizes the importance of *early* intervention for young children, the following section attempts to discuss the idea of invited intervention as opposed to imposed intervention and to try to uncover some of the reasons why encouraging parents to become stakeholders in these interventions is a central theme.

Notions of invited as opposed to imposed initiatives are an important consideration in the light of the findings from this research. As chapters seven and eight will reveal, some of the parents interviewed, expressed frustration that they were not consulted as to what they needed in their communities.

An NUT sponsored research project, conducted by PriceWaterhouse Coopers (Theakston, Robinson and Bangs, 2001, pp195-196) found that:

*“reform which is imposed and is rushed for political imperatives can set back significantly the development of those reforms. In addition, when Government spins the introduction of an initiative it should be aware of the impact on those who carry it out.”*

Matthews (2003, p 265) considers that while *'Recent policy initiatives have put participation and community high on the political agenda.'* it is the members of communities who are charged with being the *'agents in the process of local social change'*, and he presents a typology of community action. Starting with a *'dialogue'* which involves listening to and consulting with young people, Matthews goes on to suggest that *'development'* is the next stage, where teams of adults work within their communities for the benefit of young people. The third stage in the suggested typology involves the encouragement of *'participation'*, with young people working within their communities. This, suggests Matthews, would result in *'integration'* as young people work with their communities. Acknowledging that integration is rarely achieved, he argues that:

*'Cooperation of this kind promulgates opportunities for the sharing of ideas, better understanding, generation of mutual respect, and the enabling of those conditions that promote neighbourhood regeneration.'* (p269)

While the inception of various early years area based initiatives has become a motif for the New Labour Government, early intervention, a feature of this motif has the notion of delivering services to children and families in this way based upon identifying 'risk' or 'need'. Common terminology surrounding early years intervention programmes includes phrases such as 'at risk of under-attainment' or 'need' with claims of 'breaking the cycle of disadvantage'. This research has revealed that phrases such as this often serve to stigmatise the very people the initiative has been designed to help.

As Hine (2005, p121) discusses, the differences between the concepts of 'need' and 'risk' are not well documented.

*"One might say that the two objectives are not incompatible, and that one may be a means of achieving the other, but this presupposes sophisticated articulation of the theoretical understandings of both risk and need which did not exist."*

Simpson, et al (2003) suggests that the introduction of a new initiative in a community *'requires careful consideration of the social impacts that may result- both short term and long term- and the influence that the new project may have on existing social networks.'*

Simpson, et al (2003, p281) go on to suggest that:

*"Each new initiative demands a share of already limited stocks of time and energy, and so the community's social infrastructure shifts as individuals are forced to make difficult choices about where to direct their energies."*

Power, et al (2004, p469) when examining Education Action Zones stress that:

*“..initiatives take time to embed, and those working in zones experienced difficulty reconciling the need for innovative strategies to tackle disadvantage with the pressure of short-term targets.”*

This notion of creating and introducing innovative programmes whilst exploring ways of working with partners within the EAZ initiative, is discussed by Power and Gerwitz, (2001, p44):

*“..the DfEE have tightly specified the kinds of initiatives to be attempted thus circumventing the opportunities for participation in decisions about what is to be done in the zones.”*

#### **4.1.2 Initiative overload?**

Signaling their intention to put support mechanisms in place for all families, Pascal (1996) describes the way in which this government policy shift was designed to encourage parents to start creating the world they would like to be part of and to stop accepting their lot.

In 2000, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' performance and Innovation Unit (DETR, 2000a, 2000b) suggested that there were too many area-based initiatives which only served to cause confusion locally.

*“At any time there can be approximately 27 area-based initiatives operating in any one of the English regions.”*

*(HofC, 2002a)*

A point reinforced by Power et al (2004:469) who discuss the problems associated with *'the multiplicity of other area-based initiatives.'* Dickson and Power, (2001, p137) describe the way in which EAZs contribute to the idea of initiative overload:

*"EAZs are one of a number of New Labour initiatives, including Health Action Zones, Sure Start and New Deal for Communities which seek integrated or 'joined-up' solutions to complex social problems within areas of social and economic disadvantage."*

The term 'initiative overload', has emerged after a reflection on New Labour's Educational policies. It is a phrase I use copiously to describe the wave of educational interventions which have become a central theme of recent educational policy. While this has been something I have referred to since my involvement in family numeracy in 1997, the phrase itself is beginning to be used in the literature. Theakston, Robinson and Bangs (2001) use this phrase in the context of teachers' discussions about dissatisfaction with their workload. Power, et al, (2004, p467) do not actually use the phrase 'initiative overload', but they do refer to this as a concept and as a means to explain teachers' being generally 'lukewarm about initiatives'. Edwards and Warin (1999) discuss concern over teachers having to implement these initiatives and warn that primary school teachers may be tempted to view parents merely as a source of additional assistance in delivery of an already overloaded curriculum.

#### **4.1.3 The evidence based practice approach: the influence of the three initiatives involved in this study on future service provision.**

While research into the early years is longstanding, research into early years area based initiatives has been limited. Results from this emerging research area are beginning to be published but many initiatives do not last long enough for any meaningful conclusions to be drawn from the data. However, the three initiatives examined in this study have all been subject to external evaluation. A framework for the evaluation of the pilot family numeracy programmes conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) resulted in publication of the findings, (Brooks, 1998, 2002). Education Action Zones were charged with evaluating their work under the headings monitoring and evaluating, and commissioned local universities, independent consultants and teams within the Zones to carry out such evaluative work. Northumbria University (2001) published an evaluation of the family learning programmes within the EAZ. Ofsted (2001) also played a key role in publishing the impacts of the zones. Similarly, the Sure Start initiative has been part of evaluation work both locally and nationally. The most recent national evaluation (Melhuish et al, 2005) created

consternation as its results appeared to point to the fact that families involved in Sure Start programmes fared no better than those families with no involvement.

These developments have begun to offer the researcher unique opportunities to examine the effects of their introduction within a relatively new and developing research area and have impacted upon future service developments. The NfER Family Literacy evaluation (1996) informed the development of the subsequent Family Numeracy programmes. The monitoring and evaluation of Education Action Zones (2001) informed the development of Excellence in Cities and research findings from the National Early Excellence Centre evaluations have been used to inform the developmental work currently being carried out as part of the Sure Start initiative. In this way, Melhuish, Belsky, and Leyland's research (2005) which was a final evaluation of Sure Start has in turn informed the development of the Children's Centre initiative.

Interestingly, this research has revealed that *serial involvement in initiatives*, which I would suggest is a growing phenomenon is dependent upon the quality of experiences on offer. This has resonance with Swick's findings (1997), which reveals that parents who have negative experiences in early childhood programmes are less likely to engage in using other family strengthening resources.

#### **4.2 Family Numeracy: an initiative**

During 1997-98, the Basic Skills Agency funded the setting up of 14 national pilot Family Numeracy Programmes. The pilot Family Numeracy Project in the community involved in this study ran in an area of the borough which has high unemployment and related socio-economic problems. Based on the model provided by the Basic Skills Agency, the project incorporated the three pronged two generational approach which had proved so successful in the Family Literacy Projects. The pilot project which was subject to very short term funding in that there were initially only sufficient funds to run the programme twice over a ten-week period; offered three separate sessions of the Family Numeracy Project. The aim of the pilot programme was to investigate the most effective methods of raising the level of home support for numeracy; offering a quick start and immediate gains in numeracy for 3-5 year old children at risk of under- attainment, and offering a restart for their parents' numeracy learning and an impact on their numeracy level. Along with the impetus to involve parents, central to

the family numeracy initiative; these three aims were also congruent with the three key objectives for education.

Having previously implemented an IMPACT scheme with reception aged children in a primary school, the notion of encouraging parental participation in mathematics learning was key to the development of family numeracy within the community involved in this study. While the IMPACT scheme avoided requiring parents to take on the role of teachers (Merttens, 1996), family numeracy was premised on the idea that parents are their child's first and most enduring teachers (McKenna, 1988).

One session involved addressing the parents' own basic numeracy needs, another session looked at the parents' needs in supporting their own children's learning and the third session involved a joint activity in which the parents and children worked together making a mathematics game for use at home. The local college provided an adult tutor to run the parents' sessions, while the children's and the joint sessions were run by the project co-ordinator. A valuable addition to the project was the provision of a crèche which enabled parents with very young children to attend the ten-week course.

Teaching in the children's and joint sessions incorporated Thompson's (1997, p157) three suggestions for teaching early years mathematics:

- *That counting should constitute the basis of the early years number curriculum and not the 'sorting sets, matching and ordering' approach;*
- *That mental calculation methods should be given precedence over formal written methods;*
- *That the use of a wider range of teaching methods should be adopted.*

(Thompson, 1999, p 157)

This approach concentrated on modelling target numeracy concepts and skills in the introductory part of the session; acquiring mathematical language and number concepts through practical activities and using questioning techniques to extend dialogue about the mathematics involved in an activity and begin to develop mental fluency with number. The use of number rhymes, making and playing numeracy games and giving the families access to the Family Numeracy Take Home Packs which were

features of the children's and the joint sessions, went some way to illustrate that mathematics could be a fun, relevant and practical subject.

The pilot project illustrated the extent to which parents are prepared to participate in school based initiatives if they can see a direct benefit for their children. It also showed that children who were part of an intervention programme in which their parents were also involved, made significant gains in terms of attainment.

#### **4.2.1 The impetus to involve parents: a key feature of the family numeracy initiative**

Recent times have seen a renewed emphasis on literacy and numeracy learning and the development of Family Literacy Projects and more recently the introduction of Family Numeracy Projects are a direct result of this call to raise standards and change lifelong attitudes to learning. As long ago as 1982, the objective to creating a more positive attitude to mathematics was identified in the Cockcroft Report. In the Preliminary Report of the Numeracy Task Force, (Reynolds, 1998, p50) one of the most important recommendations concerns changing attitudes to mathematics by involving parents:

*"Our recommendations also aim for a supportive climate in which the educational changes can take place - both through the active involvement and support of parents, and by improving the profile of mathematics in society at large."*

This approach also recommended by Anderson (1997) who believes that when a child is supported in their mathematical learning, the learning which then occurs is of a high quality. Atkins, (1998, p21) a basic skills specialist explains that:

*" Numeracy has always come a poor second at home. There is a psychological block telling parents they can't do anything to help, even though they are desperate to. But with the right sort of approach, they can be a tremendous asset which teachers can use."*

Welcoming the advent of family numeracy programme, the Numeracy Task Force (DfEE, 1998b, p 36) advocate that what is needed is *"Something that allows parents and children to improve their numeracy*

*skills together is likely to be more productive, such as activities based in schools, but taking place after school hours with crèche facilities."*

While the family numeracy initiative was intended to '*complement the government's strategy to raise standards in school*' (Brooks, 1998, p13); the impetus to involve parents as a means to achieve this was integral to its success. This was to be achieved by offering opportunities for parents to improve their numeracy skills alongside enabling parents to provide numeracy activities in the home. Informing parents about the content and the nature of their children's learning alongside encouraging parents to support their children's achievement in maths were two further ways in which parents were highlighted as essential in the success of this initiative. By raising awareness of the importance of raising numeracy skills for community regeneration was described as another key feature.

#### **4.2.2 Findings from the Pilot Programmes:**

A framework for the evaluation of the pilot programme was established by the Basic Skills Agency with the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). However, three main findings from the pilot have particular resonance for this study. Brooks (1998) found that the children who took part in the Family Numeracy pilot programme made significantly more progress than the children in the control group. Similarly, there was a statistically significant increase in a wide variety of numeracy related tasks at home during the course and parents reported increased contact with their child's class teacher by the end of the course and reported to be more involved with school activities and supporting in class.

The Basic Skills Agency commissioned a follow-up study of participants involved in the pilot programmes in an attempt to investigate the extent to which the gains from the pilot programme had been sustained. Family Numeracy Adds On (2002), a small –scale study involving 63 family numeracy children and 61 comparison children. Two key findings revealed that:

*"Family numeracy children were superior to comparison children in the support they received from their families, attendance, and competence with mental calculation"*

and that:

*“Family numeracy children’s parents were twice as likely as those of comparison children to be involved with their child’s school.”*

*(Brooks and Hutchinson, 2002, p02)*

Taking the key findings into account, the authors concluded that while the findings need to be view as tentative, they *‘seem to show that the family numeracy children’s educational chances were superior to those of the comparison children.’* (ibid, p07)

#### **4.2.3 Family Numeracy Overview: Key concepts**

The essential concept which drove the family numeracy initiative was the imperative to involve parents. The three aims for the family numeracy initiative which included encouraging home support for numeracy development (*involving parents*), providing a quick start and immediate gain in numeracy (*raising standards*) and offering parents a re-start with their own numeracy learning (*promoting social inclusion and widening participation*); all had congruence with the governments’ three key objectives for education. Based in areas of *‘disadvantage’*, and subject to short-term funding, mathematical teaching and learning was another key concept of the initiative. This was also closely linked to changing attitudes to mathematics. Although not mentioned directly in the findings from the Family Numeracy programmes (Brooks, 1998 and 2002); one of the over-riding themes of the initiative is a concern about the compensatory approach such an initiative offers parents (Gerwitz, 2001, Hall, 1990).

#### **4.3 Education Action Zones: an initiative**

Twenty Five Education Action Zones were designated by the government to begin in September 1998, and Zone activities began in January 1999. Designed as partnerships intended to tackle entrenched problems of underachievement and social exclusion in disadvantaged areas, Education Action Zones came with the funding of £750,000 per year for three years with the expectation that Matched Funding of £250,000 per year would be secured by each Zone.

Power, et al (2004, p456) considers that “...while the ‘policy trajectory’ of EAZs may have been short, they have played a significant role in the development of New Labour education policy.”

EAZ’s were formed to provide a link between raising educational achievement and the regeneration of communities. Easen (2000, p57) considers that:

*“It is this strong undertow of making connections to the broader policy agenda of social exclusion and the regeneration of communities that offers a particular challenge to many of the EAZ’s.”*

It is clear that the EAZ objective to consult with and involve parents links to Diamond’s (2004) notion of community participation and community capacity building. While Schuftan (1996) provides a model to explain the ways in which change can come within a community at individual, group and organizational level, Diamond (2004, p188) argues for a shift in power *‘held by a managerial elite to one which is much more reflective of the community itself’*.

Similarly, the EAZ objective to *‘empower people and communities’* through engaging *‘local people in the development and delivery of policies’* connects to New Labour’s agenda for the ‘modernization’ of government (Cabinet Office, 1999).

#### **4.3.1 The impetus to involve parents: a key feature of the EAZ initiative**

EAZ guidance encouraged zones to experiment with innovative new programmes and ways of working. Although no two zones were exactly alike, features of ‘good practice’ were adopted by many zones. Although, Dickson et al (2001) advise caution about comparing zone programmes, encouraging parental involvement was a common objective across zones. As Powley, (2001, p160) discusses, the rationale behind this attempt to work with parents is based on *‘...the grounds that the task of raising educational standards is likely to be facilitated if parents and the wider community are supportive of learning.’*

The EAZ in this study adopted the philosophy of involving parents from the family numeracy project and adapted the model to suit the zone schools. The EAZ had as one of its three central themes in its action plan *‘Partnerships with Other Stakeholders’*. Within this theme was the objective *‘partnership*

*with parents to develop pupils' learning.* This work was the focus of many evaluation and inspection reports. The Ofsted inspection of the EAZ involved in this study (2001, p04) found that:

*"The high quality of some of the zone's work is shown, for example, in the action taken to improve teaching and learning and to develop family literacy and numeracy."*

The value of partnerships with parents is a particular focus of the report (2001, p11):

*"Partnerships with parents are a strength of the zone and a result of the priority given to establishing good relationships and providing zone-wide activities that foster parental interest in education. Many parents, having completed a family numeracy course with their reception-aged children, have continued into adult education courses in subjects such as mathematics, English, ICT, positive parenting and first-aid. The zone is instrumental in enabling good access to these adult education courses. In addition the zone organizes specific events for parents including literacy and numeracy conferences. The opportunities are greatly appreciated by parents."*

An NUT funded research project carried out by Price Waterhouse Coopers (2001) visited the EAZ in this study and examined the family numeracy project which had been incorporated and adapted for the EAZ. Theakston et al, (2001, p187) found that a strength of this particular EAZ in terms of support for zone programmes was *'significantly enhanced by the creation of EAZ posts in key areas such as numeracy, literacy and family links'*. The authors of the report go on to discuss the effectiveness of these posts being filled by candidates working in zone schools.

*"Although advertised to applicants across the LEA, the successful candidates were all from zone schools. Their local knowledge, very recent classroom experience and subject expertise have been crucial in giving teachers the confidence to identify their individual needs for support, for specific skills training and general professional development."*

(Theakston, Robinson and Bangs, 2001, p187)

The acknowledgement that local knowledge will empower the communities is not a new one and is a theme taken up Simpson and Cieslik, (2002, p119):

*“The main objective of EAZ’s is to improve educational standards, and they are expected to do this by adopting a ‘partnership’ and decentralized model of governance which can ‘engage’ greater numbers of ‘local people’ in the development and management of the strategy for each zone. They are meant to be about addressing a prior ‘tendency to parachute solutions in from outside rather than engaging local communities.’ ”*

Theakston et al (2001, p119) provides a detailed account of the way in which family numeracy was embedded into each zone school. The intention was to develop the initial family numeracy project which had one practitioner delivering the initiative; into a family numeracy project which benefited from having a teacher based in each school trained to deliver it, thus ensuring sustainability was built into it. However, Theakston et al, (2001, p196) found that teachers who had benefited from the training indicated that *“whilst increased high quality professional development opportunities have been a major achievement of the EAZ policy, a significant proportion of teachers working in EAZ schools feel that they do not ‘own’ the initiative”*.

As Powley (2001, p161) describes zones were initially supposed to be groundbreaking and alongside the imperative to drive up educational standards, it was expected that they would also *‘promote the related strategies of social inclusion and regeneration.’* As Power and Gerwitz (2001) explain *“The populations targeted by EAZ’s suffer economic, cultural and associational injustices.”*

The Ofsted inspection report (2001, p11) of the EAZ involved in this study, did however, consider the wider agendas.

*“The family literacy and numeracy scheme has developed quickly and extensively. The scheme has many very good features. It is monitored thoroughly, promotes social inclusion, and is sustainable, as its methods have become embedded within the practice of the schools”*

#### 4.3.2 Disseminating Good Practice

Another key feature of EAZ's was the way in which zones were charged with disseminating good practice almost as soon as they were set up. Powley, (2001, p164) is scornful of this approach and argues that:

*"It seemed to me an appalling act of arrogance to pretend that zones exemplified a wealth of good practice before they had even established their own credentials or earned a degree of credibility!"*

However, the Ofsted inspection of the EAZ in this study (2001, p13) acknowledged that the family numeracy initiative had been adapted from a previous successful model and reported that:

*'More formal dissemination of some of the initiatives, such as family learning, is very good throughout the zone, across the LEA and more widely.'*

And that:

*"The effectiveness of programmes that support early learning and encourage family literacy and the re-engagement of adults with learning is very good; dissemination in this field is excellent." (p.14)*

#### 4.3.3 EAZ Overview: Key concepts

A key concept which provided the impetus for the development of family learning within the EAZ was the imperative to involve parents. Theme three in the EAZ action plan '*Developing Partnership with other Stake-holders*' aimed to *help combat social exclusion, support family learning and help raise parents' expectations*' (DfEE, February 1999.) The theme included the following objectives:

*'partnership with parents to develop pupils' learning.'* (involving parents), *'pupils baseline math score improved to equivalent of one year's progress within ten weeks'* (raising standards) and *'promote the related strategies of social inclusion and regeneration.'* (promoting social inclusion) and *'to support parents in their own learning by providing opportunities to access college courses on school premises'*

*(widening participation)*. All four objectives were designed to correspond with the governments' three key objectives for education.

While the short-term nature of the funding and the idea of sourcing matched funding from industry was also a key feature of the initiative within the EAZ, the promotion of programmes which could be sustained by zone schools was an equal player in EAZ policy. In particular, the EAZ in this study attempted to circumnavigate the issue of short term funding by training teachers within their own schools to deliver the family learning programmes. Interestingly, in terms of this particular study, efforts to address both issues of short term funding and partnership with parents have links to notions of empowerment. It could be suggested that both parents and professionals involved in family numeracy in the EAZ were empowered through their involvement in family learning. Empowerment therefore, could also be listed as a key feature of the EAZ initiative. A further key feature of the EAZ initiative is also central to the findings from this study. The way in which key personnel with local knowledge, recent classroom experience and subject expertise were charged with developing family links and relationships with parents has resonance with government policy which promotes the idea that such people will drive the agendas forward. There is the idea that this approach will go some way to meeting the three key objectives for education.

Dissemination of good practice was also an integral part of the EAZ's plan. The Curriculum Development Officer working within the zone was also expected to deliver CPD for teachers and support staff as part of the LEA's provision of short courses and CPD. More widely, the successful initiatives within the EAZ were disseminated at National conferences.

#### **4.4 Sure Start: an initiative**

In 1997 the government conducted an extensive review of early-years provision. The review found that the earliest years in life are the most important for child development; early development is extremely vulnerable to environmental influences; multiple disadvantage for young children is a severe and growing problem; disadvantage in the early years increases the chances of social exclusion later in life; the quality of service provision for young children and their families varies enormously across

localities and districts and that services for the under-fours, an age group which tended to get missed out from other government programmes are particularly poor. (Glass, 1999, p261)

Consequently, Sure Start, a government initiative set up in 1999 with a £450 million budget over three years initially to cover 5% of children under the age of four aimed to improve the health and well being of families and children before and after birth so that children are given the greatest chance of the 'best start' in life so that they may flourish in the future. Recent initiatives such as Sure Start and Children's Centre's work on the premise that early intervention will ensure that the children involved will experience a sound start to their early education. Sure Start provision, based predominantly in areas of economic and social hardship has, as its aims, to support children, parents and communities through the integration of early education, childcare, health and family support services.

Sure Start as an area based initiative is recognised as one of New Labour's key social policy interventions (Moss, 2004, p633).

*"The social significance of the Sure Start programme, in retrospect, may therefore hinge on whether it proves to have been just another targeted intervention; or the precursor to a new and comprehensive system of early childhood services."*

Located in a tradition of early intervention, emphasis is placed on programmes being community driven, involving parents and listening to local people. It therefore presents a further adjunct to the 'Third Way' approach (Giddens, 1998).

#### **4.4.1 The impetus to involve parents: a key feature of the Sure Start initiative**

Sure Start as an initiative, is concerned with meeting four key national objectives of improving social and emotional development, improving health, improving the ability to learn and lastly to strengthen families and communities. All three initiatives involved in this study have the imperative to involve parents, but it is this notion of the objective of '*strengthening families and communities*' which perhaps poses the most interesting challenge. Further guidance is provided on meeting this objective:

*“In particular by involving families in building the community’s capacity to sustain the programme and thereby create pathways out of poverty.”*

In the same way, HM Treasury (2000) required Sure Start programmes to report on their progress towards the achievement of the target of a 12 per cent reduction in the proportion of young children (aged 0-4) living in households where- no one is working.

One of the key features of Sure Start local programmes is partnership nationally and locally. Parents are at the heart of this idea of partnership. (DfES, 2002, p 22). Another key principle is that programmes must *‘involve parents, grandparents and other carers in ways that build on their existing strengths’* (DfES, 2002, p 7.)

#### **4.4.2 Notions of partnership and empowerment**

Ball (1994) noted that the issue of partnership is seen in terms of ‘parental involvement’ and advises that a ‘triangle of care’ formed by parents, professionals and the community, with parents at the apex, encourages the discussion to centre on the relationship between parents and professionals.

As Sennett (2003) explains, an important feature of Sure Start is the changing relationships and boundaries. Explicit attention to the dynamics of partnership working including how to support parents in different working relationships is key to the professional role.

#### **4.4.3 Sure Start Overview: Key concepts**

A key concept within the design of Sure Start programmes has been the imperative to involve parents. Sure Start as an initiative, is concerned with meeting four key national objectives of improving social and emotional development, improving health, improving the ability to learn and lastly to strengthen families and communities. Although ‘couched’ in ‘friendly’ language, all four national objectives correspond with the governments’ three key objectives for education.

Key features within the Sure Start programme involved in this study included the idea to strengthen families and communities through notions of partnership with parents and through the empowerment of parents.

#### 4.5 Overview: a mini meta-analysis

This chapter has examined the nature of the three initiatives involved in this study in an attempt to track the rationale behind their inception, development and impact. In the overview of each initiative, the use of a mini meta-analysis has been useful as it provided a way to discuss similarities between the themes emerging from each initiative and then highlight those themes which are distinctive to each initiative. Integral to all three initiatives is the involvement of parents. Similarly, common to all three initiatives are concerns about offering a compensatory approach (Hall, 1996); short-term funding issues, quick fixes and a commitment to disseminating good practice. One of the important similarities with all three initiatives involves the notion of employing practitioners who have good *'local knowledge'* (Theakston, et al, 2001). However, distinctive to the family numeracy initiative, is the emphasis on both teaching and learning and changing cultural attitudes to mathematics. Distinctive to the EAZ initiative is the notion of empowerment of both professionals involved in *'developing partnerships with other Stake-holders'* and parents who are *'more confident about their own skills'* (EAZ Action Plan, p 70). According to Hannon and Fox (2005, p3), The Sure Start initiative with its aim to *'strengthen families and communities'* reflects:

*'Not only a recognition of the relationships between poverty, family circumstances, health and preschool development but also the desirability of action at the level of communities.'*

Alongside analysing the emerging literature surrounding the three initiatives examined in this study, this chapter also serves to contextualising the study. The 'stories' of family numeracy, the EAZ and Sure Start within this small community is outlined to provide a historical and situational context for the research approach which was used in this study. In the following chapter the research framework is outlined.

## Chapter 5: A Research Framework

### 5.0 Introduction

The literature reviewed in the previous three chapters reveals that the phenomenon of involving parents in area- based early years' initiatives has been a focus of both government policy and professional practice. However, while research into this area is beginning to be published, such studies do not appear to take account of the perspectives of those families who have been subjected to attempts to engage parents in those communities labelled 'disadvantaged'. It is this very phenomenon which I consider makes this particular study unique.

The suspicion of an emerging phenomenon of a new paradigm of 'parental involvement' provided the 'testable prediction' (Fraser et al, 2004), or the hypothesis of this research. This hypothesis, therefore, provided a starting point for this study, and also enabled a suitable research framework and approach incorporating appropriate methodologies for the two key phases of this research to be designed.

While three literature reviews serve to contextualize the foci of the research, this research was not designed simply to consider the benefits and/or disadvantages of early years' area- based initiatives *per se*, but rather to raise questions and challenge assumptions underpinning the current rhetoric about parental involvement, raising standards, widening participation and promoting social inclusion.

This chapter begins with an exploration of how the research question was formulated. As this research employed the use of an interpretive paradigm, an exploration of the challenges and opportunities of working within an interpretive paradigm is discussed. The research strategy and a rationale for two additions to the original research plan are outlined. Essentially a study which borrows approaches and techniques from ethnography, this chapter draws upon the work of Ball (1990) who discusses the way in which '*reflexivity connects dialectically the social and technical trajectories of ethnographic research.*' Reflexivity in this study is also discussed in terms of personal bias and objectivity. Reflective bracketing (Ahern, 1999) was employed during both the design and process of this study as a means to ensure objectivity and is discussed further in this chapter.

Summarizing the contribution of ethics to the research design and reflecting upon a previous study (McKenna, 1998) which provided the impetus for this research, several key concepts are discussed. The use of Grounded Theory (Glazer and Strauss, 1967); Research as Praxis (Lather, 1986), Reciprocity (Lather, 1986), Theoretical Sampling (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), Progressive Focusing (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and Open Coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) as proposed methods for analysing the data, contributed to the design and the process of carrying out the research as well as providing a framework for analysing the data. This section aims to provide a clear rationale for the relationship between my research question and the strategy, paradigm, approach and method of collecting data to carry out this research. The chapter ends with a discussion of the research approach and introduces the research methods used in phases one and two of the study.

Finally this chapter ends with the presentation of a diagrammatical representation of the research process and this is offered as a model for future use. Although this research does not claim to be generalisable in terms of results, I propose that the methodology could be employed in future studies. This research strategy and its methods could be used in similar communities and while the results might not be replicated, I propose that the methodology within this research process would be a useful model.

### **5.1 Proposed Research Question**

In an attempt to examine the impact of initiatives on one small community, the following research question was formulated:

*What impact does serial involvement in government initiatives, which uses parental involvement as a mechanism to raise standards, widen participation, and promote social inclusion have on the children and families and on notions of community/area regeneration?*

In a study which encounters and aims to critically analyse such diverse concepts as parental involvement, community regeneration, raising standards, widening participation and notions of social inclusion, the formulation of this research question was crucial. Although it took much angst and wrangling to formulate such a focused research question, I really did consider the time and effort an

investment. The research question was always at the fore-front of my mind when interviewing participants or critically analyzing literature. In this way, I consider that my study was clearly focused.

## **5.2 Hypothesis generating research: working within an interpretive paradigm**

As has already been stated earlier in this study, the existence and indeed the suspicion of an emerging phenomenon of 'initiative overload' provided me with "..... *the hypothesis as tentative guess, or intuitive hunch, as to what is going on in a situation.*"

(Robson, 1993:28)

As I adopted an interpretive approach to this research, where theories and concepts arise from the study, coming after data collection rather than before it, this research was therefore '*hypothesis generating*' research (Robson, 1993). By working longitudinally, through the initiation and implementation of the three initiatives of family numeracy, EAZ and Sure Start, the context underpinned the whole of the study and the government initiatives became the mechanism to understand the context. In the same way, deep immersion in the community provided the opportunity to investigate observations of events and parental activity more systematically. Providing a '*theoretical framework to research*' (Sarantakos, 1998, p38), this research drew upon the approaches of interpretive research in an effort '*to interpret and understand the actors' reasons for social action, the way in which they construct their lives and the meanings they attach to them as well as to comprehend the social context of social action.*'

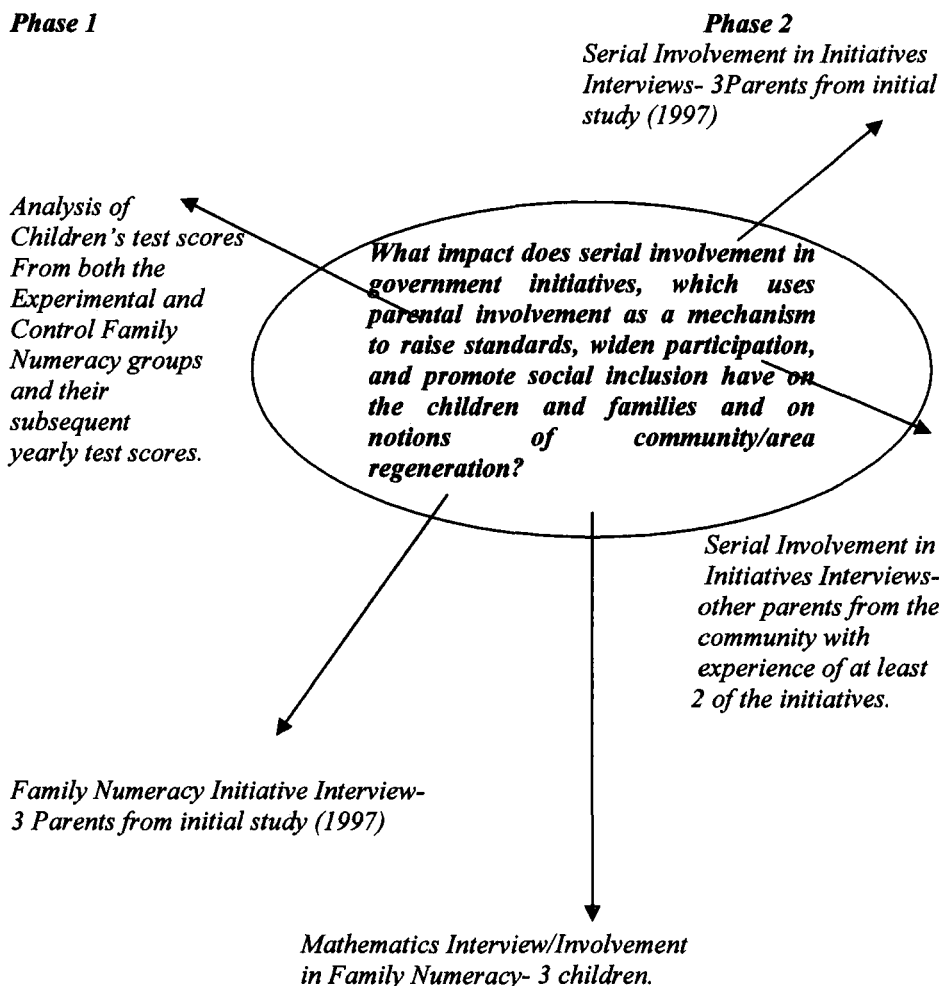
Sarantakos describes the way interpretive researchers want to know what people think about their world, to establish their perspectives and then make interpretation of these perspectives through analysis. Interpretive researchers draw out themes as their research progresses. Therefore, the interpretive paradigm was the most appropriate overarching framework to undertake this study, as the participants were required to reflect upon their experiences of involvement in initiatives and articulate their thoughts and feelings through semi-structured interviews. This paradigm allowed interpretation of participants' perceptions through subsequent analysis. In doing so, however, it should be noted that it is not always possible to be completely objective. The perceptions applied to this research are

*'inevitably coloured by expectations and predispositions that are brought to the research and by the language which mediates what is known through observation.'* (Denscombe, 2002, p20).

### 5.3 A Research Design Plan

In order to conduct my research in a logical manner, a research design plan as suggested by Denzin and Lincoln (2002, p22) was formulated. Upon reflection, this simplistic first plan reflects my cognisance about research processes at the time.

The following figure illustrates the original planned research design:



**Figure 5.1: Original Research Design Plan**

However, as the research strategy developed, and as the use of progressive focusing (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) evolved, changes were made to the original research strategy and an amended research plan and proposed time frame was developed to incorporate the changes and additions to the research strategy.

<b>Proposed Time Frame</b>	
January 2005- October 2007	Literature Search
March 2005- July 2005	<p>Phase One of the Research- Data Collection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) First interview with three parents (mothers) involved in the initial family numeracy study</li> <li>b) Analyse children's maths test scores from both the experimental and control family numeracy groups and their subsequent yearly test scores.</li> <li>c) Interview three children from the family numeracy group</li> </ul>
June 2005- September 2005	<p>Phase Two of the Research – Data Collection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Second interview with the three parents (mothers) involved in the initial family numeracy study- Focus: 'Life Histories'</li> <li>b) Third interview with family numeracy parents (mothers) Focus- serial involvement in early years area based initiatives, issues emerging from research</li> <li>c) Interview four parents (mothers) from the community with experience of at least two early years area based initiatives. Focus: 'Life Histories'</li> <li>d) Interview four parents (mothers) from the community with experience of at least two early years area based initiatives. Focus- serial involvement in early years area based initiatives, issues emerging from research</li> <li>e) An addition to the research was the inclusion of 2 sets of interviews with the fathers group to elicit the views of 8 members of the fathers group.</li> </ul> <p>The First interview – 'life histories'.</p> <p>The Second interview to examine serial involvement in early year's area based initiatives, issues emerging from research.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>f) Interview the professionals involved in three area based initiatives. 'Vested Interest Interviews'</li> </ul>

	<p>Family Numeracy: Head teacher of the primary school in which the pilot family numeracy programme ran. Also interview the adult basic skills tutor from the local college.</p> <p>Education Action Zone: Director of EAZ and Family learning co-ordinator in one primary school.</p> <p>Sure Start: Programme Manager and Community Development worker.</p>
October 2005- October 2006	Analysis of data collected
January 2007- October 2007	Writing up of thesis

**Figure 5.2: Proposed Time Frame**

These additions are discussed in more detail in chapter Six. These informal checklists were used to make sure work was completed in a logical order, but more importantly to make sure all work would be completed in time. Although there were delays to the research at times, the original schedule was adhered to.

A research strategy was formulated consisting of two phases of research. I saw the two phases of research as distinct and yet cumulative and developmental. The first phase of the research which took place during March and July 2005 was designed to revisit the participants from my previous research (McKenna 1998) which examined the impact of the pilot family numeracy initiative. I considered that revisiting and interviewing the participants would serve to 'set the scene' for the second phase of the research which built upon the findings from the original family numeracy pilot parents and children.

It was planned that the family numeracy mothers would be interviewed on three occasions, once in phase one to establish views on their early involvement in family numeracy and on two further occasions in phase two of the research. The focus of the interviews in phase two of the research involved examining the parents' life histories' and establishing their views on the main issues to emerge from the research. The mothers involved in the EAZ and Sure Start were interviewed on two occasions during phase two of the research. Once again, 'life histories' and the three main issues provided the foci. The fathers involved in the Sure Start initiative were also interviewed on two occasions.



	<p>school, work, adult study or leisure time pursuits? What were the substance, form and social context of these significant learning experiences?</p>
<p>Parents from the community with experience of at least two early years area based initiatives: Interview 2</p> <p>(Phase 2: 4 mothers)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) To establish the parents' perspectives with regard to the three issues arising from the research, i.e. communities, labelled as impoverished; the impact of short-term funding and initiatives which seem to fail to be 'joined up'</li> <li>ii) To establish how the parents' involvement contributed to their self development as a parent, the development of parenting skills and their levels of participation</li> <li>iii) To establish the parents perceptions of the contribution of the initiatives to New Labour's three key objectives for education and to what extent</li> <li>iv) To establish the perceptions of need re the community- what type of interventions would be appropriate for their community with regard to community regeneration</li> </ul>
<p>Fathers from the community with initial experience of involvement in an early years area based initiative: Interview 1</p> <p>(Phase 2: 8 fathers)</p>	<p>Life histories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) To establish whether the parents used education in constructing their life courses;</li> <li>ii) To establish ways in which their education and learning experiences have an impact on the formation of individual and group identity, and</li> <li>iii) To uncover the sort of significant experiences the parents had in the different stages of their lives? Did those experiences originate in school, work, adult study or leisure time pursuits? What were the substance, form and social context of these significant learning experiences?</li> </ul>
<p>Fathers from the community with initial experience of involvement in an early years area based initiative: Interview 2</p> <p>(Phase 2: 8 fathers)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) To establish the parents' perspectives with regard to the three issues arising from the research, i.e. communities, labelled as impoverished; the impact of short-term funding and initiatives which seem to fail to be 'joined up'</li> <li>ii) To establish how the parents' involvement contributed to their self development as a parent, the development of parenting skills and their levels of participation</li> </ul>

	<p>iii) To establish the parents perceptions of the contribution of the initiatives to New Labour's three key objectives for education and to what extent</p> <p>iv) To establish the perceptions of need re the community- what type of interventions would be appropriate for their community with regard to community regeneration</p>
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**Figure 5.3: Focus of Parental Interviews**

However, in an attempt to immerse myself with recent government policy and early year's initiatives, my first course of action was to conduct a comprehensive literature review. Examining current literature and research surrounding parental involvement, parenting support, family learning and social policy; the literature reviews also informed the planned interviews. The research question in this study was influenced by experience and literature, enabling the findings from the study to then be compared with the theories drawn from the literature reviews.

#### **5.4 Research Methodology**

In an effort to almost 'paint a picture' with my research as an illustration of what appeared to be happening in this small community, I employed the use of a qualitative research approach. Qualitative methods are not only consistent with the interpretive paradigm, but they are also considered to bring readership to the 'voice' of those surveyed (Edwards, 2004). The idea of creating a montage with my research data had resonance with my research aims and questions. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p5) explain:

*'The qualitative researcher may take on multiple and gendered images....The researcher, in turn, may be seen as....a person who assembles images into montages.'*

As I discuss further in chapters seven and eight, the parents interviewed often provided 'stories' or vignettes to illustrate their thinking. Stories as a research product are recognized as a key feature of interpretive research. As Koch (1998, p1182) suggests '*... research is an interactive process shaped*

*by personal history, biography, gender, social class, race and ethnicity and those of the people in the setting.'*

While this study could not be described as a classic ethnographic study, I certainly adopted an ethnographic approach to conducting the research. In an attempt to characterize the key features of ethnography, Zaharlik (2001) considers that an ethnographer creates social relationships which are often long-term and diffuse. Due to my long term involvement in this community and the development of my relationships with the research participants in this study, this was certainly the case in this study. Zaharlik and Green, (1991) consider that ethnography may provide a depth to research which is often lacking in other approaches. This approach was considered to be appropriate as the emphasis on forms of interaction between researcher and the group were resonant with the research aims. The nature of the pilot Family Numeracy Project and indeed its subsequent expansion into an Education Action Zone lent itself to this kind of analysis. Similarly, the evaluation work conducted in the Sure Start initiative contributed to this research approach. As a style of research, ethnography uses a wide range of methods of data collection including in-depth interviews, observational techniques and analysis of documents, all of which were incorporated into this study.

The research approach therefore, could be considered to be rooted in ethnography due to the 'social' nature of the study and as a consequence of deep integration within this community. As I began to develop a research strategy for my study, Spradley's (1979, p15) notion of '*strategic approach*' appealed to me, as its premise that ethnographic research results in social change but also serves the needs of the culture being studied, had resonance with this study:

*"Strategic research begins with an interest in human problems. These problems suggest needed changes and information needed to make such changes."*

Acknowledging that as a researcher I had a personal influence on the theoretical basis of this study led me to the work of Lather (1986). Lather argues that '*research as praxis*' (Lather, 1986, p.258) shapes both theory and practice. In the Spradley (1979) model of ethnography, theory is grounded in the data. Lather's (1986, p258) work considers that '*research as praxis*' is fundamental in terms of '*the*

*dialectical tension, the interactive, reciprocal shaping of theory and practice.*' She uses the term '*reciprocity*' to discuss the way in which theory emerges through a '*mutual negotiation of meaning and power*'. Where theory is grounded in the data in an ethnographic approach, research as praxis requires the researcher to be openly ideological when considering the data and the theory. This was the basis of this research in the sense that this study was an attempt to describe, understand and search for meaning in a small locality within which three early years area- based initiatives were placed. Although this study could be described as strategic in that it not only sought to gain knowledge about the use of parental involvement as a mechanism to achieve the New Labour government's three key objectives for education; but to do so in order to influence the current critical debate about involving parents and supporting those families from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Lather's (1986) work on reciprocity was considered in the design of this study. The decision to employ reciprocity was based upon two events. Firstly, my experiences and findings from my earlier research (McKenna, 1998) revealed that parents brought their own experiences and issues to shared family learning experiences and that this affected the relationship between the parents and practitioner but also the relationship between the parents and the children in a learning situation. Secondly, in an attempt to 'be openly ideological when considering data alongside theory' (Lather, 1986) I considered that if I was to build upon my previous research interest and develop my research in parental engagement work, I should grasp this opportunity to use reciprocity with the potential to influence social change. As Hammersley (1993, p204) explains:

*"What this means is that the educative researcher must take an openly political stance in considering what projects to approach and must push for issues of social justice and equality."*

It was quite clear to me in the early stages of this study that the political imperative to involve parents had the potential to be shaped by those practitioners and researchers who had been involved in engaging parents. In my professional life, I have two main interests. The first of these is working with parents to ensure that both children and parents reach their full potential. This is a longstanding pre-occupation since my time as an early year's worker in the early 1980s. This interest is my main

research focus and has resulted in the publication of academic articles, research reports, articles, briefing papers and training materials. It has also been the foci of both my masters and my doctoral research. The second interest is in providing learning opportunities for paraprofessionals who are engaged in the work of supporting children and families. My main focus since working in Higher Education since 2001 has been concerned with the design and development of training programmes and training materials to support those paraprofessionals working in the emerging Children's Workforce. Therefore, it was imperative that I entered into a reciprocal relationship with participants of the research and the emerging parental engagement theory and literature to further develop the shape of parental engagement work.

The concept of reciprocity was adopted in my attempts to introduce reciprocity between myself as the researcher and the participants in the research. In the same way, I attempted to introduce reciprocity between the emerging data and the theory. This is discussed further in chapters 7 and 8 in terms of how reciprocity was interpreted and operationalised in this study and furthermore how it affected analysis of the data

This study also offered the opportunity to analyse quantitative data from the baseline assessments, which were carried out with the family numeracy children at the beginning and at the end of the course and their subsequent scores in their annual mathematics tests.

Whilst acknowledging that "*...multiple methods do not constitute a panacea for all methodological ills*" (Robson, 1993:69), I planned to use a variety of research methods and employed the eclectic approach which is characteristic of ethnographic research. (Zaharlik and Green, 1991). As Zaharlik (2001, p120) maintains, the use of an eclectic approach enables the accuracy of the data to be checked. Similarly, this "*..enhances the scope, density, and clarity of constructs developed during the course of the investigation and assists in correcting biases that occur when the ethnographer is the only observer of the phenomena under investigation.*"

While Mays and Pope (1995, p 109) summarise the main criticisms of qualitative approaches in terms of researcher bias and lack of reproducibility, 'deep immersion' in the community was considered to be

an advantage rather than an indication of researcher bias. Similarly, the argument that the qualitative approach does not allow for reproducibility or for generalizations to be made is questionable in this case. Ball (2003, p33) discusses the ways in which the research role needs to be '*constructed responsively and appropriately in relation to the setting under study.*' He maintains that this self-conscious engagement with the world is what defines the process of ethnography and that this provides technical rigour in the ethnographic process resulting in the '*conscious and deliberate linking of the social process of engagement in the field with the technical rigour of data collection and the decisions that that linking involves.*'

Ball (1990) employs the term '*reflexivity*' to describe the way in which the social and technical trajectories connect during ethnographic research. Crotty (1996) expands upon the notion of reflexivity to describe the way in which '*bracketing*' prevents researchers to allow their assumptions to shape the data collection process therefore imposing their own understanding and constructions on the data. Ahern (1999, p 408) also considers that bracketing is a means of demonstrating the validity of data collection and analytical processes. She describes reflexive bracketing as '*an iterative, reflexive journey that entails preparation, action, evaluation, and systematic feedback about the effectiveness of the process.*'

A process of reflexivity was applied throughout the transcription and analysis of the interviews. This was particularly useful when applied to the children's interviews as there were only three children interviewed. When this process was applied to the children's interviews, an inductive procedure was used to interpret the meanings made by the children of their experiences of an early years area based initiative. This enabled me to construct an understanding of their experiences from their perspectives. Five primary concepts emerged in relation to the children's experiences. When assigned to the data produced from the three interviews and compared across the data sets, further themes were identified which enabled me to refine meaning and which in turn reflected common and individual perspectives. A record of the progress of the study was made in papers written for research conferences and symposia, where I presented reflections on the methodology and the data were presented for comment and criticism (McKenna, 2003, 2005)

In 2003 as preparation for a paper presented at the BERA annual conference, I began the process of reflexive bracketing. Reflexive bracketing at this early stage in the research process, involved an exploration of the ethical and methodological issues in this research. Reflexivity served to enable me to reflect the development in the understanding of researching children's perspectives on their experiences of an early year's area based initiative. This was an iterative and grounded process which not only represented the common experiences amongst the children but also retained the individuality of each of the three children's experiences in subsequently presenting the data. This is examined in more detail in chapter seven.

A consideration of personal value systems and an acknowledgement of areas where objectivity was an issue were vital when setting out to design this research and perhaps more importantly when analyzing data. As Ball (1993, p.43) explains:

*"The presence, the effect, and the biases and selections of the researcher cannot be removed from qualitative research."*

Ahern suggests post- analysis is an essential part of the process of reflexive bracketing and suggests that researchers need to consider whether to write in the first or third person and to ask themselves the question why? There is an assumption that researchers' use of the third person reflects their assumption of objectivity. I concur with Ball (1993, p46) whose preference is to use 'I' when writing of qualitative research.

*"To write the researcher out of the report is to deny the dependency of the data on the researcher's presence."*

Ahern also suggests that if a researcher identifies bias that may be affecting data collection or analysis, the researcher has actually become a reflexive researcher.

#### **5.4.1 The Ethnographic Interview: the main source of data collection**

I chose to use the ethnographic interview (Spradley, 1979) as one of my main data collection techniques as it is a technique I have used successfully many times. The interviews were designed to enable parents and professionals involved in this study, to *'tell their story'* (Koch, 1998) and interview schedules were constructed based upon the Spradley model of a semi-structured interview (1979, p55) where the ethnographic interview is compared with *'a more familiar speech event, the friendly conversation.'*

In true ethnographic style, in an attempt to 'immerse' myself in the culture of the community, I conducted the interviews with the mothers who had been involved in both the family numeracy and the EAZ initiatives in the participants' homes. The fathers from the Sure Start initiative were interviewed during several of their Sunday morning sessions at the Children's Centre. Although the fathers were not in their natural setting as such, I considered that they were in a natural setting in terms of the setting was where they regularly attended the group. I consider myself fortunate that I was able to conduct the majority of the interviews in the homes of the participants. It was important for me to be able to see and talk to the children and parents in their natural settings.

Recognizing that each social group has a set of elaborate rules for interpreting their experiences within their culture, Spradley, (1979, p05) provides a very good definition of the role 'culture' plays in communities. He suggests that it *'refers to the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behaviour.'* The concept of culture as developing a shared knowledge, therefore also takes into account shared feelings and attitudes.

There were three main influences on the design of the interview schedules. The interviews were based upon both Spradley's (1979) model and the assurance therein that the ethnographic interview considers *'stories as the research product'* (Koch 1998). Similarly, the inclusion of the 'life history' aspect of the interview process (Antikainen, 1988) recognized that previous experiences and the culture of the participants would have an impact on the perceptions of participants involved in this research.

As has already been stated, in total thirty three interviews were conducted with parents from the community. The use of multiple in-depth interviews (Bibby, 2001) with the parents involved in this

study, resulted in each parent being interviewed on more than one occasion, (3 Family Numeracy mothers x 3 interviews ) Education Action Zone (2 mothers x 2 interviews) and Sure Start Parents (2 mothers and 8 fathers x 2 interviews). Six further interviews were conducted with managers and practitioners involved in the initiatives. Alongside the three children's interviews, therefore, in total forty two interviews were conducted in the course of this research.

### **5.5 The contribution of ethics to the research strategy**

In order to be granted permission to proceed, ethical approval was sought from Durham University Ethics Committee. The increasing recognition of adopting an ethical code is particularly significant in terms of this piece of research as I considered my responsibility to the research process indicative of my integrity as a researcher. With the publication of the United Nations Convention on Human Rights and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989), researchers have been made aware of the need to '*understand the ethical questions and practices which flow from support for these international legal agreements.*' (Aubrey et al, 2000, p160).

Alongside directives from the United Nations convention, three other main sources were employed in designing the ethical aspect of the research strategy. All four sources were used to prepare for ethical approval. Using the British Educational Research Association Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004), to help me design an ethical code not only served to provide a prompt throughout the research process, but ensured that the ethical code framed this study. Alderson (1995) maintains that there are three main issues to consider in ethics focussing on duties, rights and harm/benefit.

However, the BERA guidelines also urge researchers to consider respect for the person, the knowledge, democratic values, the quality of educational research and academic freedom. A paper presented at the BERA annual conference in Edinburgh (McKenna, 2003), written prior to commencing this research, provided a consideration of possible methodological issues which carrying out this research would present. The table presented below outlines the way in which my three main considerations were categorized according to Alderson's (1995) criteria and the BERA (2004) guidelines. Using the BERA guidance (2004), the three methodological issues arising from the previously stated paper (2003) and

Alderson's (1995) three criteria as a checklist, the ethical aspect of the research framework was designed.

<b>Methodological Issues</b>	<b>Alderson's (1995) Criteria</b>	<b>BERA (2004) Guidelines</b>
Would deep immersion in the research due its longitudinal nature affect my objectivity as a researcher?	duty	the person, the quality of educational research and academic freedom
When does conversation become research?	rights of participants	the person, the knowledge, democratic values
Measuring the measurable or measuring the meaningful?	duty to the research design	the knowledge, democratic values, the quality of educational research and academic freedom

**Figure 5.4: Ethical Checklist**

As Lacey (1993) explains, the process of examining one's own methodology in a piece of work is integral to any piece of research and provides an internal and external critique of methodology. In carrying out this research, I hoped to examine the way in which my own values and preoccupations fed into the research. This was developed and refined during the process of the research.

Due to my own professional involvement in the initiatives in this community over a number of years, three methodological issues emerged. Firstly as I made the transition from non-participant observer to participant observer, deeply immersed in this research, I was concerned that my objectivity as a researcher may be affected. Secondly, because of community integration, I had qualitative data in the form of revelations from the adults involved about their perceptions of the various initiatives, which I would not have considered asking them, presenting me with the dilemma: when does conversation become research? Thirdly, I had quantitative data in the form of test results for the children involved and while illuminating; this presented a further dilemma for the researcher: should the research measure the measurable or measure the meaningful?

### **5.5.1 Methodological Issue: Objectivity as a researcher.**

When embarking upon this research I sought advice about my three main methodological issues from colleagues. Two conflicting views emerged which reflected the first methodological issue identified in my research. The first view cautioned against carrying out research solely in one community and some

colleagues advised a consideration to widen the study to examine early years area based initiatives in other areas of the country arguing that it would be difficult to maintain objectivity due to deep immersion in the study and indeed the community. However, Walford (2001) argues that researcher subjectivity is not really the issue and must be simply viewed as an *'inevitable feature of the research act'*. Denscombe (1995) believes that the ethnographer is *'his or her own primary source of data'* and as a result subjectivity is inevitable.

The second view concurred with my initial thoughts that the very fact that I was deeply immersed in this community, made the kind of bias I had 'right', and that this would enable me to open up the whole area of recent government policy aimed at supporting families through the provision of early years area based initiatives. This reinforced Gall, Borg and Gall's (2006) claim that:

*"A study that provokes deeply into the characteristics of a small sample often provides more knowledge than a study that attacks the same problem by collecting only shallow information of a large sample."*

Ball (1990, p43) considers that the success of a piece of ethnographic research depends upon the skills of the researcher and that: *"The presence, the effect, and the biases and selections of the researcher cannot be removed from qualitative research."*

### **5.5.2 Methodological Issue: When does conversation become research?**

Access to many of the parents in this community through my three different roles enabled me to gather a rich source of data. Due to their initial involvement in family numeracy some of the parents began to recognize the potential for personal growth development alongside 'giving their child a head start'. A key question involved whether this context could be conveyed as an integral part of the research findings. Statistics are informative but I had the wider qualitatively informed picture too, in the form of evidence of impact on individual parents. Using interview data from 2004, I hoped to establish the parents' perspective on what the last ten years of serial initiative introduction has been like and to uncover whether early involvement of parents in the family numeracy project a precursor to longer-term involvement in community activities?

I had qualitative data in the form of revelations from the adults involved about their perceptions of the various initiatives, which I would not have considered asking them, presenting me with the dilemma: when does conversation become research? The work of Koch (1998) was particularly useful at this point. In the same way that I considered whether conversation could be considered to be a valid research product, Koch (1998, p. 1189) poses the question ‘Telling Stories: Is it really research?’ In her work researching nursing practice, she maintains that it is the stories which ‘*make nursing practice visible*’ (p.1183). This work enabled me to consider the ethnographic interviews, which actually felt like conversations, as research. Koch, (1998, p.1189) states that:

*“..careful, reflective, systematic study of phenomena or experience taken to advance human understanding can count as research.”*

### **5.5.3 Methodological Issue: Measuring the measurable or measuring the meaningful?**

The study for this thesis builds upon previous work, which involved the testing of children’s mathematical ability upon entry to reception, the attendance of parents and children on a ten- week Family Numeracy course, and a re-testing of the children’s mathematical ability at the end of the course. For the purposes of that research, there was also the existence of a control group of children who did not experience the pilot family numeracy programme.

My previous research used quantitative data which was gathered during the pilot family numeracy programme. In an attempt to answer the broader more qualitative question: “Does Parental Partnership in Mathematics for Early Years Children Influence their Parents’ Understanding of How to Support the Children’s Mathematical Learning?” (McKenna, 1998); the children were tested pre and post intervention using the then mathematical components of the local authority’s Baseline Assessment.

As the Basic Skills Agency’s (1998) family numeracy evaluation advised that the impact should be measured by assessing the progress of the participating children’s numeracy competence compared to a control group of children with the closest match for age, experience and background possible, the research design used in the initial study (1997) consisted of the following tools:

**Stratified Random Sampling:** The research technique of stratified random sampling was used to provide twelve reception children for the experimental group. The children were assessed using the mathematical scales of the baseline assessment. The scales measured children's competence in using and understanding number and using and understanding mathematical language. In an effort to target the intervention at those children most at risk of under attaining in mathematics, I identified the children within the lowest strata of the spread of scores, i.e. 1-2, 2-3, 3-4 etc; the maximum score being 8. I then randomly selected the first twelve children who were to be included in the experimental group, proportional to the number in the sample.

**Convenience Sampling:** Because of the nature of the design of my research (I needed to match) another technique was employed to gather the children in the control group. The children in the control group were chosen by taking the first child who matched the criteria (age, gender, test score) for matching with the child from the experimental group. An analysis of the mathematical test scores of pilot children and control group children was then carried out.

**Matched Pairs Design:** The Basic Skills Agency advised that I matched each child in one group (experimental) with a similar child in another group (control). The matched pairs design allowed me to be confident that the two groups were roughly similar before exposure to a treatment, in this case the intervention of the family numeracy project.

**Parent Questionnaires:** In the 1997 study, parents were given questionnaires in an effort to find out more about the parents involved in the study and their relevant mathematical experiences. The results of the questionnaire were to be used to highlight three parents with negative attitudes to mathematics which I followed throughout the course. These parents were subsequently interviewed at the beginning and the end of the course.

**The Ethnographic Interview:** The purpose of the 1997 interview was not only to outline the project and the parents' role but also to ascertain their feelings about mathematics in general and their own experiences in particular. I consider myself fortunate that I was able to carry out some of the research in the children's homes. It was important for me as a researcher to observe the children and the parents

in their 'natural' setting. The interview was based on the Spradley (1979) model of a semi-structured interview.

I subsequently tracked both the pilot children and the children in the control group and have gathered mathematics test results from R-Y6. This data is used as an illustrative example of how the impact of an early year's area based initiative can be examined longitudinally. However, I am cautious not to make any claims on the basis of this data alone. While useful, the SAT results simply provide a further illustration within the research.

#### **5.5.4 Ethical Issues**

One of the ethical issues I had to face was whether it was considered to be acceptable to interview children about the effects of an on going intervention in their mathematics education. It appeared to be both ethical and logical to consider the views of the children this intervention programme was designed to help. Interviewing children has recently become acceptable as a research tool because of the growing belief in children's rights to be heard alongside the belief that children can competently express their views. Indeed, articles 3 and 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child require that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child must be the primary consideration and that children who are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express them freely, commensurate with age and maturity. As Aubrey (2000) discusses, children therefore should be facilitated to give fully informed consent.

The ethical code applied to this study took into account the effects on the participants as the study focused on practice. The parents interviewed in this study were asked to sign a consent form prior to undertaking the interview and indicating that they understood and agreed to all the conditions, (Appendix 1). All practitioners were made aware of the purpose of the research and their rights explained, before asking them to give informed consent (Appendix 2). Informed consent is defined in Cohen et al, (2000, p51) as:

*“The procedures in which individuals choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of facts that would be likely to influence their decisions.”*

## **5.6 Analysis of the Literature**

A comprehensive literature review was also conducted concurrently with this research and examined recent government policy and initiatives, which have promoted parental involvement and have called for parental partnership to impact upon people who are traditionally hard to reach, live in socio-economic deprived areas and traditionally have low achievement. It also examined current literature and research surrounding parental involvement, parenting support, family learning and social policy. The literature review also acted as a support structure to planned interviews as well as serving to validate the content of interviews as possible new themes emerged. The findings from the research were compared with the theories drawn from my literature review, taking account of Aubrey's (2000, p38) view that, *'A sound grasp of what is established knowledge in the field is fundamental and it may be that existing researchers in the topic can provide useful leads and starting points.'*

Analysis of the literature could be considered to be theory led as themes emerging from the literature will contribute (Edwards, 2001). The development of the analysis of the data collected was a gradual process which served to reinforce or extend issues or emergent common themes throughout the research contributing to theory building (Atkinson and Delamont, 1985).

## **5.7 Proposed methods of analysis**

An important part of the design of the research plan included a consideration of how the data would actually be analysed. I considered it important to integrate plans for analysis in the design of the research. This section will explain how this study was rooted in Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and how analysis of the data borrowed from the following key concepts: Research as Praxis (Lather, 1986), Reciprocity (Lather, 1986), Theoretic Sampling (Sarantakos, 1988), Progressive Focusing (Strauss and Corbin, 1988) and Open Coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1988).

### **5.7.1 Grounded Theory**

The use of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in this study was an important feature of the research design. The emergence of data and theory through analysis had particular resonance with this study. Taking into account that this research relied heavily on the ethnographic interview as its main

data collection technique, it was encouraging to find that Spradley (1979, p11) advocates the use of ethnography as *'an excellent strategy for discovering grounded theory.'* Strauss and Corbin (1998, p12) describe grounded theory as a theory *'derived from the data, systematically gathered and analysed through the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another.....the researcher begins with an area of study and allows theory to emerge from the data.'*

### **5.7.2 Theoretical sampling**

As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, p42) identify:

*'One of the limitations often raised in connection with ethnographic work is that because only a single case, or at any rate a small number of cases is studied, the representativeness of the findings is always in doubt.'*

This was obviously a concern to me. Alongside the three family numeracy parents, interviews with four parents involved in at least two early years area based initiatives were supplemented with eight further sets of interviews with the participants of the dads group from the local Sure Start programme. In total fifteen parents were interviewed on two separate occasions; three in the case of the family numeracy parents. Three family numeracy children were also interviewed. As sampling is closely associated with theory (Sarantakos, 1988, p154), theoretical sampling was used in this study at this point. Theoretical sampling is closely associated with grounded theory and

*'.....is characterised by the fact that data collection is controlled by the emerging theory, in that the researcher has constantly to look for new units and data, and justify the theoretical purpose for which each additional group is included in the study.'*

Unlike, the researcher described in Sarantakos, (1998) who will constantly add new units to the sample until the study has reached saturation point, there were only two additions to this study: the inclusion of the views of the 'fathers group' and the 'vested interest' interviews with the professionals involved in the initiatives. Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue that the selection of cases should be designed to

produce as many categories and properties as possible. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, p45) argue that while in the stages of the research, the cases chosen for investigation may not matter greatly, but later on , *'this may come to acquire considerable importance.'* This was the case with this study. In order to address the issue of gender bias, (the parents in the study were mothers) the addition of the fathers to the research process added a further dimension to analysis of the data. Similarly, in an attempt to address validity and in accordance with Anderson et al (1994) who consider that a further sources of validity is linked with the successful completion of the research cycle. Therefore this study may be deemed valid as it became a tool to reframe practice and pursue further questioning.

### **5.7.3 Progressive Focusing**

The development of the analysis of the data collected was a gradual process which served to reinforce common themes throughout the research contributing to theory building (Atkinson and Delamont, 1985).

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed borrowing open coding and progressive focusing from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss: 1967) to identify potential themes as a basis for theorizing why parents might become involved in early years area based initiatives.

Progressive focusing (Strauss and Corbin, 1988) was key to this study and enabled additions to be made to the study as the research progressed. The way in which the foci of the parents' multiple in depth interviews developed is indicative of the way in which progressive focusing affected the development of the study.

### **5.7.4 Open Coding**

My initial analysis of the data used open coding which Strauss and Corbin (1998, p101) describe as *'the process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data'*. While Miles and Huberman (1984) consider that coding provides a solution to dealing with qualitative data, Charmaz (2000, p51) asserts that:

*'Coding helps us to gain a new perspective on our material and to focus further data collection, and may lead us in unforeseen directions.'*

One of the best ways to explain how this occurred in this study is to provide an example. As already discussed the inclusion of the fathers in this piece of research arose from me identifying an opportunity to include the views of men in this study. Data collected and analyzed from the mothers in this study suggested that many men considered being with younger children as ‘women’s work’ and this was the reason given for men’s non participation. Coding the data served to highlight the changing role of fathers and the impetus to challenge cultural and stereotypical views of fathers as an emerging theme. Once the fathers were added to this study, this became one of the foci of the fathers’ interviews. While there are software packages available to aid with coding data, Nud.ist, a computer package for handling interview transcripts for example, I chose to code my data firstly using the ‘large-sheet-of-paper-approach’ advocated by Gordon and Langmaid (1988). Whilst this may seem a rather primitive approach to analyzing and coding the data, my background in early year’s education, needs to be acknowledged at this point. Suffice to say, this approach to analyzing the data worked for me. As a consequence, my initial open coding generated four main issues and six main themes from the parents’ interviews alongside five main themes from the children’s interviews in phase one of the research. Five main themes and six particular images of the initiatives emerged from interviews with parents in phase two of the research. The professional interviews yielded five main themes. The final list of codes is included in the following two tables:

<b>Five Main Themes (codes) to emerge from the parents’ interviews:</b>
Parents’ perceived impact of involvement
Relationships and Involvement in the school
Understanding how numeracy was taught in school and how parents were able to support the development of their children’s numeracy
Ways in which early involvement had impacted on family life and the development of parenting styles
Ways in which early involvement had impacted upon their own personal development as learners
<b>Four Cross Cutting Issues to emerge from the parents’ interviews:</b>
Historical Issues- negative school experiences
Issues of self-esteem and confidence
Issues of teacher and parent role- suspicious of effort to involve them
Issues of parental aspiration- wanting life to be better for their children
<b>Five main themes emerged from interviews with the children:</b>
Confidence in Numeracy
Interest in Numeracy
Attainment in Numeracy
Relationships with parents
Ideas about learning

**Figure 5.5 Phase One of the Research: Research Findings (codes) to emerge**

<b>Parents Interviewed according to Five main themes:</b>
Life Histories- lived experience
Emergent issues: a) Communities labelled as disadvantaged b) Short Term funding c) Initiatives not joined- up
Parental involvement as a mechanism to raise standards, widen participation and promote social inclusion
Government Policy
Community Needs
<b>Out of the 5 main themes, 6 particular images of the initiatives emerged:</b>
Image of the initiatives as fostering 'involvement', 'participation' and 'partnership'
Image of the initiatives as having an impact on parenting skills, relationships with children and development of self-perception as a parent
Image of the initiatives as a set of activities
Image of the initiatives contributing to initiative overload
Image of the initiatives in terms of the community and its residents
Image of the initiatives as a publicity campaign
<b>The professional interviews yielded five main themes:</b>
History of 'working with parents' –legislation meaning now time to act
Problems of streamlining services and multi agency working
One initiative followed by another
Undercutting of services- stepping on toes
Target led services

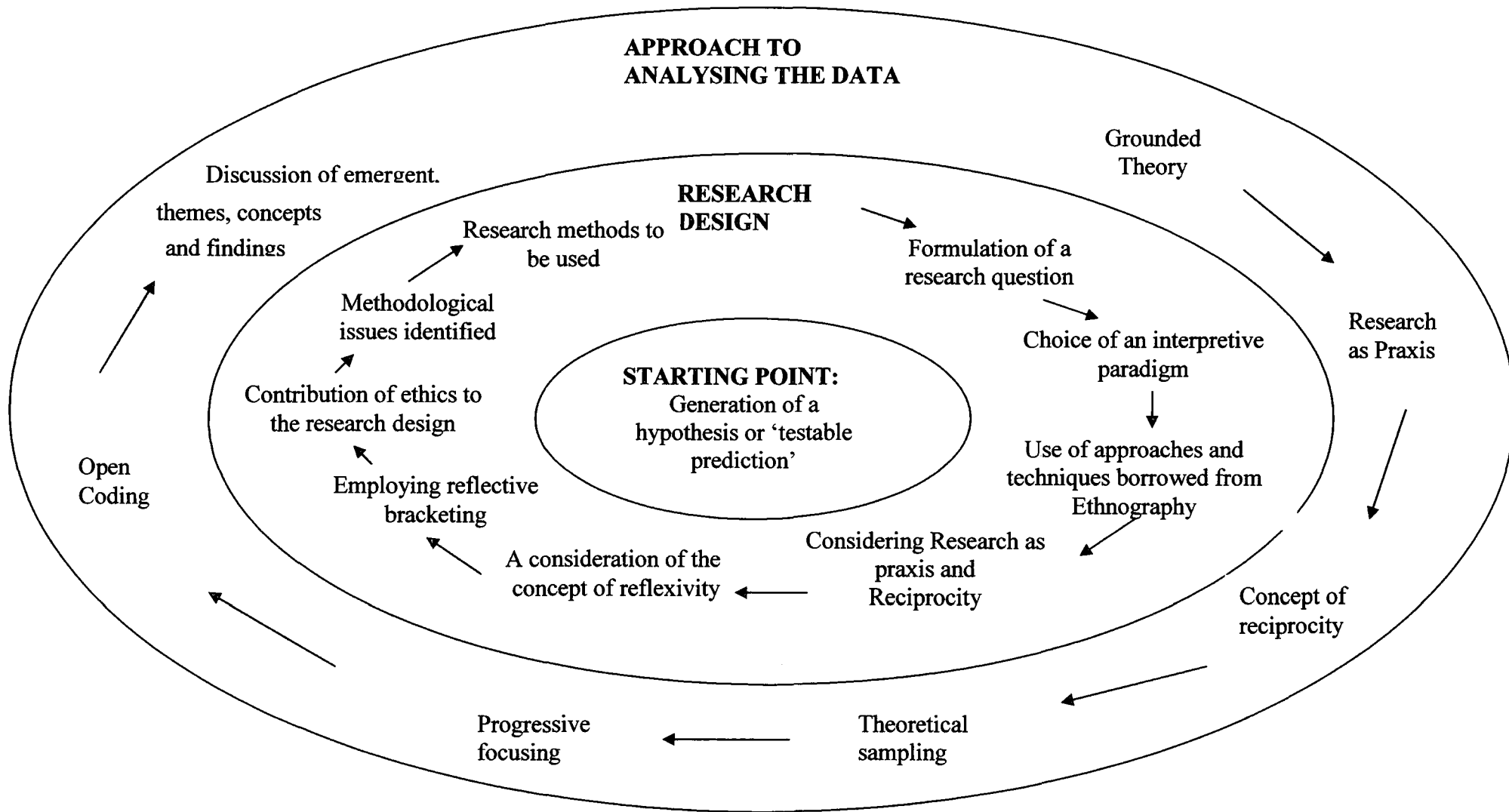
**Table 5.6 Phase Two of the research: Research findings (codes) to emerge**

### 5.8 Overview

The design of this study was influenced by an acknowledgement of the importance of building data analysis into the design of the study. Resultant from this, a research framework emerged. As has already been discussed there were one or two additions to the research process along the way. The influence of progressive focusing, (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) enabled this research to be interactive-reactive (Zaharlik and Green, 1991). The ways in which progressive focusing and the use of reflexivity and reciprocity (Lather, 1986) were interpreted and operationalised in the research are discussed in detail in chapters 7 and 8 alongside a discussion about how they affected the analysis.

On the following page I present a proposed model for conducting research into early years' area- based initiatives as a suggestion as to how my research design could be adapted by other researchers. This model proved to be a breakthrough in my thinking about the research process and became fundamental to the design of the study and later analysis of the data. The first circle represents the starting point for

a study. The second circle presents a recipe for a research design plan, starting with the formulation of a research question. The third circle represents the proposed methods used in analysis of the data, starting with grounded theory.



**Figure 5.7**  
**A proposed model for conducting research into early years' area-based initiatives**

## **Chapter Six: Methodology**

### **6.0 Introduction**

Phase one of the research carried out during spring 2005, was concerned with re- visiting the family numeracy pilot families in an attempt to establish the participants' perceptions of their involvement in an intervention programme designed to raise the standards of numeracy for both children and families. The family numeracy pilot was, in many cases the first intervention experience the families had encountered and was therefore considered to be a useful starting point. Even though more than seven years had elapsed since the families had participated in the pilot programme, I had maintained a relationship with the participants and visited the children twice yearly at school. The parents were aware of my research from the beginning of 1997 and had all agreed to me having access to their children's yearly test results. I also frequently encountered parents in my subsequent role as family learning co-ordinator for the Education Action Zone. Indeed many of these parents attended the yearly Parents' Conference which I organized each year and some of the parents attended bi-monthly parents' workshops which were designed to involve parents in the making of resources to take back to school to promote home-school links.

When in 2001 I joined Northumbria University, my role as Sure Start evaluator ensured increased contact with parents from the same community where family numeracy had been piloted. I was pleased to re- acquaint myself with some of the parents who were involved in the pilot programme and who had subsequently become involved with the Sure Start programme. Deep immersion in this small community ensured that this study would not only provide some longitudinal data, but would also provide a rich insight, almost a 'snapshot' into how one small community contends with several initiatives running concurrently. In line with my research aims, I was particularly interested in the ways in which each initiative's imperative to foster parental involvement was interpreted by the parents. I was also concerned to establish how the children themselves viewed their early involvement in family numeracy.

### **6.1 Phase One of the Research**

The research plan for phase one of the research included:

- a) Interviewing three parents involved in the initial family numeracy study

- b) Analysis of the children's maths test scores from both the experimental (12) and control family numeracy (12) groups and their subsequent yearly test scores.
- c) Interviewing three children from the family numeracy group

Data collection methods included using the ethnographic interview (Spradley, 1979) to interview both parents and children from the original family numeracy pilot programme and analysis of the children's maths test scores from a seven year period. This phase of the research was an attempt to establish the perspectives of the families involved in the pilot family numeracy programme and used three separate data collection techniques in an attempt to contextualize phase two of the study. I considered that this information was necessary for me to 'frame' the rest of the study.

The Basic Skills Agency and NFER (Brooks, 1998) conducted an evaluation of the fourteen pilot family numeracy programmes. This evaluation proved very useful in terms of finding some resonance with the experience of the families in the pilot programme involved in this study. The Basic Skills Agency/NFER evaluation (Brooks, 1998, p5-6) listed eight main findings. However, three key findings from the national evaluation had significance for this study. Brooks (1998) found that the children who took part in the Family Numeracy pilot programme made significantly more progress than the children in the control group. Similarly, there was a statistically significant increase in a wide variety of numeracy related tasks at home during the course and parents reported increased contact with their child's class teacher by the end of the course and reported to be more involved with school activities and supporting in class.

Analysis of this data follows a rather formulaic approach and is categorised and presented under the data collection techniques rather than examining emerging themes which is the way I proceeded to conduct the analysis in phase two (Chapter 8). Subsequent to the external evaluations, the findings from the parents' interviews, the children's interviews and the children's mathematics test score results are presented and analysed. As a consequence, themes emerged from the study as progressive focusing was employed (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This aspect of the research design was particularly useful as the themes were then used as a basis for future interviews with parents and professionals in phase two of the study.

### **6.1.1 Analysis of children's mathematics test score results.**

This aspect of the study used quantitative data from the research. As Robson (1993, p371) maintains:

*'A qualitative account may be the major outcome of a study, but it can be enhanced by supportive quantitative evidence used to buttress and perhaps clarify the account.'*

The children's mathematics test score results were analysed in an attempt to examine whether the early intervention of family numeracy had any long-term impact on the children's mathematical learning. The children's interviews were used to gather the children's perceptions of being part of an early intervention programme.

### **6.1.2 Family Numeracy Parent Interviews 2005.**

In phase one of the study three parents were interviewed in an attempt to examine their perceived impact of the family numeracy intervention. Parents' perspectives were sought on their recollections of children's involvement in the early intervention programme of family numeracy, focused on school activity, mathematics at home and self evaluations as mathematicians.

### **6.1.3 Family Numeracy Children's Interview 2005.**

In the original study, children were not interviewed. However, in this study three children who were involved in the pilot project were interviewed in an attempt to examine the children's perceptions about the effectiveness of the intervention. Fasoli (2001) discusses the 'new sociology of childhood' which sees children as social actors in their own right and as such argues that children should be informed about any research they may be involved in.

Similarly, the recently published BERA ethical guidelines (2004) require researchers to comply with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which state that:

*'The best interests of the child must be the primary consideration in relation to all actions concerning children'* (Article 3)

and that:

*'children who are capable of expressing their views should be granted the right to do so in all matters affecting them, commensurate with their age and maturity'* (Article 12)

However, as Aubrey (2000, p164) points out there are difficulties involved when we make young children participants in research:

*'It may be almost impossible to inform young children fully about the research, so their consent may seem more like exploitation.'*

I then referred to the BERA guidelines in relation to research with young children which states that:

*'Children should be....facilitated to give fully informed consent.'*

And that:

*'Voluntary informed consent is the condition in which participants understand and agree to their participation without any duress prior to the research getting underway'*

## **6.2 Phase Two of the Research**

Phase two of the research was conducted during summer 2005 and included interviewing both parents and professionals involved in the three initiatives. Mothers from the family numeracy pilot were interviewed on two occasions. The first interview in this phase of the research involved the use of the Life History interviews which were concerned with giving the parents' a voice. I was interested in establishing the life histories of the parents in an attempt to be able to formulate a clear understanding of their 'lives as lived.' An attempt to explore lives-as-lived, life-as-experienced and life-as-told has long interested researchers (Bruner, 1986). The biographical method in educational research is used heavily in educational research (Alheit, 1994).

Stanley (1993) maintains that while we feel we can act independently in our lives, we recognize the structural limitations imposed by our social and ethnic origins, our gender and the era in which we are living. Alheit (1994, p288) concurs with this:

*“The learning processes between structure and subjectivity are manifold, but they can only be understood if we do justice to both poles: the structural framework of conditions governing our lives and the spontaneous dispositions that we adopt towards ourselves.”*

A second interview, which explored whether their involvement in family numeracy acted as a ‘catalyst’ for further involvement in any of the subsequent intervention initiatives which followed, was also conducted. The purpose of this interview was to examine the perceptions of the mothers’ experiences of their involvement in the initiatives. The notions of communities labeled as disadvantaged, the effects of the short- term nature of funding such initiatives and the idea that the succession of initiatives fail to be sufficiently ‘*joined up*’ to have any lasting impact on families’ lives were also examined. Mothers from both the Education Action Zone and the Sure Start initiatives were also interviewed on two occasions. Once again the focus of these interviews involved the Life History interview and their experiences of the initiatives.

#### **6.2.1 An addition to the research plan: The Fathers.**

As in chapter five when I discussed interviewing the pilot family numeracy parents, I largely meant ‘mothers’. In chapter four this issue is explored in the literature. For this and I suspect many similar communities, the homogenous nature of the women’s roles largely meant that it became the responsibility of the women to support their children’s learning.

Employing ‘*theoretical sampling*’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), the inclusion of the perspectives of eight Sure Start Fathers proved to be a valuable addition to this study. In my work as a Sure Start evaluator, I had been involved in evaluating the work of a ‘Father’s Group’ held in the Sure Start programme within this study. Many of the fathers expressed their eagerness to discuss their involvement so I arranged to subsequently interview the fathers during several subsequent Sunday mornings. This was considered as separate to the Sure Start evaluation by the fathers. The rationale for adding the fathers’ perspectives to the research were two-fold. Firstly, the idea that the Sure Start fathers in the same community where both the family numeracy and EAZ initiative took place, lent itself to ‘*theoretic sampling*’ as outlined by Sarantakos (1998. p154). Secondly, I considered that this inclusion would add a further dimension to the study. This was particularly important to me as I had been strongly

influenced by Easen's (2000) concept of illusory consensus. When applied to the ways in which a term such as 'parental involvement' is used when in effect we actually mean 'mothers' involvement, Easen's argument that continual use of such a term perpetuates its use. In this case the term 'parental involvement' perpetuates the myth that both mothers and fathers are equally involved in their children's education, when in reality this is not the case. The parents interviewed in both the family numeracy initiative and the EAZ initiative were made up of mothers. Therefore, the chance to include the views of fathers from the same community was fortunate.

### **6.2.2 The 'Life History' Interviews**

In Phase two of the study, all parents interviewed were asked to consider their 'life history'. This was a term I used to describe the process of the parents telling their stories (Koch, 1998). I was particularly interested in the parents' perspectives on their *'life-as-lived, life-as-experienced and life-as-told'* (Antikainen, 1998, p216). Often termed the 'biographical method' in educational research, these interviews were designed to uncover the life experiences and learning experiences of the parents. As Antikainen (1998, p217) advises *'a life history approach'* often comprises of a narrative biographical interview. Tierney, in Denzin and Lincoln (2000) asserts that not only is life history related to biography, it is often a retrospective account involving some form of narrative statement. Using Tierney's definition of life history as a model, the parents were therefore asked three questions adapted from his proposed life history interview model. I was particularly interested to find out how had the parents used education in constructing their life courses; whether their education and learning experiences had impacted on the formation of individual and group identity, and what sort of significant experiences did the parents have in the different stages of their lives.

### **6.2.3 The second parental interviews**

The second parental interview was designed to examine the parents' perspectives of their involvement in government initiatives. I was also interested in establishing the parents' perspectives with regard to the three issues arising from the research; the idea that their community had been labelled as disadvantaged was explored alongside their perspectives of the impact of short-term funded initiatives which seem to fail to be 'joined up'. Similarly, the interviews were designed to establish how the parents' involvement contributed to their self development as a parent, the development of parenting

skills and their levels of participation. The parents' perceptions of the contribution of the initiatives to New Labour's three key objectives for education were explored. This interview was also concerned with establishing the perceptions of needs of the community and asked the parents to suggest what types of interventions would be most appropriate for their community with regard to community regeneration.

The idea of carrying out a series of interviews with the same respondents was to allow their multiple voices to emerge and to enable them to express a variety of positions on similar issues in an attempt to enable me to explore the tensions and contradictions involved in their serial involvement in early year's area based initiatives. Progressive focusing (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was used as themes emerged from the interviews.

#### **6.2.4 An addition to the research: professionals and practitioners**

As has already been discussed, my research into parental engagement was carried out using an interpretive paradigm in an attempt to '*aim at understanding the dynamics of a socio-cultural system as well as of how people interpret their world.*' (Sarantakos, 1994). Similarly, Cohen and Manion (1989, p39) state: '*Theory is emergent and must arise from particular situations; it should be grounded on data generated by the research act.*'

An example of this responsiveness to emergent theory was the inclusion of the '*vested interest*' interviews with professionals and practitioners. During analysis of the literature and as a direct result of discussing this research with colleagues in the fields of parental involvement, family learning, and parenting support, it became clear that my original hypothesis that communities were being subjected to serial initiatives, could be attributed to the leaders and managers and practitioners of such initiatives each having a vested interest in the success of their project or initiative, usually according to a government target.

In true ethnographic style, this study adopted the interactive reactive approach as advised by Zaharlik (2001, p120) thus allowing '*the ethnographer to explore and refine the questions that*

*were posed at the beginning of the study and generate questions that could not be anticipated before entry into the field.'*

As it was clear that the success of the initiatives depended largely upon and were measured by, the involvement of parents; the inclusion of this set of interviews became a very illuminating aspect to the research design plan. Therefore, the Head teacher of the primary school in which the pilot family numeracy programme was held was interviewed alongside the adult basic skills tutor from the local college who taught the Adult Sessions on the programme. It would have been interesting to interview the family numeracy co-ordinator but as this person and the researcher are one and the same, this would have compromised this research. The Education Action Zone Director was interviewed alongside a Family learning co-ordinator from one primary school. One of the success criteria of the inclusion of family numeracy into the Education Action Zone action plan was the idea that with the appointment of a family learning co-ordinator in each zone school, sustainability would be ensured once funding ended. The Sure Start Programme Manager and the Community Development worker who had responsibility for the 'fathers group' were also interviewed.

### **6.3 Management of the interviews.**

The data from the multiple interviews provided a depth which I could not have generated from fewer contact times. Given the depth that I was seeking I could not have managed more parents; in phase two of this research, I conducted 33 interviews with 15 parents, 6 with children and 6 with professionals. The volume of transcription data was as much as I could handle given the time constraints.

The idea underpinning the use of multiple in depth interviews with the same respondent rather than one long interview was to allow the multiple voices of the parents to emerge and to build space into the research and writing for the complexity that is typified by a young parent trying to rear their children in a disadvantaged community. To this end a set of interviews were developed. These varied in type and included fairly structured interviews based on personal constructs as well as less structured life history interviews and informal discussion. The focus of the interviews were based around topics covered or identified within the literature on parenting and involvement in their children's care and education

generally, and more specifically living in areas deemed to be 'disadvantaged' where parental engagement work seemed to be concentrated.

As much of the qualitative data to be collected in this study involved analyzing interview transcriptions from the interview processes, content analysis (MacNaughton, 2001) was employed involving a system of coding successfully employed in the initial study. The series of interviews were analysed to provide me with further insights into the parents' thoughts and feelings about being involved in the project. Similarly the structure of the ethnographic interviews allowed themes and issues to emerge as naturally as they would in conversation.

#### **6.4 Validity Reliability and Rigour**

Defining validity "*presents a confusing diversity of ideas.*" Hammersley, (1987). In this study, the term validity is used to refer to the validity of the piece of research as a whole. To consider validity in this way requires an evaluation of any methodological objections that can be raised against the research. Although I could not ensure validity I attempted to validate my data, through triangulation. My study used semi- structured ethnographic interview as the main data collection tool. A total of thirty three interviews were conducted with children, parents and practitioners involved in the study. Alongside this an analysis of the literature was undertaken which served to reinforce or extend issues or emergent common themes throughout the research contributing to theory building (Atkinson and Delamont 1985). Selecting such an approach provided methodological triangulation, using '*different....sources to corroborate each other*' (Silverman, 2005, p121) offering some reliability to the study. The resulting data sets were subsequently analysed and codes attached to the data. I also used triangulation of sources of data because:

*"Triangulation techniques...attempt to map out or explain more fully the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint."*

(Cohen and Manion, 1980, p269)

And

*'each data source gives information of a different type which usually serves to complement and provide a check on the others.'*

(Hopkins, 1993, p135)

From both a theoretical and practical perspective, several measures of validity were apparent throughout this study: *interpretive, theoretical, external and internal*. Reflective dialogues from both the children and the parents involved in the initial study allowed for a significant level of *interpretive* validity. *Theoretical* validity or the way in which the research explains the characteristics and components of serial involvement in government initiatives, was secured as perceptions were gathered from participants. *External* validity was established because of the expansion and replication of government initiatives throughout the UK. *Internal* validity was established as the participants of the research experienced the different initiatives at different times and places and the eclectic research approach enabled threats to internal validity to be considered. I also considered that as I used multiple data collection methods, the weaknesses of some of these methods can be counterbalanced by the strengths of the others and should therefore be considered to have the potential for increased validity.

Ball (1990, p40) calls for rigour in qualitative research. In a discussion on objectivity, he maintains that this needs to *'rest firmly upon the researcher's awareness of what it is possible to say given the nature of the data that was and was not collected.'*

### **6.5 Confidentiality and Anonymity**

To comply with my ethical statement, it was explained that all information and data collected would be treated as confidential, and that names would not be used in the final thesis, which would be available within the university library. Confidentiality would be further assured by erasing all tape recordings upon transcription, and destroying any notes taken.

### **6.6 Overview**

In this chapter methodologies for both research phases have been outlined. A discussion of the way in which the children's mathematics test score results were analysed is presented, alongside a discussion of the focus of the parent practitioner and children interviews. A particular focus on the 'Life History'

and the inclusion of the practitioner 'Vested Interest' interviews provides further justification for conducting the study in the ethnographic style. In the following two chapters, the results from phase one and two of this research are examined.

## **Chapter 7: Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Results Arising from Phase One of the Study**

### **7.0 Introduction**

In this chapter the data generated from phase one of the study is presented, analysed and discussed. Phase one of this study took place during March- July 2005. This phase of the study involved revisiting the pilot family numeracy families from 1997 and included interviewing three family numeracy mothers and their children alongside an analysis of the children's end of Key Stage Two mathematics results. My tracking of the families over a seven year period serves to contextualize the future parental engagement work examined in this study. The parents from this small community were offered the further opportunity to be involved in several subsequent initiatives, two of which are examined in this study. Although the vignettes are often presented as exemplars of the parental engagement work occurring in this small community, the issues presented are discussed as features of the parental engagement work at play in this community. It is useful to consider the data from phase one separate to phase two of the study as this phase of the study serves to contextualise phase two, setting the scene for the subsequent phase of this study.

The children's mathematics progress over a seven-year period is presented and an analysis is presented to show progress and comparisons to national averages. This chapter then presents, discusses and analyses the interviews conducted with the pilot family numeracy mothers and the family numeracy children. The idea that the parents involved in the pilot family numeracy underwent a process of '*perspective transformation*' (Mezirow, 1997) is discussed as a feature of parental engagement work. This process has particular resonance to the findings from this phase of the study. Finally, this phase of the study is discussed with reference to its particular significance to phase two of the study.

### **7.1 The children's mathematical progress**

In order to contextualise the children's mathematical results from phase one of this study the national evaluation of the pilot family numeracy programme (Brooks, 1998) is considered in this section. The incongruity of the short term funding which prevails in early years area based initiatives is discussed with particular reference to the notion of using 'evidence based' practice to inform future practice. The claim that research into such initiatives can best be described as 'sketchy' is considered and is

juxtaposed with the idea that this longitudinal study which has involved the collection of data over a ten year period, offers a unique contribution to the research into the impact of early years area based initiatives generally but that it specifically provides an insight into perspectives of parental engagement work.

### **7.1.1 The evaluation of the Pilot National Family Numeracy Programmes**

As with many early years area based initiatives, the pilot family numeracy programmes were subject to external evaluation. A framework for the evaluation of the pilot programme was established by the Basic Skills Agency with the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). The fourteen pilot programmes were required to provide the Basic Skills Agency and NFER with data concerning the numbers of parents and children taking part and their educational and linguistic background. This was achieved by asking the parents to complete a pro forma with information about theirs and their children's gender, age, and ethnic background. Occupational status and Education were also categories on the pro forma (Appendix 3).

As has already been outlined, the children's numeracy competence and progress from the beginning to the end of the course was assessed. This was possible only for those children between 4 and 5.3 years old at the beginning of the course. However, the Basic Skills Agency and the NFER also required practitioners to assess a control group of children during the same period and using the same assessment procedure. The control group in this study was provided by the remaining children in another reception class in the same school. The control group requirements were to match the experimental group with a control group who had the closest match for age, experience and background possible. (Appendix 4)

Information about numeracy-focused home activity both before and after involvement in family numeracy was also recorded. Seventeen examples of numeracy-focused home activities were provided on a pro forma and parents were expected to complete this form before they embarked upon family numeracy and also at the end of the course. There were also three categories on this pro forma which explored parents' relationships with their child's school. The pro forma asked parents to indicate how often they attended school activities, how often they helped with school activities and how often they

talked with their child's teacher. Once again this section of the form was expected to be completed both before and after the course. (Appendix 5)

As family numeracy co-ordinator, I was also required to supply information about how the families were recruited to each course, how many remained and how often they attended; how many adults gained full or partial accreditation of their numeracy gains; and other areas of progress and progression. The children were assessed using the two mathematical scales of the QCA Baseline Assessment. The two scales measured the children's competence at the beginning and end of the intervention in using and understanding number and using and understanding mathematical language. While the Basic Skills Agency conducted the fieldwork for the evaluation, NFER conducted the statistical analysis of the data. The following table illustrates the comparisons of the national evaluation and the evaluation conducted with the pilot family numeracy children in the community in this study.

<b>Comparison</b>	<b>National Results</b>	<b>Local Results</b>
Parents Involved	517	12
Mothers Involved	499	12
Fathers Involved	18	0
Parents with English as an additional language	12%	8%
Parents aged between 16-34	69%	100%
Parents with no qualifications	56%	80%
Parents with post 16 qualifications	70%	0%
Parents who were unemployed	75%	100%
Retention rate on courses	84%	100%
Children Involved	515	12
Girls Involved	42%	40%
Boys Involved	58%	60%

**Table 7.1 Comparison of national and local family numeracy programme**

As with the national programme, the programme reached women almost exclusively; 499 of the adults taking part in the national programme were female. In the pilot programme in this study all 12 of the parents were women. This reflects the notion that the term 'parental involvement' is over used when in effect it is mothers' involvement that is the norm (Keating, 1996). In the local pilot, the adult tutor assessed the mathematical skills of the parents using the Basic Skills Agency's screening pack. The assessments revealed that 42% of the group were operating below level one and that 35% of were operating at level one. The Basic Skills Agency advised that their target audience would ideally be those parents operating below level one. Retention on the courses nationally, was high with 84% of the parents who enrolled on the courses staying on the courses until they ended. For my pilot, this figure was even higher and we retained 100% of the parents who had enrolled. One of the possible explanations for this high retention rate was provided in one of the interviews by one of the family numeracy mothers.

*'For many of us, this was our first experience of being involved in our children's education. None of us worked and I would say erm that all of us were keen that our children had a good start at school.'*

### **7.1.2 Analysis of the family numeracy children's mathematics test scores**

Initial analysis of the pilot family numeracy children's end of Key Stage One and Two SAT results indicate that this early intervention went some way to determining future success in mathematical scores. The original pilot family numeracy programme involved twelve parents and their children. As this school had a dual intake and there were two reception classes, the use of a control group which matched for age, gender and background was possible. Tracking the twenty four children's optional yearly mathematical results from reception to year 6 has revealed that the children, who were involved in the early intervention family numeracy programme during their reception year of schooling, appear to have made slightly greater gains in numeracy.

The raw data from the children's Mathematics SAT's results are included in appendix 6, in accordance with advice from Denscombe (1998, p24) who says that *'it is not acceptable to present the findings of small surveys as percentages without specifying the actual numbers involved.'*

The data from KS1 for both the family numeracy group and the control group compared to the data from the national cohorts are presented in the following table:

Levels	W	Level 1	Level 2c	Level 2b	Level 2a	Level 3
<b>FN Group</b>	0%	25%	8%	17%	42%	8%
<b>Control Group</b>	0%	25%	17%	33%	8%	17%

- rows do not total 100% as absentees and children disappled are not shown

**Table 7.2 Analysis of Mathematics Key Stage 1 Results**

Due to the small numbers of children involved in this study, caution is advised about the extent to which generalizations can be made on the basis of the research findings. As Denscombe (1998, p24) advises *'the limited size of the sample need not invalidate the findings'*. He also advises that *'the smaller the sample, the simpler the analysis should be.'* As described in chapter five, the mathematical data is just one of the data sets and needs to be considered alongside the interviews with the family numeracy families.

The analysis of the children's Key Stage 1 SATs results demonstrates that the Family Numeracy Group scored better at level 2a (42%), suggesting that this first intervention did have some effect on mathematical attainment and perhaps offers an insight into the possible potential of children who had been identified as underachieving in mathematics at such an early age. The importance of attainment in mathematics in the early years cannot be underestimated. Aubrey and Godfrey (2003), for instance used early numeracy skills to predict children's results in Key Stage 1. In Ofsted evaluations of the National Numeracy Strategy (Ofsted, 2000a, 2001a, 2002) it is claimed that there have been statistically significant gains in test scores for Years 3, 4 and 5 since the start of the strategy in 1999. The inference being that where children perform well at the end of Key Stage 1 SATs, this offers an indication of their potential scores at end of Key Stage 2.

However, both groups did less well than the national cohorts. The national statistics for Key Stage One mathematical results for 2000 (Massey, Green, Dexter and Hamnett (2003, p30) reveal the following:

Levels	W	Level 1	Level 2c	Level 2b	Level 2a	Level 3
Percentage	2%	7%	17%	23%	25%	25%

\* rows do not total 100% as absentees and children disapplied are not shown

Massey et al (2003) discuss their reservations about interpreting these mathematics results. Their concerns centre round the structure of the assessment 'package' which includes:

*"a mathematics 'Task', which is designed to be suitable for the assessment of children working towards or achieving at Level 1. The second is the 'Test', with which these experimental comparisons are concerned. Only children who might hope to achieve Levels 2 or 3 are required to take the tests, which are targeted at this higher range of attainment. Thus KS 1 Mathematics national assessment results are determined by the combined effects of both the Task and the Test set each year."*

This all contributes to the idea that while this intervention did have some impact in this deprived area, children's numeracy learning in areas described as disadvantaged is below those children living in more affluent areas.

The data from KS2 for both the family numeracy group and the control group compared to the data from the national cohorts are presented in the table below:

Levels	Below Level 3	3	4	5	Pupils Disapplied	Pupils Absent
FN Group	0%	33%	42%	25%	0%	0%
Control Group	0%	75%	8%	17%	0%	0%

**Table 7.3 Analysis of Mathematics Key Stage 2 Results**

As with the Key Stage One results, caution is advised about the extent to which generalizations can be made on the basis of the research findings due to the small number of children involved. As described

in chapter five, the mathematical data is just one of the data sets and needs to be considered alongside the interviews with the family numeracy families.

Initial analysis of the KS2 SAT's results indicate that this early intervention went some way to determining future success in mathematical scores. However there are several contributing factors involved and therefore it is difficult to disaggregate one factor as the contributing influence to the children's success. Rather, the separate factors deserve an analysis of their own. The early intervention of family numeracy appeared to provide a 'bridge' between the type of mathematical learning which occurred in the children's homes and the type of mathematical learning which was taught in school. Parent's ability to help their own children with mathematical learning must also be considered as a contributing factor or indeed a determinant in the children's future mathematical success. The parents all reported an increase in the number related activities they were doing at home with their children during and subsequent to the family numeracy intervention. Where the family numeracy intervention can claim to be successful is its early work on developing mental fluency with number. The work of Walden and Walkerdine (1982) on mental contexts is worthy of consideration at this point. Walden and Walkerdine claim that children need to understand what is required of them in mathematics and suggest that children often confuse the context of the task with the content and that this leads to a lack of understanding. There is an important distinction to be made here concerning building shared understandings based upon children's mental contexts. As parents were involved in this early intervention, the opportunity to expand upon previous shared experiences and the opportunity to develop shared understandings in a mathematical context cannot be under-estimated. Similarly, children are not often afforded 'status' as mathematical thinkers and we are aware that many young children enter school unable to write or recognise numbers upon entry to formal schooling (Aubrey, 1993). The children who participated in the early intervention of family numeracy brought mathematical skills and knowledge to the course which is not assessed on entry to school. Their knowledge about money, for example was directly related to their home experiences and this aspect of number is not assessed upon entry to the foundation stage (DfES, 2007).

The 2004 Key Stage Two National SAT results for mathematics included both a teacher assessment and a test. The following tables provided by QCA (accessed July 8<sup>th</sup> 2004) show the percentage of year children achieving each level nationally in 2004:

#### Teacher Assessment

Levels	W	1	2	3	4	5	6	Pupils Disapplied	Pupils absent
Percentage	1%	1%	4%	19%	46%	29%	0	0	0

#### Test Results

Levels	Below Level 3	3	4	5	Pupils Disapplied	Pupils absent
Percentage	6%	19%	43%	31%	0	1

- W represents children who are working towards level 1, but have not yet achieved the standards needed for level 1.
- Figures may not total 100% because of rounding.

As the analysis illustrates, some of the family numeracy pilot children continued to make and maintain more progress than the control group. There could be several explanations for this. The parents interviewed discussed that ways in which their initial involvement in their children's early mathematical learning and development was sustained throughout the primary years. The finding that there was a statistically significant increase in a wide variety of numeracy related tasks at home during the course provides us with another explanation. The parents talked about ways in which they promoted numeracy learning in the home with activities such as shopping and cooking and playing numeracy related games. The head teacher of the primary school discussed the way in which access to the numeracy take home packs was expanded throughout the school. This ensured that this group of children had sustained access to age specific numeracy related activities which they transferred to the home-learning environment, sharing their learning with their families. The third finding that parents increased their contact with the school was also borne out in the parents' interviews. Each parent interviewed explained how their initial involvement in family numeracy contributed to the formation of positive relationships with the teaching staff and the school. This also appeared to be long lasting and was only interrupted as parents either sought employment or training opportunities.

### **7.1.3 Evidence based practice and short term funding arrangements**

The pilot family numeracy programme ran from 1997-1998. Future funding like many intervention pilot programmes was dependent upon the local authority and as a consequence only lasted for one subsequent year. While the future of family numeracy within this particular borough was secured through its incorporation into an Education Action Zone, the evaluation of the impact of such an intervention however, remained at risk. As Rees, et al (2007, p761) explain, educational research has been subject to significant restructuring in recent years. There has been a long standing concern that educational research *'did not cumulate to provide a robust body of systematic evidence and conclusions that would provide an adequate basis for the improvement of educational policy and professional practice.'*

Paradoxically, the New Labour government has promoted the idea that research should feed into practice alongside the expectation that evaluation and research of such initiatives will enhance future provision.

Where parental involvement and early intervention studies are concerned, parents who are recruited to such initiatives present themselves not as the homogenous group they were once considered, but as groups with diverse backgrounds, multiple goals and varying levels of understanding. Therefore what they seek and gain as individuals will vary, making evaluation and research complex (Barrett, 2006). It is not surprising therefore that the rigour of some parental involvement focused evaluation studies have suffered criticism for assessor bias, the size of the sample and research design, (Moran et al, 2004 and McConachie and Diggle, 2007). However, there seems to be sufficient evidence for consensus of opinion across the literature on three points. Firstly, that early intervention, no matter when it occurs, it better than no intervention at all; secondly that most interventions meet the aims of the research design to some extent; and thirdly that the most successful programmes build on existing parental strengths rather than highlighting deficits. More specific benefits include parents' being able to share new skills with their offspring (McKenna, 1998); group training facilitates mutual support (Duncan et al, 2006); and that intervention programmes can have a positive and measurable impact on parent child interaction (McConachie and Diggle, 2007).

In 2000, when the pilot family numeracy children undertook their end of Key Stage One SAT's (Standard Assessment Tests), I had moved to the Education Action Zone. The Basic Skills Agency contacted me with the request to send data of the children's Key Stage One Mathematics test results. This very small piece of research was subsequently published in a Basic Skills publication entitled 'Family Numeracy Adds On.' (Brooks, 1999). The rationale for this follow on study was provided in the foreword to the final report:

*'We think it's always important to try and find out whether the good effects of programmes last.'*

This proved to be rather difficult as in the intervening three years both families and practitioners had 'moved on'. However, Dyson, Beresford and Splawnyk, (2007) consider this to be an all too common feature of short term funding arrangements and assert that one of the many consequences is a low response rate. This is certainly borne out with the follow on study to 'Family Numeracy Adds Up'. In this study 'Family Numeracy Adds on' (Brooks, 1999) the pilot family numeracy children and their parents are returned to. Although there are only two key findings from the follow up research, the research revealed that:

- *"Family Numeracy Children were superior to comparison children in the support they received from their families, attendance and competence with mental calculation;*
- *Family numeracy children's parents were twice as likely as those of comparison children to be involved with their child's school."*

The report authors explain that they followed up the children who had taken part in the pilots, and matched them with a peer group. They go on to explain that the sample is small as it was difficult to keep in touch with a large sample of children, many of whom had changed schools. However, the research was unable to follow up the parents. Once again the impact of short-term funding could provide an insight into why this was not possible. As many of the staff, myself included at the time, were on part-time, short-term contracts, the authors considered that *'it was simply not practical for them to find and interview the parents.'* (Brooks, 1999, p1). Brooks, (2002, p 02) cautions against

making generalisable claims and therefore the follow on study's credibility is questionable (McKenna, 2003).

As my research for this study followed these parents and children over a seven- year period, the focus of phase one of this study was on the long- term impact on both the parents and children.

Therefore, this study did not seek to simply examine the data in an attempt to see if Brooks' (2002) findings were replicated.

### **7.2 The findings from the Family Numeracy Mothers' Interviews**

Phase One of this study was an attempt not only to establish the extent to which the pilot family numeracy programme had impacted upon the children's achievement but also to endeavour to establish what this initial involvement in an early years area based initiative had meant for the families involved.

In the following sections the results of the interviews with the pilot family numeracy mothers are presented, analysed and discussed. The first set of interviews, which were designed to establish the parents', perceived impact of the family numeracy intervention were carried out during March 2005 and July 2005. Unfortunately, some of the families had moved from the area so I was only able to send out seven letters to parents who still maintained contact with the primary school involved in the family numeracy pilot. The three mothers who subsequently returned the pro forma with their contact details and agreement to be interviewed were then contacted and arrangements were made to interview the respondents in their own homes.

### **7.3 Generating categories and themes to code the data:**

As data were collected analysis was applied using five categories as the basis of a system of coding the data. I then identified four further cross cutting issues that '*helped to make sense of the data*' with the aim '*not just to make the data intelligible but to do so in an analytical way that provides a novel perspective on the phenomena*' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p 210). Both the five main themes and the further four cross cutting issues provide a way to '*differentiate and combine data*' and to '*make reflections about this information.*' (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p27).

Using progressive focusing and open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) to code the data from this set of interviews, it became apparent that there were five main themes emerging from the data. The five are discussed under the following sub-headings as I applied codes to the data:

- Parents' perceived impact of involvement
- Relationships and involvement in the school
- Parents understanding and support of numeracy development
- Parental involvement and personal development as learners
- Family life and parenting styles

Four issues emerged from this data set which can be considered as cross cutting against the five themes. The interviews revealed four main sets of issues for these mothers: the impact of their own school experiences, self esteem and confidence, teacher and parental roles and parental aspirations. These four issues affected the relationship between the parents and the school and their subsequent engagement.

While it might be suggested that coding of the data employed a rather simplistic technique, I found this technique to be invaluable and most revealing. Using the 'large-sheet-of-paper-approach' (Gordon and Langmaid, 1988) as outlined in chapter six, I analysed transcripts of the interviews and used highlighter pens to group data according to the five themes and four issues.

#### **7.4 Data Display: Five main themes**

The methods used in this study rely on my skills and judgements as a researcher. Issues of bias and subjectivity were concerns and have been discussed in chapter five. However, after the data collection period was completed, a period of reflection took place where the need to validate the research process became apparent. Hammersely and Atkinson (1995, p210) acknowledge the influence of the '*existing ideas of the researcher and relevant literature in shaping the analysis*'. Miles and Huberman (1984, p10) explain that '*generically a display is an organised compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action.*' As has already been discussed in chapter five, the use of Reciprocity (Lather, 1986) enabled me to enter into a reciprocal relationship with the research

participants which was not concerned only with reciprocity between individuals but with the development of a political philosophy (Entwistle, 1979). Reciprocity was operationalised in the data analysis with a coding process which not only reflected parents views and concerns but which also took account of the current findings to emerge through theory and literature surrounding parental engagement work. Entwistle (1979) considers that this approach commits actors to social change.

This study employed the use of 'open coding' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) to code main themes and issues to emerge from the interviews. However the coding process was also influenced by and had resonance in the parental engagement theory and literature. This reciprocal approach to the coding process, where codes were assigned according to the emerging categories and themes from the interviews but which also took account of the theory and literature had also been successfully employed in the design of the semi-structured interview questions. Using reciprocity in this way enabled me to '*work with those studied and the wider community both in understanding what are problems and in interpreting reality.*' (Hammersley, 1993, p204).

Examples of codes applied to the data can be found in figure 5.5 which presents the codes to emerge from phase one of the research. Table 5.6 which presents the codes to emerge from phase two of the research.

Each of the vignettes presented within the following sections represent broader patterns in the data. At the end of the first phase of data collection, reflection on the need to validate the research process led to a decision being made to examine the emerging data against the literature to identify any resonance.

Alongside sharing the interview transcripts with the research participants, I considered that comparing the emerging themes and issues from the interviews to themes within the literature would demonstrate a level of trustworthiness and authenticity of the data (Woods, 1996; Aubrey et al, 2000). It was at this stage that the process of '*perspective transformation*' (Mezirow, 1997) as a key feature of parental engagement work really became apparent as a common theme in all of the mother's interviews.

#### 7.4.1 Parents' perceived impact of involvement

All three parents interviewed agreed that their involvement in the pilot family numeracy had been beneficial. However, their ideas about the impact of family numeracy varied. One mother whose son was on the Gifted and Talented register for mathematics at his comprehensive school described her son as *'your protégé.'* She considered that her son's early involvement in family numeracy and the opportunities to support her son's learning, her own involvement had afforded her, were contributing factors to his success in numeracy.

*'Come on now, if we hadn't come along to family numeracy, I would never have joined a library to get him maths books out, I would never have played all those maths games with him or took him shopping or cooked with him or asked him to pair socks or lay the table; that was one to one correspondence, do you remember? It had a huge impact on the way we as a family approached mathematics. X got so much more input than the older two because I now knew what to do and that if I did do these things, it would improve his maths.'*

Another mother described the way in which the family numeracy initiative had impacted upon her personally:

*'Erm, erm I don't think it did much for her maths development if I'm honest but it did a great deal for us in terms of getting us to mix with other people from the area. Erm, It was an opportunity for me to meet other mams in the same situation. So it was good in that sense.'*

The third mother however considered that family numeracy had had a significant impact on her confidence and had enabled her to continue with this newly awakened learning and to finally gain some qualifications. Although each of the mothers' perceived impact of their involvement in family numeracy is in some respects unique, I consider that the data suggests a broader pattern. As Denscome asserts (1998, p36) *'The extent to which findings .....can be generalized to other examples.....depends on how far the example is similar to others of its type.'* The literature surrounding the impact of involvement in family learning for the families, reinforces many of the cross cutting issues described in this and in subsequent sections. The excerpts from the three mother's

interviews demonstrate that the mothers' perceptions of the impact of their involvement were three fold. Firstly, that their involvement had been a contributing factor to the future success of their children. This is reinforced in the Desforges (2003) study which found that parental involvement in their children's education between the ages of seven and sixteen is a far more powerful force than family background, size of the family and level of parental education. Secondly, the mothers discussed the ways in which their involvement enabled them to make friends with local people from the community. Haggart (2000) supports this idea and considers that learning in families can act as a trigger to lifelong learning and participation in the community. Thirdly, the mothers discussed the ways in which involvement had impacted upon their own confidence. Vincent (2000, p80), found that one of the benefits of attendance on family learning courses often resulted in *'the injection of confidence and independence to which many attested as a result of the course.'*

#### **7.4.2 Relationships and involvement in the school**

The growing acceptance that by involving themselves in school activities, parents could have an impact on their own personal development and growth as a parent and as a learner was something which emerged over time. The family numeracy room in the school, or the Parents' Room as it became known, was a crucial factor in encouraging further involvement in the school. The room, a spare classroom in the school became almost a drop in centre for parents when the family numeracy project was not using the room. The head teacher was very keen that the parents felt welcome and furnished the room with tea and coffee making facilities and a selection of toys available for younger children and babies. An informal mothers and toddlers group sprang up and the parents began asking the head teachers for more resources. The head teacher advised the parents that they needed to start charging for each session the mothers and children used the room, equipment and tea and coffee and this would give them some funding to resource the provision properly. One parent who took the lead in this development was Lorraine. Lorraine had three children in the school and her youngest son was involved in the pilot family numeracy project. As her youngest son was at school, this mum described being *'a bit lost'*. She described how she hated leaving Josh at school and being involved in the set-up of the Toddlers group had enabled her to be physically close enough to him to give her peace of mind. However, Lorraine's subsequent experience of the Sure Start initiative appeared to negate the further

development of her social and cultural capital. In phase two of this study, Lorraine's story is returned to. (See page 194)

Having the room also lent itself to the provision of more courses for parents. The head teacher of the school made enquiries within the local authority and the local college were able to offer short ten week courses on subjects such as 'aromatherapy' and 'baby massage'. This was actually a fore-runner to what many Sure Start programmes did when this initiative started.

Parents who were initially reluctant to develop their own numeracy skills requested more maths at the end of the family numeracy project. The adult basic skills tutor from the local college agreed that she could return to the school and help the parents work towards ultimately embarking upon a GCSE mathematics course at the college. As one parent explained:

*"Marie was great at putting us at ease. The first adult session on the family numeracy project was terrifying for me. When she got the test out in that first session, I thought I was going to faint but then you came in (this researcher was also the family numeracy project co-ordinator) and you took part and made it funny saying things like 'I can't do fractions, I'm going to get these wrong'. Well then I thought to myself 'just give it a go, it's meant to be a laugh. Even she isn't taking it seriously. As the weeks went on and we did budgeting for meals and measuring for carpets I began to really look forward to it. I couldn't believe I could do maths, I thought I was rubbish at it. I certainly was when I was at school. A few of us were concerned that we would lose all our new found skills at maths if we didn't keep it up. We were shocked on two counts, one that we were enjoying it and wanted it more but two, that someone was listening to us and really did their best to get us some more teaching. I certainly couldn't believe it could happen. No-one had listened before. "*

The mothers discussed how their initial involvement in the family numeracy pilot had reawakened their interest in learning. Lorraine discussed her learning journey.

*'After the college came into the school and gave us more maths, I realised that I actually wasn't that bad at maths. I had been running the play group on a volunteer basis and had really enjoyed that. I started to look into further training opportunities. I had no qualifications but I thought if I could use my experience in looking after children, I would quite like to get a job in that area. After the college maths course in school I felt confident enough to go to college. I went to college with a few of the other mams and nearly died when I got my GCSE maths. Well that was it, I kept going and three year later I qualified as a nursery nurse. I honestly wouldn't have done any of this if I hadn't gone into school to Josh with his maths. Well that's what I thought I was doing, anyway.'*

The ways in which family learning has served to foster and develop relationships between home and school is a common theme in the parental involvement and family learning literature. Brooks (1998, p 03) in his evaluation of the fourteen pilot family numeracy programmes reported that *'Parents increased their contact with their child's class teacher by the end of the course and were more involved with school activities and supporting in class'*. Alexander (2005, p 50) supports this argument and suggest that schools need to *'Create relationships of mutual respect and honesty with children, parents, carers and families.'*

#### **7.4.3 Parents understanding and support of numeracy development**

As most parents expressed a need to learn more about how both numeracy was taught in school and how they could support their children's numeracy development, these two aspects of the initiative have been considered together in this section. While the family numeracy pilot was focused on enhancing two aspects of mathematics: using and understanding number and using and understanding mathematical language; the key finding from the interviews revealed that the idea that maths could be 'fun' was the main outcome for parents and children involved in family numeracy.

The parents interviewed all discussed their concern about their ability to support their children's numeracy. They considered that maths skills learned in school a generation ago had been forgotten and that new methods of teaching number were an area into which they were unhappy about being inducted into. The parents all described the course as *'definitely worthwhile'* and talked about how their

involvement had resulted in their feeling much more confident. This motif of increased confidence on the parents recurs in the data. The Parent and Child sessions were described by parents as both 'educational' and 'fun'. No negative opinions were expressed about the course from those who had attended, one stating that she 'absolutely loved the course'.

All three parents interviewed thought that this early involvement in family numeracy not only had a beneficial effect on their children's early mathematical development and progress but that the exposure to the way in which maths is taught in school was described as 'an eye opener' for many of the parents. The parents all expressed pleasure that maths seemed to have a more practical element to it than when they were at school. They agreed that maths was more fun for their children. However, alongside the result that maths appeared to be fun for the children involved, it must also be noted that the children also made progress in their mathematical ability. As the results from the yearly collection of the children's mathematics results reveal, this progress, albeit small, continued year on year.

The parents interviewed discussed how the school had held an evening event designed to raise awareness of the new National Numeracy Strategy. One mother described the experience:

*"I said to him, erm, I don't know why we're going 'cos Lynne has told us all about the National Numeracy Strategy and how our children will be the first lot of children to have it. I told him that you had said that the main difference was that this new way of teaching was actually going back to the old way of teaching, being able to reckon up in your head quickly like me gran could do. I told him that you said the kids wouldn't have to sit for hours now completing worksheets."*

Another mum discussed the parent and child sessions within the family numeracy pilot.

*"I liked the handouts you gave us, can you remember them? When we did one to one correspondence you gave us a handout with ideas for things we could do at home, like setting the table, sharing sweets and things. I found that really useful. I thought it was great that we*

*were involved in something so new; actually two new things because they linked in didn't they?"*

The third mother discussed the ways in which new mathematical concepts were introduced to the group. She discussed how the family numeracy practitioner (me) had introduced the notion of mental imagery to the group.

*"I'll never forget the day you told us that the National Numeracy Strategy expected children to do something like mental imagery. It was a great moment when you got the children to demonstrate what it actually was.....you got the children to close their eyes and imagine the 'aqua-blaster' at the leisure centre. Then, you asked them to imagine the life guard was standing at the bottom of the steps up to the aqua-blaster and that there were five kids waiting to go up. He let two go and you asked the kids to shout out how many were still in the queue. I'll never forget the sight of them four year olds with their eyes closed all shouting out the right answer. You showed us that our kids were capable of far more than we thought they were."*

Central to the family numeracy scheme was the production of activity games that formed part of a Take Home Pack. This enabled shared learning in the school setting had a direct carry over into the home. As a result of this increasingly integrated approach to children's learning, number activities began to permeate more aspects of family life. Jackie, Jamie's mum said:

*'My involvement in family numeracy has taught me that maths isn't just about adding and filling in sums on worksheets. It's about sorting, matching, sequencing, counting and measuring. We learnt that maths is all around us, on doors, buses, car number plates, in shops and in the home. Maths can be fun, playing games, singing number rhymes, counting the stairs, pairing socks- even setting the table!'*

Because of their involvement in playing maths games with their children from an early age, the parents had attempted to continue this long after the initiative had ended. With the support of the EAZ, the

primary schools embarked on a massive programme of putting together maths games take home packs for all age ranges within their schools. This was seen as a very valuable resource by the parents. Parents were particularly pleased when their child was given a maths take home pack to bring home which dealt with a mathematical topic which their children were struggling with. One parent discussed how the 'Make Ten' game had enabled their son to make sense of tens and units. This mum discussed how the whole family had played their particular maths game in order to help the boy grasp the concept of ten units making a ten and ten tens making one hundred.

*'My husband couldn't believe that a simple game involving 100 straws and two die would help our son 'get' tens and units. When we all played it as a family, the penny finally dropped for Christopher and we were delighted. Who would have thought that playing a game would help? Much better than a homework sheet like he gets now.'*

In an area where some fathers worked away from or lived away from their children, the Take Home Packs were also useful to involve other family members in supporting numeracy learning.

Two of the parents said that when they were helping their children at home with home-work, they were more confident because of the work they had done with the adult basic skills tutor on how children learn mathematics. Two of the parents said they were pleased with their child's progress throughout their primary stage of education and were particularly pleased that they had taken part in family numeracy as they thought this had gone some way to stimulating their child's interest in mathematics.

One parent whose child had scored 7 out of 8 in the pre family numeracy baseline assessment test, considered that while their child had had fun during the ten weeks of family numeracy, involvement had had no impact on the child's progress or ability. This mother considered that her child's scores in annual tests and SAT's would have been as good had their child not been involved in family numeracy. However she did welcome the opportunity to spend some time with her child during his first few weeks at school and considered that involvement in the project had gone some way in settling her child into school.

High levels of communication between parents and children within the Parent and Child sessions provided opportunities for parents to gain insight into how teachers and other parents related to children, talking to them and discussing with them rather than shouting. This widened the range of strategies that parents were able to use when interacting with their own children and thereby increased their capacity to support children's numeracy and learning in general.

Another parent discussed how the take home maths games provided the family with something which they 'could all do together'. This acted as a stimulus for other home family activities such as playing scrabble and monopoly. This mother said that as a child she could not remember playing such family games and was thrilled that she could provide this experience and memory for her own children. She said it meant that instead of watching 'telly when there was nothing on' the family played games. Her partner, who also could not remember playing games as a child, had bought books and card and domino games. This parent reasoned that perhaps she and her partner enjoyed playing the games more than their children.

*'Sometimes when the phone used to ring, we all ignored it. We were frightened to get sidetracked from the game. One Christmas we bought the youngest a dart board. By the end of the Christmas holiday, we were all great at counting back from 180'. I know it sounds daft but what a great skill to give your child.'*

Notions of the potential of parental empowerment are a broader pattern to emerge within this data set. Where parents and teachers had been successful in developing '*relationships of mutual respect and honesty*' (Alexander, 2005, p50), the parents felt empowered to support their children's numeracy development. This aspect of parental engagement work is given more credence from Alexander (2005, p50) who advises '*To put the needs of children and parents at the centre of learning all schools need to.....enable parents and the people who work with them to really understand the importance of parents as educators and what that means in practice.*'

#### 7.4.4 Parental involvement and personal development as learners

Of the three parents interviewed, all three claimed that their involvement in family numeracy had resulted in them either going onto further learning and skills development or further involvement in early years area based initiatives. Two of the parents discussed the impact on their own mathematical learning. Initially reluctant to address their own numeracy skills, these parents who possessed no formal qualifications, found that they actually enjoyed the sessions with the adult basic skills tutor from the college. Due to demand the tutor organised a follow on course for parents interested in brushing up on their maths skills. This course took place in the family learning room in the school ensuring that the parents were not intimidated by the requirement to attend the course at the local college. This went a long way to build the confidence of these young unqualified parents. When this course ended, the two parents felt confident enough to enrol on a GCSE course and ultimately ended up training as nursery nurses and are currently employed in schools within the community in this research.

The other mother described herself as not having the confidence to quite take this step.

*'When some of the mams went to college I knew I couldn't. I was so afraid of failure. However, a few years after being involved in family numeracy, the school introduced a family literacy project (This was actually an EAZ programme) and I went along to that. By this time Anne-Marie was in year 3 and the other two were in school so things were a bit easier. I then started helping out in school and things. Then I went along with Mrs X to some parents' conferences and workshops which were great. The next thing I knew I was training to be classroom assistant in school. I only got up to my stage one because I fell pregnant again but I know I can build on it when the little 'un starts school. I've got something to build on.'*

As Vincent (2000, p80) discusses, for many parents attendance at a family learning course often results in *'the injection of confidence and independence to which many attest as a result of the course.'*

Another parent who had been involved in the pilot family numeracy programme undertook classroom assistant courses. This parent appeared rather bitter as she applied three times for a classroom assistant post in the school and was not chosen. Having successfully completed classroom assistant courses at levels one and two, this mother finally secured employment in another school in the area in this role.

This is a common feature of parents' involvement in family learning. Brooks (1998, p03) in his evaluation of the fourteen pilot family numeracy projects reports that:

*'84% of parents gained at least one unit of accreditation in NumberPower or similar accreditation in those programmes that gave the opportunity to do so.'*

Parental aspirations to achieve a certificate or have their learning recognised in some way are a common theme in the parental involvement research literature. Vincent (2000) considers that attaining a certificate is an important motivator and tangible proof of achievement.

#### **7.4.5 Family life and parenting styles**

Alongside stories of playing more games as a family, carrying out more numeracy related activities in the home, being able to support their children's numeracy learning more effectively and realising that one little girl in the study (the eldest of three under four) was 'lovely'; stories of the impact this early involvement had had on family life and the development of parenting styles began to emerge. One mother discussed the way in which the pilot programme had gone some way in making her confront the issue that she did not possess any formal educational qualifications and that her life chances and those of her children would continue to be limited without them. This epiphany impacted significantly upon family life for this family as the mother embarked upon a quest to 'get up to speed'. Unfortunately as she followed her ambition to gain qualifications, her marriage broke down.

*'I was changing er; he wasn't and didn't want to. He thought women should stay in the home and bring the bairns up. Once I er, tasted that first success in getting my family numeracy certificate, I wanted more. I thought I was setting a good example to my kids. Erm, I wanted a good job to give us all a better life. Training to be a nursery nurse was the best thing I ever did, both in terms of learning for myself but also because I learnt more about parenting my own kids and supporting their learning.'*

Another mother discussed how as a young mother living away from her family, she had no one to turn to when facing parenting issues:

*'It was through talking to the other mams that I learnt about being a little bit more in control with my kids. When their dad left, I was totally responsible for them and I think they took the mickey a little bit, even though they were so young. When I went to toddlers, the other mams saw this and gave me advice. I remember one telling me to remember that I was the adult and that they were children and needed someone to give them boundaries.'*

Alexander and Clyne (1995) discuss the way in which family learning is not just concerned with education of the children involved. They discuss the way in which family learning can be a powerful stimulus for families to learn about roles, relationships and responsibilities in relation to the stages of family life including parenting education. This was given further weight within Excellence and Enjoyment (2003). The primary education strategy includes the following statement:

*"We believe that parental engagement work should support parents in helping their children to learn through family learning projects and also support for parenting skills."*

This statement sent out a clear message to educators about the role of education in the twenty first century. The idea that the delivery of education needs to be shared with parents is generally well accepted in the parental engagement field. However there is also a growing acknowledgement that some parents in the twenty first century may need some support in their parenting. Indeed in the Chancellor's pre-budget report, *Support for Parents: the Best Start for Children* (HM Treasury and DfES, 2005, p1), the new role of Parent Support Adviser (PSAs) was announced. This document placed PSAs within the Government's strategy to improve the life chances of children and young people and to deliver equality of opportunity, a strategy guided by:

*"three underpinning principles: rights and responsibilities: supporting parents to meet their responsibilities to their children; progressive universalism: support for all, with more support for those who need it most; and prevention: working to prevent poor outcomes for children, young people and their parents from developing in the first place."*

The parents in this study all discussed parenting issues as a preoccupying concern during the interviews. In this phase of the study, the mothers discussed their uncertainties of child rearing when their children were so young. The mothers all discussed that their children who took part in the pilot family numeracy project were challenging in different ways. The support networks and the development of services which were increasingly becoming available to the mothers were discussed in terms of becoming 'better parents'. This is a theme which is returned to in phase two of this study which examines both the mothers' and the fathers' perspectives of Sure Start in relation to supporting parenting.

### **7.5 The Four Cross Cutting Issues**

As already discussed the five themes emerged from the data. Progressive focusing (Strauss and Corbin, 1988) enabled me to code the data according to the five themes. However, during this process of categorising, coding and thematising, it also became apparent that four cross cutting issues were present within each of the themes. This was given further credence when I shared the interview transcripts with the mothers. The mothers reflected on their interviews and expanded upon the five main themes, often with reference to one or more of the four cross cutting issues.

#### **7.5.1 Parents experiences of schooling**

The first cross cutting issue concerns the parents' personal experiences of their own schooling. One mother reasoned that due to her negative school experiences, leaving school at fifteen to have a baby, she felt very negative about even stepping foot over the school door.

*"When I left school at fifteen, it was as if I proving the teachers right. They all said I would never do anything with my life. I think when he (child) started school and the teachers saw how young I was, I was just waiting for all of that bad stuff to start again."*

Webster-Stratton (1999) and Mills and Gale (2004) agree that any negative experiences that parents have had will make them anxious about being around schools and being able to deal with enquiries from the children that they feel they do not have the knowledge and skills to answer. However,

another mother interviewed, discussed the way in which the school staff were able to reassure her that she had a positive contribution to make:

*'It was amazing. There was I erm, scared to cross over the school door but when I did the er, staff were so friendly and welcoming. I couldn't believe the head teacher was making parents cups of coffee. She had always looked so stern before. Then when she started saying they could do with a hand erm photocopying and filing children's work, I was one of the first to volunteer. I started to feel part of the school team.'*

Building relationships with teaching staff was a common theme to emerge from the research. One mother revealed how, not long after the family numeracy course had ended, her son told her that the teacher had locked him in a cupboard at play time because he had been naughty. This parent explained how she had been initially very angry and had marched up to the school *'all guns blazing, ready for a fight'*. She explained how she had had very negative school experiences herself and had often felt *'persecuted'* by her teachers. By the time she had marched up to the school she felt well prepared to take on the authority of the head teacher.

*"I wasn't having anyone locking my bairn in a cupboard"*

The mother laughed as she recounted how the head teacher dealt with this accusation very calmly, even though, in this mother's words, she was *'seething'* with anger. She described how the head teacher simply took her to the classroom and challenged her to find a cupboard. The school building was an early 1970's design and therefore open plan. There were no cupboards, particularly walk in cupboards that locked. The issue was resolved quickly and enabled this young mum to have an early positive experience of her son's school and teachers. She was full of admiration for the way in which the head teacher handled what could have been a very awkward experience. The ways in which all three mothers developed a more positive approach to teachers and education is due to their early involvement in family numeracy alongside the positive experiences they subsequently had in their dealings with their children's school. The negative experiences they had had themselves in their own school career appeared to be negated with the more positive experience of their involvement in their children's early

schooling. As Easen, Kendall and Shaw (1992) discuss, until parents have some positive experiences of schooling, their earlier negative experiences continue to be the basis for thoughts, feelings and action. The second cross cutting theme which examines issues of self- esteem and confidence analyses the impact of the mothers' negative school experiences and how this influenced not only their attitude to their children's early education but contributed greatly to the way in which they regarded their own skills and abilities to support their children's learning and to with parent.

### **7.5.2 Self -esteem and confidence**

The second issue which is often a direct consequence of the first is low self- esteem and confidence. Low self esteem and low confidence amongst the pilot group of parents appeared to be prevalent. Indeed one mother said,

*“Being a mam erm was all I thought I was good at. I was er worried that if I became involved in helping her to learn school stuff, I wouldn't be able to do it and that I er, would be letting her down and me down and that other people, erm, those people who thought I had made a good job of being a mam would realise that that was all I could do. I couldn't take it that step forward.”*

Two of the mothers interviewed explained how after their initial involvement in family numeracy, they felt a little more confident and volunteered to help out in their child's classroom. One parent explained how she did not feel very confident hearing children read or even helping them in the art area but she did feel confident enough to photocopy worksheets for the teacher, file children's work, and sweep up sand, mix paints and wash paint pots. Another mother explained how initially reluctant to work with other children, the class teacher had asked her to hear children reading and she described feeling empowered helping a child who was 'stuck' on a word by employing the technique she had used with her own child. She encouraged this child to 'sound out' and this resulted in the child making progress and the woman gaining confidence in her ability to support other children's learning.

One mother who gained employment in a local bakery during the family numeracy pilot explained that her confidence in maths had improved to such a degree that she felt able to apply for a part time position in the bakery:

*'I wouldn't have applied if Marie (adult basic skills tutor) hadn't explained that for most people the time factor is the problem most people have with adding up and multiplying. Once she explained that it didn't matter how long it took to get an answer as long as we got the right answer, I found that freed me up.'*

Once again this is a recurring theme in the parental involvement literature. Cummings, in Whalley (2000, p129) discusses the life changing potential of family learning and parenting support programmes:

*"..the general consensus is that the group is definitely a confidence builder and in some cases, mine included, it can lead to a major career change."*

### **7.5.3 Teacher and parental roles**

The third issue which also relates to the parents' past experience is a suspicion about the reasons why schools would want to involve such people as themselves. All three parents discussed how 'uncomfortable' they felt having 'extra' contact with the school. The parents discussed how they were initially suspicious of efforts to involve them and considered that it was the teachers' job to teach their children. As Christina, one of the mothers said:

*"When we got the letter about being involved in the family numeracy I thought 'Why do we have to be involved? Teachers should just get on and teach the kids, that's what we send them to school for.'"*

In the interviews with the mothers involved in the initiatives, a key theme to emerge was the initial 'reluctance' of the mothers to become involved. Many of them posed the question: "Why do I have to be involved?" While it could be argued that the parent's initial understanding of the concept of family learning was subjective, I did wonder whether these mothers actually had a point. However, the challenge of encouraging these parents to support their children's learning and to see things in 'new ways' (Easen, Kendall and Shaw, 1992), was exciting to me as a practitioner. Acknowledging that the parents were 'experts on their own children' (Athey, 1990, p60) enabled the setting of parameters for a

'different' relationship to emerge between this set of parents and me as a practitioner. As the weeks progressed and the parents talked to me about their children's progress and abilities, their confidence grew and their attitudes slowly changed with their initial reluctance transformed into enthusiasm. Mezirow (1997) refers to this process as '*perspective transformation*', where people begin to see things differently and behave differently. Seeing their children's learning and the impact of their own involvement in a new light enabled the parents to feel differently about themselves and their children. As Easen et al (1992, p294) argue '*Through the validation of their experience, parents' self esteem and confidence in their role as a parent and as an individual is enhanced.*'

By the end of the pilot, the parents had identified themselves as family learners because of the benefits they had experienced by being involved in family learning. As Epstein (1990) concludes from her studies of parental involvement, almost all parents of all backgrounds care about the education of their children. She suggests that it is not a lack of interest which leads to low levels of parental involvement; rather it is the fact that so few schools let parents know what is expected from them or how they might contribute to their child's education which is the problem.

One mother described how being involved in helping out in the classroom had empowered her to support her own child's learning at home:

*'I knew teaching methods had changed since I was at school erm, but I hadn't really understood just how er, different it was. Watching Mrs X teach the children, just the way she spoke to them, er, gently asking questions really made me think about how I tried to help my child at home. After that I stopped buying those books, er, you know the ones where the children fill in pages of worksheets of sums or spellings and I started doing things like cooking with him and reading to him at night time, spelling as we went along. Once he started to learn to write, we started leaving little notes for each other. It was lovely.'*

Despite the negative experiences and personal feelings of the parents involved in this study, there was the desire to provide a better life for their children and it was this that helped them to overcome what was sometimes an almost pathological fear of the school environment. Alongside this was a growing

acceptance that by involving themselves in the school activities, this could also have an impact on their own personal development and growth as a parent and as a learner.

One mother discussed how in the first few sessions of family numeracy she had been very frustrated at her child's abilities. The making of the game caused this parent considerable stress as her child was not able to colour the game board in 'properly' as she could not keep within the lines.

*'I actually think you've got it on video from all those years ago. I was mortified when you played it back to the group. All you can hear is me telling her off and her crying. It wasn't until you took me to one side and explained that at four she shouldn't be expected to be able to colour in accurately. Do you remember? There was even a point when she was making her game and I made a separate one because I wanted it to be perfect.'*

This particular mother was a very young mother and had three children under the age of four. The child with whom she participated in family numeracy was the eldest of these children. This mother readily admits she was rather harsh on her daughter and expected a lot from her. However, she claims her involvement in the pilot family numeracy and her subsequent attendance at the school based playgroup was responsible for her growing awareness of 'how to be a better mam'.

*'I thought she was a bit behind the other children in the group, that's why I was so hard on her. When I realised that some of them could cut but others couldn't, some of them could colour in the lines but others couldn't, some of them knew their numbers; you see Anne- Marie did, but others couldn't, I started to clam down a bit. I started to think that maybes I had done a canny job teaching her, her numbers?'*

Easen, Kendall and Shaw (1992, p 287) discuss this as a feature of initiatives which enable parents and children to learn together:

*"Unremarkably, the parents' learning process appears to be similar to the child's learning process as described by Athey; that is, both children and parents have developed cognitive*

*structures which have built up from experience and which underpin behaviour. First hand experience is therefore central to the learning process for children and parents.”*

This process of *'perspective transformation'*, (Mezirow, 1997) where people begin to see things differently and behave differently emerged as a common feature in both phases of this study. Indeed it appeared to be prevalent in the parental engagement work in all three of the early year's area based initiatives.

#### **7.5.4 Parental aspirations**

When the mothers reflected on reasons for their initial involvement, without exception all of them said that they became involved because they, *'wanted life to be better for their children'*. This is a common theme in studies into parental involvement (Epstein, 1985, Hornby, 2000, Smith, Haggart and Dutton, 2005). One mother discussed the way she considered her life chances had been affected by what she saw as her limited success at school.

*'I wasn't thick at school but I wasn't in the top set either. I was like in a middle band and I think we were forgotten about, just left to get on. I left school bored with the whole thing and with no proper qualifications as I got pregnant and had to leave before sitting my exams. They said I could come back and take them but after the baby was born, well.....Then when I had the kids, I really impressed upon them how important it was to stick in at school. I am so delighted that x is on the gifted and talented programme. He is so much better at maths than either me or his dad ever were. He keeps talking about going to University or getting a well paid job. We were never encouraged to think like that. I always knew I'd be a mam and my husband knew he'd be going down the pit or to the ship yards. That's all there was.'*

One of the mothers discussed the way in which being involved in family numeracy *'helped me to see how maths was taught so that helped me to help Jamie.'*

Interestingly, the mothers and subsequently the fathers interviewed in this study discussed bonding with their children and all equated time spent with their children as useful time with their children. The

mother discussed earlier who had three children under the age of four discussed how as the weeks progressed on the family numeracy pilot, she grew to relish the one-to-one time she was able to spend with her eldest daughter:

*'After a few weeks I looked at her one day singing her little number rhyme with the rest of her friends and thought just how hard I had been on her. Her brother was born when she was fourteen months old and because she was a clever bright little thing, I started to depend on her to fetch and carry and later to look after her little brother while I bathed or fed the new baby. Only four years old and I put so much on her. She was just a bairn herself. Coming along to family numeracy didn't stop that mind, but it did make me appreciate her more and think what a lovely little girl she was. I felt terrible. I had been so busy with the other two; I forgot just how canny she was.'*

Bonding with their children was a common cross cutting theme and is indicative of Mezirow's (1997) '*perspective transformation*' in action. Lorraine discussed how playing maths games had enabled the whole family to enjoy spending time playing and learning together:

*'Sometimes when the phone used to ring, we all ignored it. We were frightened to get sidetracked from the game. One Christmas we bought the youngest a dart board. By the end of the Christmas holiday, we were all great at counting back from 180. I know it sounds daft but what a great skill to give your child.'*

Enjoying spending time together as a family was a feature of this phase of the study. As previously stated all of the mothers interviewed equated time spent with their children as useful time with their children.

#### **7.6 The Findings from the Family Numeracy children's interviews:**

The children's interviews were analysed according to five main categories or primary concepts. Presenting the children's reflections on their experiences of their early involvement encouraged me to consider the role of reflexivity. In this study reflexivity worked as it enabled me to make informed

interpretations from what the children were telling me they had experienced, observed and felt. As Aubrey, et al (2000, p5) discuss:

*'How you systematically and logically draw together data from the raw processes, how you analyse the data, the rigour in your analysis, the interpretation of those data, and the subsequent dissemination of the research results are vital elements of the research process, demanding many research skills as well as integrity.'*

Central to my concern was a consideration of the most effective way to present data gathered from three children's interviews which would not only enable me to construct an understanding of their experiences from their perspectives but would also draw out common themes and apply codes to the data. When a reflexive process was applied to the children's interviews, an inductive procedure was used to interpret the meanings made by the children of their experiences of an early years area based initiative. This enabled me to construct an understanding of their experiences from their perspectives. As a result five categories or primary concepts emerged in relation to the children's experiences. When assigned to the data produced from the three interviews and compared across the data sets, further themes were identified which enabled me to refine meaning and which in turn reflected common and individual perspectives. Although the children themselves did not use the following terms to describe the impact of their involvement in family numeracy, there were five main ways in which their involvement had manifested itself. Labelling or categorising the children's responses according to the five main categories enabled generic issues to be discussed and the children's responses are used to demonstrate broader patterns within the data. The first four categories are concerned with the children's attitudes to learning. The final category surrounds the developing relationships of the children and parents. The five categories are:

- Confidence in Numeracy
- Interest in Numeracy
- Attainment in Numeracy
- Ideas about learning
- Relationships with parents

The use of data gathered from only three children was considered to be sufficient for the purposes of this study but the findings are not generalisable. As already outlined in chapter five, I was constrained by the amount of responses I received to my initial request for the original family numeracy families to take part in this study. The findings reflect my previous study (McKenna, 1998) which aimed to elicit the perspectives of young children during their experiences of an early year's area based initiative which provided an early intervention to support children's mathematical learning. The data presented here provides an understanding of what it means to participate in such an initiative and the findings add to the body of literature developing from the fields of family learning, parental involvement and parental engagement literature. Children have individual perspectives based on what they know and understand about their lives and the growing emphasis on giving young children a voice in research (Fraser et al, 2004) enabled the three young people in this study to discuss and reflect upon their experiences of family numeracy. Using data from the parents, the children and the practitioners involved in this study provided a triangulation of data for the study. The children's interviews cannot claim to be typical of all children's experiences of family numeracy. However what they do present are authentic voices of three children from which perspectives can be identified through the process of examining, ordering and classifying the data.

### **7.6.1 Confidence in Numeracy**

The first category to emerge from this data set surrounds the notion of the children developing a greater confidence in numeracy. Though their involvement in Family Numeracy was designed to foster home school relationships, an important aspect of this was that their involvement would also impact upon early numeracy levels. Developing confidence in numeracy is generally accepted as a contributing factor to success in the subject (Aitken 1970, Buxton 1981, Merttens and Vass, 1993b and Thompson 1997).

The generic issue of generating a positive attitude to mathematics is a much researched area. As Neale (1969, p636) wrote:

*'..positive or negative attitudes towards mathematics appear to have only a light causal influence on how mathematics is learned, remembered and used.'*

The Cockcroft Report (1982) discusses that many parents have a fear and dislike of mathematics, and reason that this is perhaps as a result of their own unhappy school mathematics experiences. The report warns that these negative feelings and attitudes may then be passed on to children. Buxton (1981) seeks to find an explanation as to why so many adults have negative attitudes to mathematics. He suggests that mathematics is a subject which because it is based on reason, rarely engages the emotions. As Ofsted (1997, p 6) explain:

*“We tend to regard ‘Not being very good at maths’ and ‘having no head for figures’ as acceptable- innumeracy seems to be tolerated to a degree which illiteracy certainly is not.”*

Therefore, the issue of developing confidence in numeracy is a one which necessarily preoccupies mathematics educators. The ways in which we have been encouraged to develop confidence in numeracy have again been numerous and have generally been categorised under the ‘Let’s make Maths Fun’ banner. The introduction of the National Numeracy Strategy (DfEE 1998b, p 50) has had much to contribute to this very important aspect of mathematics education. Recommending that schools *‘provide a supportive climate in which the educational changes can take place- both through the active involvement and support of parents and by improving the profile of mathematics in society at large.’*

One of the ways in which the family numeracy project could be considered to be successful was the incorporation of maths games as the main teaching approach. Maths games were employed throughout the project with the children and their parents making maths games to play at home and access to maths take home packs as key features of the project. The aim was that through playing maths games a positive attitude to maths would be engendered and the children would learn the required mathematical concepts as they played the games.

One of the children interviewed expressed surprise that family numeracy had not been widely available and that he had actually been one of the first children in the country to participate. He described how playing maths games had become a feature of his childhood.

*'I remember bringing the Take Home Packs home and playing them with my mam, dad and brother and sister. When my mam started helping out in the school, Miss X (Head Teacher) wanted the Take Home packs right throughout the school. My mam and some of the other mams helped to do that. That meant that I got to try out most of the packs before they went on the trolley.'*

When this boy was questioned about what impact he thought playing maths games had had, he considered this carefully and suggested this was why he was so confident in maths:

*'I feel like I added, took away, looked for shapes, made dough numbers, spotted car number plates, all the time. I really do think that I wouldn't be as good at maths if I hadn't played all those games. It made me feel confident about numbers, shapes, fractions, angles and stuff.'*

This was a common response amongst all children interviewed in this study. As analysis of this data set progressed, it gradually became evident that categories I imposed upon this data set were applicable across the lived experience of the children interviewed. The impact of the games aspect of family numeracy appeared to have influenced future mathematical learning for all children involved in this study.

### **7.6.2 Interest in Numeracy**

The second finding illustrates the extent to which the children's involvement also went some way to engender a greater interest in numeracy. Although it is difficult to measure whether the children would have taken such an interest in numeracy if they had not been involved in family numeracy, the vignettes provided by the children seem to suggest that their early involvement did indeed have an impact in their future success. Two of the children from the pilot claimed that not only was mathematics their 'best' subject at school, it was also their favourite. Anne Marie discussed how she was naturally interested in mathematics and wondered if her mothers' constant references to numeracy in particular, encouraged a greater interest in numeracy.

*'I remember going to the supermarket and my mam used to turn it into a lesson. She used to leave me at the veg aisle and ask me to put 12 potatoes in a bag and then weigh them. I would do it and when she returned and I gave her an answer she would ask something like, 'well what would 6 potatoes weigh then?' I think this made me interested in numeracy.'*

In a discussion about Anne Marie's future, we discussed the qualifications needed to be a teacher. She told me that she was good at maths. I told Anne Marie that I preferred English to maths when I was at school. This discussion then focussed on possible reasons for Anne Marie liking and being interested in mathematics. This was a recurring theme across all three interviews with the family numeracy children. Jamie discussed how his success with mathematics had served to keep him interested in the subject. However, it was Josh who was able to make the link between his early involvement in family numeracy, his future interest in numeracy and its applications to other subjects:

*'I think it started with maths. When I went to the comp I was quickly identified as being good at maths. That felt good. I had done well with me SAT's at xxx school. When I was told that I was going into the top set for maths at the comp, I thought if you can be good at maths and if people think you are clever with maths, you should be clever at everything. I started to like being thought of as a clever lad. Me mam and dad are always bragging about me in front of me nana and me aunties and uncles. I like it.'*

The way in which the children discussed their attitudes to mathematics learning is indicative of the notion that success in a subject engenders a greater interest. This is a common feature of the teaching and learning literature. (Jensen 1995, Goleman 1996 and Gilbert 2002) Indeed, Woolfolk et al (2008, p 452) assert:

*"Learners are more likely to pay attention to, learn about, and remember events, images and readings that provoke emotional responses."*

The children were well able to discuss their emotional responses to a range of family numeracy activities. One of the boys discussed his frustration at some of the tasks which evolved from family numeracy:

*'I remember pairing socks. What was that all about? It was dead boring.'*

He went on to discuss how he had enjoyed playing the maths games.

*'I remember the games we made in family numeracy. We played them for years.... years after the family numeracy finished. I liked keep getting them out and having a play with them even though they were too simple for me as I grew up.'*

The emphasis on making 'maths fun' was a central feature of the family numeracy project. The idea to use a games based approach to mathematics was based on the body of research which demonstrates that interests increase when a learner feels competent. Alongside this, the idea that even if pupils are not initially interested in a subject or an activity, they may develop interests as they experience success (Stipek, 2002) was a consideration.

### **7.6.3 Attainment in Numeracy**

The third finding which is evident in both the children's end of Key Stage Two SAT's scores but perhaps more importantly is revealed through the interviews, is the children's attainment in numeracy. One child explained how '*being good at maths*' had influenced his motivation to learn and make progress in other subjects:

*"When I knew I was good at maths, I started to try with other subjects, especially spelling. I hate spelling. But I started to really work at it and learn my spellings and think about words before I wrote them down.'*

When probed further and asked why he began to put effort into other areas of learning, this boy's response was insightful:

*“I thought if you can be good at maths and if people think you are clever with maths, you should be clever at everything. I started to like being thought of as a clever lad.”*

Alongside these findings, two inter-related themes emerged from the children’s interviews as they discussed the way their involvement in family numeracy created positive relationships with their parents and also how this involvement and the mathematically focused activities which the children were encouraged to play at home, helped them to learn about learning. The idea that success in learning results in attainment is a much researched area of teaching and learning (Ainley, Hidi and Berndorf, 2002 and Stipek, 2002). St Pierre et al (1994) researched the impact of programmes designed to work with young children and their families. The research centred on ascertaining whether such programmes had an impact on the attainment of the children involved. The research suggested that these programmes helped to break the recurring intergenerational cycle of low attainment.

#### **7.6.4 Ideas about learning**

The idea that early involvement in family numeracy engendered a positive attitude to learning in general for the families involved is a recurring theme to emerge from this research. This data set reveals that early involvement in this particular family numeracy project resulted in developing confidence, interest and attainment in numeracy. The children’s responses can be categorized according to their interest and emotions. It appears from this that once the children had reflected upon their experiences of family numeracy and mathematics learning, they were then able to consider ideas about learning per se. As Alexander and Murphy (1998) discuss, learners are more likely to pay attention to, learn about, and remember events, images and readings that provoke emotional responses. Renninger, Hidi and Krapp, (1992) discuss the ways in which learning is also related to interests. The children interviewed in this phase of the research discussed the ways in which their emotions and interests were engaged.

One of the boys provided an insight into the ways in which family numeracy and the activities associated with it had impacted upon his and his family’s ideas about learning.

*'Me mam says going to erm, er, family numeracy was great because er, she was no good at maths and when I started school she had been buying those books from WH Smiths, erm, where you complete pages of sums. Then when we did family numeracy she realised that that wasn't important, knowing how to do maths was more important than being able to write numbers.'*

The other boy interviewed who was on the Gifted and Talented register for mathematics at his comprehensive school considered that the parental involvement aspect of the initiative was largely responsible for the way in which his parents' viewed learning.

*'My mam and dad have always sat me down with homework and made sure they understood how to do it and made sure they could help me. My mam says this started with her involvement in family numeracy and just carried on.'*

As Woolfolk et al, (2008) discuss, learning and information processing are influenced by emotion and interest. The children revealed in this data set that their thoughts about learning were indeed influenced in this way. An adjunct to this data analysis was the ways in which the children described the development of their relationships with their parents both during and subsequent to their initial involvement in family numeracy.

#### **7.6.5 Relationships with parents**

One of the boys interviewed discussed how playing the games had enhanced the closeness within his family.

*'I erm, remember playing the games on dark winter nights and stuff. I remember erm, my mam turning the telly off and saying 'Let's play a maths game', I loved it, especially when my dad joined in too. Sometimes the games were far too easy and didn't last long but it was nice all of us sitting down together and playing.'*

Anne-Marie discussed how playing the game in her house was particularly difficult because of the presence of her two younger siblings. However, her mother started to introduce strategies to overcome this:

*'When me mam and dad split up, me dad used to come for the other two on a Sunday and take them to me grans'. Me mam used to tell me dad to leave me with her and we played the maths games. I loved those times, just me and me mam together. It wasn't the games I enjoyed I don't think, it was the opportunity to be alone with me mam.'*

While Athey (1990) argues that not enough attention is paid to the learning which can occur between a parent and a child, Anderson (1997) discusses the benefits of the parent/child relationship when both are involved in a joint mathematical learning experience. Both Anderson (1997) and Rogoff (1990) believe that when a child is supported in their learning, the learning which then occurs is of a high quality.

*"The difference in the mathematical experiences suggest that the parent mediator was a crucial element in creating a context for mathematical learning."*

(Anderson, 1997, p 508)

The social constructivist view of learning where children need interaction and reflection to facilitate learning sees the adult role in such learning situations as crucial. It is widely accepted that simply providing experiences on their own will not mean that learning and development will automatically follow (Vygotsky 1978, Athey 1990). The adult role of 'scaffolder' (Vygotsky 1978) is seen as crucial, supporting the child's learning and encouraging the journey from novice to expert. This social perspective of education sees learning as a social process where any learning which occurs between the child and others becomes the basis for the learning which then occurs within the child. Social relationships therefore are seen as important because they provide the child with the culturally approved meaning of experiences. Rogoff (1990) theorises that young children come to know their world as a result of social interaction with others. Research by Romberg (1992) has shown that children actively construct their mathematical knowledge as they interpret their experiences and create a theory which makes sense to them. The idea of children constructing meanings from social situations

when they are supported by a significant adult contributes to the emergence of a new paradigm of parental involvement.

### 7.7 Overview

A return to the parents and children who had been involved in the pilot family numeracy programme was a most rewarding experience for me as a researcher. The participants had already been involved in the research for my M.Ed dissertation and I had visited them over the intervening years, attending their children's school Christmas party each year and visiting the school each summer to collect the results from the children's yearly tests. As the parents had already given their approval for the school to share the results of their children's yearly optional tests with me, the parents were well aware and very interested that I was carrying out this longitudinal study. Indeed one of the reasons for the parents' retention rates on the pilot programme could be attributed to their desire to *'do the best'* for their children. The second reason for such a high retention rate could be attributed to the effect of Mezirow's perspective transformation (1997). The four cross cutting issues to emerge from this phase of the study; parents experiences of schooling, self-esteem and confidence, teacher and parents roles and parental aspirations, was very much influenced by perspective transformation as the parents began to see their children's and their own learning abilities in a new way. As the parents saw their children learn and achieve and their own involvement began to make an impact, it was clear that they began to feel differently about themselves and their children.

The dilemma of being both researcher and having my past involvement in the pilot programme has been discussed thoroughly in chapter four but I think it worth returning to here. As a qualitative researcher I used the *'metaphor of montage'* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p4-5) *'to present different voices, different perspectives, points of view and angles of vision.'* in an attempt to *'create spaces for give- and -take between reader and writer.'*

However, one of the main issues during this phase of the research was around the validity of analysing data from the children's interviews which were asking children to reflect on an initiative which took place seven years previously. As Kellett and Ding (2004, p, 166) advise, children aged around the age of ten *"still carry reliability health warnings"*.

From the beginning of the data collection, I was mindful to comply with the three components of qualitative data, *data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification* (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Therefore during the analytical process, meaning was refined as 'themes' from the research emerged. From the themes further meaning was extracted identifying specific attributes or features to describe the children's experiences in particular. It gradually became evident across this data set that the categories and themes were common amongst and applicable to the children's experiences. Coffey and Atkinson (1996, p29) explain the importance of generating concepts to understand the data and of attaching codes to the data. They describe coding as a heuristic process '*providing the researcher with ways of interacting with and thinking about the data.*'

As I analysed the children's interviews, regularities and patterns in the data were noted. Miles and Huberman (1994, p11) write that initially these are '*held lightly, maintaining openness and scepticism*'. They maintain that conclusions may be '*vague....then increasingly explicit and grounded.*' As we can see from this process of analysis, the final conclusions may not appear until data collection is over, but they could be considered to be '*prefigured from the beginning*'.

They discuss that conclusions are '*verified as the analyst proceeds*' and '*meanings emerging from the data have to be tested for their plausibility....sturdiness....confirmability- that is their validity.*' Brooker (2001) suggests that it is through triangulation or from interviews with others that validity can be assured.

Using data from the parents, the children and the practitioners involved in this study provided a triangulation of data for the study. The parents' interviews certainly reinforce some of the key findings to emerge from the children's interviews. An example of this can be found in section 7.4.5 which examines the parents' perspectives on the ways in which early involvement had impacted upon family life and the development of parenting styles and section 7.6.5 which examines the children's perspectives on their relationships with their parents. The vignettes provided by Christina (mum) and Anne- Marie (child) illustrate the way in which involvement in family numeracy had enabled both mother and child to spend more time with each other, when the presence of younger siblings had prevented this at home. Both Christina and Anne- Marie also talked about strategies they had put into

place to extend this 'time together' to the home context. The game playing aspect of family numeracy had engendered a developing closeness between the mother and daughter with Christina admitting that *'I forgot just how canny she was'*.

The findings from phase one of this study and the employment of progressive focusing (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) served to aid the structure of the development of phase two of the study. While the children's interviews revealed that the children were mainly concerned with confidence, interest and attainment in numeracy; the early involvement in family numeracy also enabled the children to consider their relationships with parents and their ideas about learning. This led me to consider the educational experiences of the parents involved in phase two of this study and resulted in the inclusion of the parents' life history interview where the parents were asked to consider whether their own educational experiences had helped to construct their life courses, had an impact on individual and group identity and whether any significant learning experiences had occurred in the lives of the parents involved. Key issues to emerge from this phase of the study for the mothers centred on issues to do with history and culture, self esteem and confidence, roles of teachers as opposed to mothers and the aspirations and hope the mothers had for their children. The sub-themes emerging from phase one of the study were concerned with parents' perceived impact of involvement; relationships and involvement in the school; understanding how numeracy was taught in school; ways in which the parents' supported the development of their children's numeracy; ways in which early involvement had impacted on family life and the development of parenting styles, and ways in which early involvement had impacted upon parents' personal development as learners. These emerging themes helped to frame the 'Parents' Perception' interviews used in phase two of the study which examined whether one initiative was the catalyst for future involvements in initiatives in the community alongside an examination of whether parents' involvement contributed to their self-development as a parent, the development of parenting skills and their levels of participation. Similarly, the parents' thoughts on the three issues which emerged from the research; communities labelled disadvantaged, short term funding and initiatives which failed to be 'joined up' were also included in the structure of the semi structured interviews used in phase two of the study. In the next chapter, the ways in which the parents involved in this study explore both the personal and the political and the historical and the cultural is discussed and analysed in depth.

## **Chapter 8: Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Results arising from Phase Two of the study**

### **8.0 Introduction**

In this chapter I will present, analyse and discuss the way in which phase two of this research contributed to the emergent picture of what it means to experience involvement in early year's area-based initiatives. I will also discuss some of the issues arising as the research progressed.

During June-September 2005, phase two of the research was conducted. During this time all parents interviewed, (which included three family numeracy mothers, two EAZ mothers, two Sure Start mothers and eight Sure Start fathers) were asked questions in two separate interviews designed to enable the parents to discuss their life histories and to establish the parents' perspectives on their experiences of involvement in the initiatives.

This chapter therefore will attempt to draw all of the data from this phase of the research together and will examine the perspectives of the parents and the professionals involved in the three initiatives. Rather than follow a formulaic approach and reveal the data from each set of interviews, 'open coding' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was used to code the findings from the interviews in an attempt to reveal emerging themes and sub themes. Six particular images of the initiatives and four sub-themes to emerge from this phase of the study are presented, analysed and discussed.

### **8.1 Images of the initiatives**

The perspectives of both parents and professionals associated with the initiatives involved in this study contributed to the emergence of images of the initiatives. The interview data provided me with different images of the initiatives. This served to provide criteria for judging progress and the extent to which involvement was indeed contributing to a phenomenon of 'serial involvement' or 'initiative overload'.

Images of the initiatives were shaped, to some extent, by interviewees' roles and concerns. I discerned six particular images and found that some parents' views reflected a combination rather than a single notion of what type of services the initiatives should be offering. The images were concerned with parents attempts to describe the initiatives in terms of fostering 'involvement', 'participation' and 'partnership'; having an impact on parenting skills; relationships with their children and the

development of their self perception as a parent. In the same way the way in which the images were often viewed as a set of activities was discussed alongside the emerging view that the initiatives were contributing to the phenomena of initiative overload. Images of the community and its residents and images of the initiatives as a publicity campaign were also concerns discussed by the parents.

### **8.1.1 ‘Involvement’, ‘participation’ and ‘partnership’**

As already discussed in chapter two, the terms parental involvement, participation and partnership are often used interchangeably. In the light of this continuing debate and taking into consideration the policy developments and imposition of associated initiatives designed to engage and support families, it is increasingly important that we differentiate between the three terms and develop a common understanding of what each term actually means. In terms of this study, the emphasis whether it was involvement, participation or partnership appeared to change depending upon the context. In the family numeracy programme, the term family learning was used but such programmes have been accused of offering a compensatory approach (Hall, 1990). In the Education Action Zone, parental activity of all kinds was referred to as meeting the objective of ‘parental involvement’, even though parents are consistently referred to in the EAZ literature as ‘problems’ (Theakston et al, 2001).

However, this research revealed that it was in the Sure Start initiative, that the terms ‘involvement, participation and partnership’ were used interchangeably. One of the reasons for this could be that parental activity in the Sure Start programme was often initiated to meet a number of objectives and targets. Another explanation for this ‘blurring’ of the terms could be explained by the broader remit of Sure Start to engage parents. To be officially designated, a Sure Start Children’s Centre has to provide a basic level of service referred to as its ‘full core offer’. Sure Start Children’s Centres are intended to provide universal service for families and young children according to local need. The various ways with which Sure Start Children’s Centres in disadvantaged areas are expected to engage parents is strictly prescribed and according to government guidance (DfES, 2006b) must offer the following:

- Early Years Provision- with support for families of children with special needs and disabilities including early identification

- Outreach- with a programme of activities to raise community awareness, a co-ordinated programme of home visits, a system for referring families to other services and the identification of a key worker to work with families wherever possible
- Family Support- with information and activities for families and children in the area, support and advice on parenting, access to specialist services for families, activities to help parents and carers understand child development and strategies to increase the involvement of fathers
- Parental Involvement- with systems for user feedback and consultation, information sharing as well as opportunities for parents and carers to have a say in the provision of services
- Links to training and employment- with support for parents who want to train or work.

In both the Family numeracy and the Education Action Zone programmes, the objectives were distinct and clearly designed to meet fewer targets than the subsequent Sure Start programme. In Sure Start the focus on involvement, participation and partnership with parents has an emphasis on empowerment and personal development. This could be said to be building upon the objectives to involve parents in the family numeracy and the EAZ initiatives.

The unanimous opinion of those parents, who had been involved in Family Numeracy, whether it was with the pilot project or its subsequent incorporation into the EAZ, was that it was extremely important that they should be involved directly with their children's learning. The structure of family numeracy in both initiatives, with its many practical activities, meant that parents participated in learning with their children and with teaching staff. Relationships within this triumvirate were not perceived as hierarchical. Certainly, it was the intention of the course organizers that all should work *'as a team, as equals in children's education'* (McKenna, 1998).

One aspect of the involvement was the networking opportunities afforded to the parents. As one mother explained during her second interview:

*'I am new to the area, and being involved in this scheme and the courses put on for parents by the EAZ has helped me to make some friends among my child's friends' parents.'*

Locating the sessions within classrooms helped parents to find out more not only about children's learning but also about *'how schools operate'*. This increased appreciation of the role of the teacher (*'She's not an ogre'*, commented one mother) was a further contribution to closer home-school links.

During the first run through of the EAZ family numeracy scheme, it became noticeable that the courses were attended in general by parents who were already involved in the schools. Recognized as a feature of family learning programmes at the beginning of their provision (McKenna, 1998), it was during the second set of courses where parents discussed *'some new faces are appearing'*. Carers other than mothers were in the minority, but were beginning to attend. One set of parents, because of other commitments, 'shared' the workshop sessions. Grandparents attended in some cases. Ways of involving fathers more directly were discussed. Although some fathers did become involved in subsequent numeracy workshops, many parents interviewed considered that fathers were more willing to attend events such as sports days, and it would appear that supporting children's learning is still seen by many as *'a woman's job'*. Once again, this is a recurring theme in parental involvement research. McGivney, (1999b) in her research into the low participation of men considers that gendered roles in parenting may reinforce the view that learning is *'women's work'* and that supporting children's learning is what mothers do.

The parents interviewed were puzzled by and expressed impatience with the reluctance of some of the parents to become involved and attend the workshops. They were concerned about the relative impact on learning of children whose parents did not participate and thought that these children might be disadvantaged.

While all three initiatives were charged with the imperative to involve parents, the Sure Start programme manager discussed how encouraged she felt that the political climate had changed:

*"You can refer back to the late 60's- when we had partnership with parents. Forty years on we're still in the same place- but there's a sense of – it's time to act. It's more opportune now because it's supported by legislation"*

Sure Start, at its inception was seen as being at the forefront of changes in national policy in relation to young children and their families. The remit to address the effects of deprivation, poverty, unemployment through multi- agency intervention programmes was recognized by professionals across services as a way of giving coherence to a highly compartmentalized and possibly fragmented existing network of support. However, for the Sure Start programme in this study, the task of trying to streamline services in line with Government priorities was seen as fraught with tensions, not least because of the difficulties associated with multi agency working. Professionals interviewed for this study talked of 'one initiative after another', which stretched capacity in terms of human resource. For a small metropolitan borough in which personal contact was an easy way to ensure collaboration, the introduction of yet another strategic initiative was felt by some to be problematic.

Another area of concern expressed by some practitioners was the sense that Sure Start, as well as bringing together partners across agency boundaries would be perceived as diverse, undercutting other services in terms of offering training and in the implementation of strategic intervention. There was anxiety that the rhetoric of providing integrated services would blind potential partners to the consequence of setting up new provision across existing networks and community initiatives.

For parents, the value of being able to access a range of support for themselves and their children as a consequence of the multi-agency nature of Sure Start was seen as a clear opportunity. Although some refuted the image of the locality as an area which required multi- professional intervention as a consequence of multi-dysfunctional patterns of parenting, others recognized the potential benefit in personal terms that participation in the new initiative would bring.

In this section, the changing notions of fatherhood within this community are discussed. In terms of contributing to the image of the initiatives which foster 'involvement', 'participation' and 'partnership, this exploration is not only current; it also relates to the personal and political, cultural shifts related to economic change, women's positions and employment and fathers agency in terms of the private and the personal domains.

Raikes et al, (2002) have identified five stages of father involvement. In stages one and two, father involvement was not a priority. At stage three, a designated father involvement co-ordinator was

appointed who promoted father involvement. At stages four and five, the programmes 'matured' and supported fathers as parents but also in their personal development, employing a father co-ordinator with training for him/her and for staff in general about father involvement. This fathers group is clearly at stage four on Raikes' involvement scale. This is illustrated in an interview with the Community Development Worker as she discussed how she had read about a free plastering course for men in the local newspaper. She asked fathers from the group if they would be interested and secured places for two men on the free course run by a local regeneration charity. Similarly, a successful bid for £2,500 to the Adult Learning grant resulted in a free 26 week Karate course for families regularly attracting 17 families.

One father who described himself as a '*behind the scenes contributor*' was actively involved in planning events for the dads and worked closely with the CDW, claimed that: '*You only get out of it what you put in!*' This father explained how disappointed he felt when trips such as a visit to Washington Wildfowl Park were poorly attended. He asserted that the men needed to get their heads together to organise more activities, which would attract men. Although the CDW had suggested forming a football team so the fathers could then play other Sure Start Fathers' groups, this father had persuaded her that there would not be enough men to make a team. The CDW has clearly researched the nature of male participation and the needs and requirements of the men in the group. The local knowledge and research conducted by the CDW in this fathers' group has resulted in an extension of activity beyond the Sure Start programme itself.

In one interview, a father discussed his ideas about the way in which activities designed for men without children present would encourage the dads to interact:

*'Something like football or a gym or e-mail or if we could buy some play stations- this would attract more men and older kids.'*

The Community Development Worker in response to this submitted a bid to a charitable organisation. This has resulted in enabling the group to purchase televisions and electronic games consoles as a resource for the older children of the group to access. One father interviewed explained how his would benefit the group:

*"It'll be good because of the mixed age of the children here. It will allow the fathers' more time to spend with the younger children. Because of the environment here, it will stop the older children running around."*

Another father expanded upon this:

*"Its also good as it'll keep us up to speed with our children in terms of computer technology. We're not going to be left behind. It'll also give the kids whose parents can't afford PlayStations the opportunity. In the same way it'll allow parents to ration time playing computer games."*

Interestingly, the fathers questioned all discussed their partners' levels of participation. One father explained how his wife was a member of the management committee of this Sure Start and had been involved in another regional Sure Start in the North East before moving to the area. As a *'serial Sure Start attendee'* his wife was vocal about the benefits of her involvement. Another father interviewed discussed the impact of his girlfriend's involvement in Primrose Sure Start. Relatively new to the area, this young mother had become involved in Sure Start and had completed a few courses.

This clearly shows that the fathers were very interested and indeed proud of their partners' involvement in Sure Start activities but were content to keep their own involvement within the boundaries of the group and did not feel the need to extend their involvement to other Sure Start activities at this time.

When questioned about extending their level of involvement in Sure Start, the fathers suggested that the activities on offer did not interest them and being mostly daytime activities they were also at times when some of them were unable to attend.

One father questioned explained that he would be interested in wider involvement in Sure Start but couldn't come to some of the activities *'because most of the stuff that's on is on during the day.'* When pressed, however, this father revealed that he would feel uncomfortable coming to another Sure Start activity that was not specifically dedicated to men and children. He went on to explain:

*“I have to say, I am not interested in attending courses for me. The whole point in getting involved in all of this was to give me a little bit of time with the kids and give the wife a break from them.”*

### **8.1.2 Involvement and Non-involvement**

Across all three initiatives, the nature of involving parents in the initiatives was discussed. It seemed that views about the nature of non-involvement related to two main dimensions: sense of capacity to cope and willingness to participate. Views about involvement, also related to two main dimensions: type of involvement and the nature of involvement.

Using these dimensions, four categories were formulated using open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998):

- *Confident involvement*- personal sense of coping/willing participators
- *Detached coping*- sense of coping adequately or well/reluctant participators
- *Vulnerable estranged*- low sense of coping/hesitant, wavering and doubtful participants, and
- *Alienated*- low sense of coping/unwilling to participate, sense of being outsiders.

For most parents involved in the initiatives, this involvement or partnership often involved attending courses. There was acknowledgement that for many parents, their participation on courses had been motivated through attempts to help their children learn. For some parents attendance on courses had awakened their interest and enabled them to pursue something for themselves. There was widespread recognition that if parents were keen on learning skills, this could have beneficial effects not only on their own children but on the wider community. Gaining confidence and self esteem were seen as vital pre-requisites in attempting to secure paid employment once their children were in school. The Family Numeracy mothers could be described as having ‘confident involvement’ in the first and subsequent initiatives.

The Sure Start parents talked about their willingness to be involved in Sure Start, either as a *partaker* or a *contributor*. Reasons for involvement were varied. One mother interviewed said:

*“I will get involved in anything if it will help my child.”*

Some parents wanted to be involved in Sure Start at not only an activity level, but also at an organizational level because they wanted to have their say. The Sure Start mothers appeared to demonstrate all four levels of involvement. Some, such as those who wanted to be involved at an organizational level could be described as feeling confident with their involvement. However the majority of mothers' experiences appeared to be one of '*Detached coping*' as they presented a sense of coping adequately but were often reluctant participators in Sure Start activity.

Some of the mothers from the local primary school playgroup talked about their involvement with the Education Action Zone and likened some of their early Sure Start experiences to their early experiences of the EAZ. The mothers had been involved in Family Learning courses with their children in the primary school, funded by the EAZ. They had also been to the local Teachers' Centre to attend Parents' conferences organized by the EAZ. Some of the mothers saw these approaches as complementary and felt that it was timely that their needs were being addressed through a variety of agencies. Similarly, the EAZ director saw the injection of support from both the EAZ and Sure Start along with other initiatives as vital to community regeneration in the area.

One mother interviewed however, expressed a different viewpoint:

*"I sometimes find myself torn. Like most parents I want to do the best for my children but what do you do when Sure Start is offering something for you and your baby and the EAZ is offering a family learning course for you and your five year old and offering crèche facilities. I can't attend both, so it's the baby who loses out in terms of my attention. His time will come but at the moment, the five year old is taking priority as he has just started school. I suppose I have to choose which one would benefit from my support the most."*

Although this mother appeared grateful for the provision of such opportunities within her community, her inability to attend all three provision was clearly a problem for her.

### **8.1.3 Parenting skills**

While the previous section has explored the ways in which the initiatives have sought to foster and promote parental involvement, participation and partnership, the parents' perspectives of what their

levels of involvement in the initiatives actually contributes to their family lives is an important aspect of this study.

In this section, the concept of parental agency is introduced and is used in an attempt to analyze the ways in which the parents in this study use actions and respond to their concerns. As Vincent (2001, p.348) explains:

*“Working–class groups are often positioned, in research literature and policy statements, as unable to construct effective challenges- the lack of appropriate cultural capital and material resources and in some cases, the dominance of ‘survival issues’, are presented as rendering people passive in the face of state-sanctioned authority and expertise.”*

Vincent, (2001, p363) sub divides parental agency as follows:

- silence (inaction, ‘waiting and seeing’)
- conversation (debate, dialogue, engaging with the system)
- storming (direct protest, anger)
- by-pass (making own arrangements which by-pass the school e.g. employing tutors)
- exit (moving child from the school.)

Vincent’s framework for analysis provides us with a useful way to discuss the ways in which different parents in this study used parental agency.

One of the ways in which the parents in this study exercised agency and ‘used actions and responded’ (Vincent, 2003) to their concern that life for their children would be better, was to continue to involve themselves when opportunities arose. The initial family numeracy parents for example, claimed that their involvement in family numeracy resulted in them ‘signing up’ for future involvement in early year’s area based initiatives. Most notably, the three parents all engaged immediately with the Education Action Zone initiative. As the parents involved in the first initiative became known as ‘expert ambassadors’ in terms of family learning they could be described as ‘engaging with the system’, having a conversation and deploying parental agency (Vincent, 2001, p363). The parents

were immediately involved in the first event held by the EAZ at the local teachers' centre where a parent accompanied a teacher from each zone school to a 'Family Learning Take Home Pack' day where twenty one schools were involved in putting together a resource for home school learning, which consisted of 20 literacy game and 20 numeracy game take home packs.

The three parents also signed up for the First Annual Parents' Conference, which was organized by the EAZ. The significant of this is that these parents became '*ambassadors*' for family learning as they had been the first parents in the borough to be involved in family learning. The parents were very proud of this fact. This could be considered to be an example of parents taking parental agency once step further by choosing to associate them with something recognized as successful and further, becoming advocates for the initiative. Similarly, as the parents became involved in future initiatives in terms of engaging with what was on offer, there emerged a link to the idea of a parental involvement continuum, (Buswell Griffiths, et al, 2004, p420). Buswell Griffiths et al, identify parent- professional relationships as ranging along a continuum from non-participation, through support, participation and partnership to control, claiming that:

*"It is clear that partnership is less than parent control and more than parent support."*

The Sure Start mothers all agreed that Sure Start was all about giving their children a good start in life. The idea of exploring what the provision of a good start for the young children of the area actually meant enabled the parents to examine their own roles in this and indeed the Sure Start programme. Further exploration of this revealed that they understood Sure Start to be an intervention approach aimed at helping families with young children in the area. This was achieved by the provision of opportunities for young children to play and learn. Perceptions about the playgroup, for example, were interesting in that the parents made the distinctions between other playgroups in the area and the Sure Start playgroup in terms of qualified staffing available.

Mothers were highly complimentary about the staffing for the playgroup. They identified the provision of two crèche workers and two nursery nurses as central to the successful recruitment and retention of

parents and toddlers to the playgroup. Learning how to play with their children was seen to be of high importance, especially to the young mothers. One mother who was heavily pregnant said:

*"I come here for a rest because the crèche workers look after her and take her to the messy area which I haven't got at home and they read stories with her and I can watch. Before when I took her to playgroups I watched her play, now I try to join in with her and play just like the crèche workers."*

One mother commenting on the availability of Sure Start personnel said:

*"It's so different from other playgroups because you've got the crèche workers, the nursery nurses, midwives all available in this one place. If you've got any problems you can talk to them or they can go and find an answer for you or the right person to talk to."*

Mothers were similarly pre-occupied with preparation of the children for formal schooling. One mother talked about 'getting the children used to being left' because the mothers were able to take a back seat at the playgroup and watch their children play under the supervision of the Sure Start staff. Another mother talked about the activities provided at the playgroup such as paint and play dough and the provision of story-sacks, all of which were considered to be getting the children 'ready for school'.

When asked how the fathers group could attract more men from the local community, the fathers became quite animated. One father explained that being involved in the Sure Start Fathers' Group had heightened his awareness of the importance of being involved in his children's lives. He suggested that as fathers tended to work during the week, weekends were becoming times to spend with children. He wondered if fathers were not coming to the Sunday morning group as they were '*already doing things with their kids on the two days off?*'

This finding is also reflected in the literature. In their research, Parra- Cardona, et al discussed the ways in which their participants talked about wanting to be a good father. The fathers wanted to be there for their children and expressed the desire to move on from their previous lifestyles.

The EAZ mothers were most keen to discuss their development as parents. As a result of attending several EAZ parent conferences, the mothers considered that their involvement in their children's learning was almost a measure for their success as 'good parents'. As discussed earlier, parents I interviewed often passed judgement on those parents who chose not to be involved in the initiatives. The EAZ mothers I interviewed saw this as an indication that these parents were just not interested in their children's development but most importantly were not interested in developing as 'better parents' themselves. One mother during her life history interview expanded upon this:

*"I can't understand them not making an effort to try to at least come along to one conference. I mean everyone is invited. It's free. We get our lunch and are able to learn things to take back to school but also learn about how what we are doing with our children, makes a difference to how they learn in school."*

Another mother proposed that:

*"Some of them just don't care. They shove them into school and then they get on with their lives. You can't just stop being a parent when they go to school. We have to work together for the good of our children"*

The Sure Start mothers interviewed regarded being involved in Sure Start as "a good thing" and were indignant about the perception of deprivation being the driving force behind the initiative. The mothers were keen to be involved in their own children's learning and development and were enthusiastic about helping them to learn and thus giving them a "better start in life". Some mothers acknowledged their own lack of parenting skills and expressed the hope that through involvement in Sure Start activities, these could be addressed.

*"I'm er your typical young mother, not married, erm, living in a deprived area. That doesn't mean I don't want to do the best I can for \*\*\*\*. I have learnt so much from attending the group. The baby massage course has been great for me to settle her every night. I don't panic now at bed time. I have a routine and it works."*

One father discussed how his daughter was actually the first baby in this Sure Start and how his involvement in the group had enabled him to develop his ability as a new father. Being with other men had given this father a forum to share his uncertainties about his skills as a father of a baby. The other men had been supportive and he remarked on how the men had laughed at the way in which women thought themselves to be experts on babies and young children. Two related themes clearly emerged from this interview, the strength of women in the home and often as a consequence of the women's strength, men's own mental attitude and beliefs. A view was expressed that mothers often exert control over the family and not only decide whether their partner's involvement is or is not required but feel secure enough in their 'mothering' skills to make judgements on the quality of such involvement. One father was observed as he followed his sixteen month daughter around the centre while she explored the toys. When an older child offered to '*look after the baby*', the father said '*just leave her, if she falls, she'll learn.*' He described how his daughter had had to be taken to hospital during the previous week as she had fallen and bruised her forehead. He explained how having had experience of two children had helped him to remain calm and feel more confident in such situations.

This is reflected in the literature as Lamb (1986) maintains that the development of self-confidence in a key factor which determines how fathers become 'involved' with their children. Once fathers realise children are fun, Lamb asserts that they should be able to expand the activity context.

Another father discussed how his involvement in the Fathers' group had allowed him to spend more time with his children. He explained that when he came in from work, his children were often off doing other things. The Sunday morning group had allowed him time to spend with his children and this, in turn, had stopped both his wife and his children complaining that he did not spend enough time with them. This father expressed satisfaction in the development of his skills as a parent, but more specifically in the development of his self-confidence as a father.

Another father discussed the way in which spending more time with his children had enabled him to gain confidence: "*I feel a lot more confident with the bairns.*"

This idea of confidence in parenting is one which emerged in many discussions with the fathers. One father explained *"I sometimes get frustrated with the kids, but I try to talk to them and sort the problem out."*

This was a theme which was discussed by most of the men in the focus group. One father discussed how the group allowed him two hours of unbroken time with his children:

*"When the wife's around, I'm terrible. I tend to fall asleep or read a book or something. When I come here I am in charge and it's great. It makes you feel better that you are spending time with your children. It's the same feeling you get when you've been to church. You feel good but you can't really explain why."*

Another father thought attendance at the group had contributed to his perception of himself as a parent and claimed that: *"I'm just as important as their mam!"*

Another father made the point that when men usually talked about their children, for example at work or in the pub, children were often discussed in terms of what they did wrong; e.g. keeping you up at night. This father considered that his involvement in the group had enabled the fathers to develop an ongoing discourse that centred on their children's developing abilities rather than presenting problems. The fact that the men relished this opportunity reflects the way in which notions of 'fathers' are developing in the twenty-first century.

This aspect was also observed as two fathers watched a two-year-old girl complete a jigsaw. They began to discuss whether this was advanced 'behaviour' for such a young child. Comparisons were drawn between other children and the men concluded that this young child was indeed 'advanced'. The father of the child in question went on to discuss how having the opportunity to observe his children play enabled him to learn more about his children's interests and development.

During another visit to the Sunday morning group, three fathers watched as their older children played a board game. The fathers discussed the ways in which the children were quickly becoming 'experts'

at playing this game as they were gaining more experience each week. The conversation then centred on the ways in which their children were developing certain 'skills' as they played the game. One father expressed his pride that his child was able to 'take-turns' in the game. Another father commented on his sons' acquisition of number language as he counted spaces to be moved forward or backwards. The fathers discussed the educational potential of such board games and one father said:

*"You would never think they could learn so much from a playing a simple game. Having the time to sit back and watch and try to understand what is going on in their minds is a wonderful opportunity. It's something I never have time to do at home."*

The fathers' rationale for being part of the group also emerged during discussions with the fathers. One father discussed how his involvement had impacted upon his son's social development. This child had at first been very reluctant to leave his father's side and was now confidently wandering off and playing with other children. This father also considered that their involvement in the group had contributed to his son's language development. Although not claiming that the group was totally responsible for these two developments, this father was obviously proud that his involvement had impacted upon his son's development and enhanced their relationship.

One father discussed how playing with other people's children in the group had afforded him the opportunity to spend some time with boys. As a father of two young girls, he welcomed this opportunity.

One of the interesting themes to emerge during discussions with the fathers was their perceptions of their fathering style as opposed to their relationships with their own fathers. Three fathers discussed their memories of their own childhood and their relationships with their own fathers. One father explained how his father had been a good role model and had been very involved in his upbringing. The other two fathers discussed not remembering their dads being involved until they were about fourteen.

*"I've only recently starting actually talking to my dad. We have never fallen out or anything like that; we just had nothing to say to each other."*

The other father discussed how a dialogue with his own father had opened up for him, since the birth of his own children.

*"My dad hardly er, had anything to do with me but when we had the girls, he changed. I think its erm; it's all so different now. He drops everything when we ask him if he can look after them. It's the future I'm thinking of, I want my kids to look back and know I was there for them"*

This is an interesting development for these men. As the fathers were talking about their own 'fathering' styles, many of them compared their own experiences from their childhood and examined their relationships with their own fathers. One father said:

*"I have more time to spend with my kids than my dad ever did."*

This notion of 'being there' was explored further as the fathers discussed the privilege of being able to pick their children up from school on occasions.

*"I can't ever remember my dad picking me up from school. Sometimes when I pick them up and they moan all the way home about their day or the cold, I have to remind myself that it is great being able to pick them up."*

One father whose shift patterns at work were about to be changed, discussed how he intended to challenge his employers about 'family friendly' working practices. He discussed the importance of being able to be involved in his children's lives. As well as empowering these men to become more involved in their children's lives, it could be claimed that the discussions held in the group enabled dads to think about the level of involvement they wanted from their family life. The focus group session certainly highlighted this issue for this father who was obviously considering his next course of

action with his employers. Perhaps talking this through with the other men contributed to his decision on how to handle the situation? Attempts in Britain to limit the working week have the potential to influence the quality of father-child contact and the quality of family relationships. However, it is too early to know what effect they will produce.

One father discussed the benefits his involvement in the group has had in terms of building a relationship with his children and enabling his children to mix with other children:

*'During the week the kids don't get to be with other children as they are with their grandma and there are no kids there.'*

This suggests that this fathers' involvement in the lives of his children may be impacting upon the future success of the children in terms of their social and educational development.

One father interviewed identified that his children appeared *'better behaved'* when he was around. He wondered if this was down to the stereotypical approach his partner adopted when his children misbehaved.

*"She uses me as a threat when they're naughty. She tells them: 'You do that again and I'll tell your dad mind'. My mam used to do the same. She used to say 'Wait till your dad gets in.'*

Once again, this is reflected in the literature. Horn and Sylvester (2002) found that children with involved fathers avoid high-risk behaviours compared to children who have uninvolved fathers.

Interestingly, some of the fathers interviewed did not think their involvement in the group had contributed to their relationships with their children. One dad discussed how his involvement in the group had not made much difference to his relationship or his involvement with his children. His primary reason for coming to the group was to provide his children with the opportunity to interact with other children. He went on to discuss how this time was also used to *'meet other dads'*.

*“Watching other dads here has proved to me that I’m an OK dad. Some dads just want to come here and have their bacon sandwich and spend the time talking to other dads. I am very involved with my children anyway. I drop them off in a morning and pick them up at night. My dad was the same with me. When I am here, I spend the time with my kids.”*

Once again, this finding is replicated in the literature. Ferguson and Hogan’s research (2004) supports the notion that father friendship in a group setting can lead to positive outcome both inside and outside of the group.

Each of the fathers interviewed, identified clear benefits for themselves, for their children and for their wider family relationships from attendance at the group.

#### **8.1.4 A set of activities**

For some stakeholders, the initiatives were seen as a set of activities. According to this image of the initiatives, success is associated with high attendance at a large number of activities.

The Director of the Education Action Zone discussed the way in which the family learning co-ordinator had set targets based upon her experience of having targets imposed from the Basic Skills Agency herself when delivering the pilot family numeracy programme. The schools involved in delivering their own family numeracy courses were funded according to the number of parents the parental involvement co-ordinator managed to recruit to each course. The EAZ director discussed that while this might have seemed harsh; the impetus to involve parents in this way resulted in rewards for the schools in terms of supply cover to release a teacher from the school to deliver the course and funding for materials to run the course.

The Sure Start programme manager discussed the problems associated with reaching parents whilst maintaining an ethos and vision of consultation and choice. She discussed the way local data monitoring the reach of the programme is submitted monthly to the national team. Whilst providing information in relation to particular numerical targets is useful in terms of analysis and reflection, this programme manager expressed concern that these targets may not be the most appropriate in terms of

measuring fundamental change. There may be pressure to improve performance through increasing head counts, but:

*“We need to get away from counting the number of activities and the numbers attending- the trap is that some activities are easy to set up, such as ‘mothers and toddlers’ groups. Some of the simple targets may be wrong that is if we really do want to change the way the community will function in the future.”*

The Sure Start programme manager talked, for example, about how the Sure Start Mothers and Toddlers group at the local community centre had gradually built up its attendees to thirty. This included three fathers and two families from Turkey who had recently moved to live in the area. This was seen as a thriving activity and a huge achievement in terms of the levels of deprivation and the low level of past community involvement. It was acknowledged that getting parents to participate actively is very difficult in the short timescales associated with the Sure Start initiative.

High involvement of parents in these activities were seen as a sign of increasing self-confidence for the parents. One mother interviewee discussed the way in which the success of Sure Start was also judged by the extent to which it provided well-organised, enjoyable and worthwhile activities. As one mother said about a visit to the Sea Life Centre which was arranged in request to the community asking for an activity during the half-term:

*“How many two year olds from around here would get the chance to experience that?”*

#### **8.1.5 Duplication of services**

In order to maximize impact upon the local community, the issue of duplication of services and initiative overload was explored. One of the mothers during her second interview during phase two of this study gave her perspective of early years area- based initiatives:

*“In 1997 I became involved in Family Numeracy. That was great. It was my first child going to school and any opportunity to be involved, I was there and willing. In 1999, the school*

*with the help of the EAZ introduced a family literacy scheme for children in year 3, so there I was again. But by this time, family numeracy was running still in the school so I had to go along to that too with the little 'un who had just started school. Then the Sure Start building opened and x asked me to come along to the Parents and Carers groups and be on the Parents' Forum. That meant that nearly every afternoon I was involved in something, either Family learning, EAZ stuff or Sure Start stuff."*

Another mother discussed the way in which professionals appeared to 'target' those parents who had previously participated in family numeracy.

*'When the EAZ started, the Head came into the toddlers group in the school and explained how there was a huge resources there for the school but that parents needed to be involved, you know going to the teacher's centre and stuff for the school to be able to benefit. That was scary going to conferences and stuff but we did get some great equipment for the kids and the school. I just felt that it was always the same set of parents who had to be involved though. I just think they could have put a little bit more effort in and got some of the other mams. Er, you know what I mean, the ones who stand on the school yard moaning about school and teachers.'*

One of the fathers who was only involved in the Sure Start fathers' group gave his perspective:

*"I work full time, alright I know not all the dads do, but it seems to me that there is just too much going on in one little area. The Sure Start staff keep trying to get us involved in other stuff....do you want to talk to someone from the Drugs Action Team? No thanks.....What about we arrange a visit from the Sure Start health visitor/ community nurse/ men's community worker? I just want to be left alone."*

Mothers also discussed whether Sure Start would duplicate existing provision or provide something new. This issue caused problems for those mothers wanting to access Sure Start activities but also wanting to continue with other community initiatives. One mum interviewed, attended both the Sure

Start playgroup (held on Tuesdays) and the original playgroup at the local primary school (held twice weekly on Mondays and Wednesdays). The playgroup which had its roots in the family numeracy initiative, had evolved as the parents and children, with the Head teachers' support began using the family learning room in the room as a meeting place and a play venue for their young children.

*“The Sure Start playgroup is excellent. The resources and staffing are brilliant and it is free. However, I couldn't stop coming to this one, because Lorraine has worked so hard and it was here before Sure Start. I would feel terrible.”*

Some interviewees raised questions about whether Sure Start activities would become embedded in the community or simply become a replacement for services already existing within the community. It appeared that even though the Sure Start personnel were providing a specialist and different activity for different purposes, some participants used it as 'more of the same' and interpreted it as familiar provision.

However, a further issue for some parents included being excluded from activities because they did not live in the 'disadvantaged' area. One mother interviewed explained how her sister took her children along to Sure Start activities because she lived in the Sure Start area. This young mother lived in an area without a Sure Start programme and was therefore denied access to services on offer to her sister and her family.

*“Sure Start should be for anybody who wants to access it. It can cause bad feeling with people who live nearby and if they can't access something that somebody else can, it isn't fair. It should be for everyone.”*

#### **8.1.6 The community and its residents**

In this section I will discuss the idea of community as a process. The notion of community as a construct and community as 'lived experience' will be explored. I consider that this offers an original contribution to this study and indeed to the field of early years area-based initiatives itself.

I will discuss community as conceived from outside and relatively static and as, obviously dynamically experienced by those in it. The first issue here, which is closely linked to the second idea of *'developing community'*, focuses on the idea that as these initiatives are seen as being about changing community we need to consider issues such as why do people living in these communities appear to want things on their doorstep? The pre-occupation with providing services within *'pram pushing distance'* suggests patronization by government. However, it certainly seems to make a difference to families that we as outsiders don't understand.

Secondly, the notion of deprivation and lived experience will be juxtaposed with the rhetoric of community regeneration or *'developing a community'*. One way to do this is to import professional workers. However, the experience of one mother in this study serves as a warning to those professionals aiming to do just that.

Thirdly, the idea of the homogeneousness of the community must be considered. With a high preponderance of teenage parents in this area, the idea that all young parents are the 'same' needs to be examined.

*"Teenage parents are not a homogeneous group; they come from all social classes, religious backgrounds and ethnic groups. They vary widely in their circumstances and life experience."*

(Teenage Pregnancy Unit, 2004, p3)

### **8.1.7 Community as a 'construct' and community as 'lived experience.'**

Parents interviewed expressed concern (almost indignation) that Sure Start had been located in the area because of an idea of perceived deprivation.

One mother hoped that this was not the case:

*"I hope not, because I was er, brought up here, went to school here and though I live in  
\*\*\*\*\*, Erm, I have returned here with my children because there are no facilities like this at  
\*\*\*\*\*"*

One mother expressed the view that other neighbouring areas within the borough were in more need of the facilities offered by Sure Start. There was however, acknowledgement that the area had a prevalence of young one-parent families:

*"Because I was a teenage mam, I was offered a house here. It is easy to get a house on the estate. That's where they put all the pregnant mams."*

Parents at the local primary school playgroup were indignant that support appeared to be focused in the area and was targeted specifically towards young single mothers.

*"Look, we live here as well, we struggle but because we are in a two-parent family trying our best we get no help from anyone."*

The difficulties associated with 'where to place' the initiatives were discussed widely. All interviewees were aware of the parochial nature of the communities and suggested that people wanted things on their own doorsteps. For this reason many stressed the importance of publicity and of encouraging and supporting people to attend the various activities offered as part of the initiatives. While Government policy considers that having services within pram-pushing distances of families is desirable, some of the parents interviewed in this study were less convinced. One mother explained how as a new mother she looked forward to getting her baby ready for a trip to the doctors and the baby weighing clinic and while she thought having the playgroup based at the centre would benefit her as her child developed, she did not think she would transfer her health needs to the centre.

The actual erection of the Sure Start building in this community caused concern amongst both parents and practitioners. Some interviewees saw the location of the building as an ideal location. Situated next door to the community centre, one mother discussed how this would allow for some joint ventures.

However, some referred to the disadvantages of the location. The plan to open a new private nursery nearby concerned some of the mothers. One mother thought that the hub of Sure Start should be on a particular side of the road and anticipated that some people would be reluctant to attend activities where the new building was erected. The new road system appeared to have created barriers that formed or reinforced existing psychological, community boundaries.

One mother, however, thought it was in the wrong place but that this did not put her off using it:

*'It'll not put me off; it's only a short walk. It'll be good exercise with the buggy.'*

Reservations were expressed that the building itself would lead to a loss of activities at other venues. The following vignette illustrates this point. One of the parents expanded her involvement to the Sure Start initiative. As a result of her involvement in family numeracy, this parent suggested to the head teacher of the school where the pilot ran that the school could run a playgroup for local parents and their young children. As the school had a spare classroom the head sanctioned this idea. This playgroup started off on a small scale with the parents taking charge as playgroup leader and gradually parents joining the group. One of the findings from the evaluation of the family numeracy pilot (NFER, 1998) is that the parents became more involved in their children's school.

Once the Sure Start initiative came on board, the programme manager in consultation with the head teacher decided that this playgroup should become a Sure Start playgroup. Funding for the development of this group, new resources and staffing ensued. The initial resistance to this change from the playgroup leader subsided as she saw the resources that were pouring in.

However, this mother/playgroup leader talked about feeling *'squeezed out of the community.'* Where she once saw herself as an integral part of the community, providing a service for young mothers and their toddlers, she talked about the effect of Sure Start on her present role:

*'It has had a very bad effect on my role. The parents are going to the other playgroup because of what it can offer, but surely it is of far more value for the families to come to a*

*playgroup in the building where their nursery and school is. We were alright before they started, to be honest.'*

If we analyze the experience of Lorraine (one of the original family numeracy mothers, page 139) according to Vincent's categories of parental agency (2001), she could be described as employing 'silence'. Lorraine accepting the benefits that the introduction of the Sure Start playgroup would bring to the community, accepted the situation and the change to her status. Similarly, when brought to the attention of both the primary Head Teacher and the Sure Start programme manager, the institutional response was one of acknowledging, responding but doing nothing.

The notion of importing professional workers is an interesting idea. While often viewed as a positive aspect of provision:

*'It is so different from other playgroups because you've got the crèche workers, the nursery nurses, midwives all available in one place. If you've got any problems you can talk to them or they can go and find an answer for you.'*

(Interview with Sure Start mother)

and as an excuse to not use the 'existing capacity' on offer from the community;

*'There is often a lack of suitable people within a community who would have the self-esteem self confidence, skills and knowledge to become involved in a project.'*

(Interview with Sure Start programme manager)

The negative aspect of this vignette is that this parent who had been running the playgroup for two to three years was replaced by Sure Start workers. Not only was this very disempowering for the mother concerned, it served to do the exact opposite of what Sure Start aimed to do in terms of empowering parents from the community to return to work.

### **8.1.8 'Developing' or 'upgrading' a community'- is this regeneration?**

One of the mothers interviewed talked about community regeneration:

*"This used to be a good supportive community with neighbours helping each other out. Wouldn't it be great if we could re-start that?"*

In relation to opportunities for education and supporting community regeneration, collaborative working existed between the Education Action Zone and Sure Start. From the perspective of the Director of the EAZ, the potential for working together was clear.

*"In reality we cover a similar area; I think the two services could actually complement each other- ours with an education bias and theirs with a health and social care bias. We've got the remit for the whole Borough and they've got the remit for the small areas- you could see how it could work."*

Similarly, the Sure Start manager felt that the Sure Start programme was there to complement other early year's initiatives going on in the borough rather than be in competition with them:

*"I don't see myself (Sure Start) in competition with other early year's initiatives within the borough- I see us as complementing them. The EEC, their focus is on early years education and it is a borough-wide initiative whereas ours is a different focus, a neighbourhood borough-wide approach- we may do similar things but their approach and their catchment area is different to what ours is, but I do think that there is a need to link up there particularly with the Sure Start Plus Workers- we need to link up into....to feedback so that there is no duplication"*

### **8.1.9 A publicity campaign**

Many interviewees talked about the publicity for Sure Start. The parents interviewed thought that the publicity had been very good in the beginning, but dwindled as time went on. Within the Sure Start area, there was some resentment from the school playgroup leader who thought that the local paper was

unfairly promoting the Sure Start playgroup and was neglecting to publicize the already existing school playgroup, despite request from both the playgroup leader and the head teacher.

The local paper appears to have been used effectively by Sure Start to publicize events. The *Pamper Day* provided for the mothers at the local community centre was featured in a double page spread and the paper regularly carries adverts about Sure Start events such as the playgroup. However, some publicity about Sure Start was deemed to be unfair in its representation of the area. One mother expressing her concern about the perception of involvement in Sure Start as having a social stigma attached said:

*“The local paper needs to get rid of this attachment, \*\*\*\* as a deprived area, single mams.*

*This playgroup is run by professionals for kids and parents who want their kids to learn, not just to intervene in a social problem.”*

## **8.2 Overview**

Phase two of this study was primarily concerned with establishing the perspectives of the parents in this small community. The key concerns that informed the research design remained constant. Foremost among these was my desire to establish the perspectives of the parents in this small community, many of whom had experienced serial involvement in the initiatives and for whom the initiatives themselves had been designed. While conducting multiple in depth interviews, (Bibby, 2001) added another layer of complexity to the research design, this was considered a rich addition to the research rather than a problem.

Both the parents' and the professionals' interviews contributed to the formation of images which were concerned with parents attempts to describe the initiatives in terms of fostering 'involvement', 'participation' and partnership'; having an impact on parenting skills; relationships with their children and the development of their self perception as a parent. In the same way the way in which the images were often viewed as a set of activities was discussed alongside the emerging view that the initiatives were contributing to the phenomena of initiative overload. Images of the community and its residents and images of the initiatives as a publicity campaign were also concerns discussed by the parents. Many of the parents interviewed discussed the way in which one initiative seemed to follow another initiative. Some parents discussed that the initiatives appeared to be imposed on communities and little

regard appeared to be given to the 'community voice', the parents for whom the initiatives themselves had been designed. However, none of the parents actually used the term 'initiative overload.'

Although the parents did not use the term initiative overload, many of them discussed the ways in which they took advantage of what was offered from a particular initiative. Initiative overload, which was *my* perception of what was occurring in this small community, was not actually the experience of the parents whose main objective when becoming involved in the initiatives appeared to be to utilize whatever was available or offered to them for the benefit of themselves or their children. However, the other perception of what was happening not only in this community but is currently being replicated across the UK was borne out by this study. This is evidenced by a strengthened focus on parents during the second term of the New Labour government (2001-2005). The Children's Act (DfEE, 1989) substituted the legal concept of 'parental responsibility' for that of 'parental rights'. Subsequent support given to parenting programmes and other family learning initiatives signaled a change in thinking. A new paradigm of parental involvement appears to be emerging and parental involvement is no longer an adequate term to discuss the various levels of parental engagement and activity currently at play. The changing political imperative to involve parents (DfEE, 1997) and the growing awareness of the link between parents' own educational experiences and parental attitudes and expectations for their children has heavily influenced the development in parental engagement work.

## **Chapter 9: Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations**

### **9.0 Introduction**

In this final chapter, the main research findings are analysed in order to draw some conclusions from this study, and to identify implications and recommendations for the future. This chapter begins with a brief summary of the research findings from phase one and phase two of the study. A discussion of the use of critical ethnography and reflexivity, used in this study to structure theory, follows. The main hypothesis of this study is that the parental engagement work occurring in the small community in this study is contributing to the emergence of a new paradigm of parental involvement. This is examined with reference to the perspectives of the parents involved in the initiatives and juxtaposed with New Labour's introduction of policy in an attempt to address the perceived problems.

This chapter then proceeds to examine some of the issues to arise from this study. The notion that practitioners are concerned with registering attendance at activities rather than measuring the impact parental involvement has on family life and more creative models of parenting is examined and is considered to be a rather simplistic way to measure involvement. Further to this, the expectation that short term funding will result in a quick fix is examined alongside the rhetoric of joined up thinking and the reality of the way in which individual programme objectives often prevent such developments.

Perhaps more importantly, this study gives weight to the idea that a new paradigm of parental involvement is emerging in the twenty first century. This chapter examines the changing roles of parents and considers the idea that encouraging young unemployed parents from such communities back into the work place often mitigates against the much lauded goal of a successful family life. In the same way, the current pre-occupation surrounding the work life balance debate is examined and questions whether this has any resonance with parents living in disadvantaged communities.

Penultimately, the research question central to this study will be examined. The extent to which the use of parental involvement within early years' area based initiatives contributes to meeting the three key objectives for education and on notions of community regeneration, is examined alongside an

examination of what works best for the families involved in such initiatives. Finally, the limitations of this study will be discussed and future research possibilities will be examined.

Some of the sub headings within this final chapter are presented as questions. Each sub heading concludes with some recommendations for the future.

### **9.1 Summary of research findings**

While Dyson and Robson (1999, p13) welcome rigorous evaluations of parental involvement initiatives, they warn that depending upon small-scale evaluations of local examples rather than programme wide evaluation has resulted in '*..the evidence of participation and positive attitudes on the part of participating families tends to be stronger than the evidence of gains in attainment- though the latter kind of evidence does indeed exist.*' However Moran et al, (2004, p95) considers that the evidence of what makes for successful implementation of programmes attempting to involve parents is largely descriptive or based upon '*practice wisdom*'. This study therefore joins the ranks of other qualitative studies in an attempt to evaluate process rather than content by gleaning data from '*softer*' material, (Ball, 1990).

This longitudinal study consisted of two phases and involved the analysis of Key Stage One and Key Stage Two mathematics test results from twenty four children, alongside an interview programme which involved a total of forty two interviews.

The main finding from this study does indeed appear to support the hypothesis of this study. This study has revealed that a new paradigm of parental involvement is emerging to describe the raft of parental involvement initiatives being employed in early year's education in the twenty first century.

While the analysis of the children's maths test scores, revealed that the family numeracy children appeared to make slight gains in progress in their mathematical development, this was not where this early intervention programme had most impact. The family numeracy children interviews revealed that for this group of children, having the opportunity to spend time with their mothers during and subsequent to the family numeracy initiative enabled the children to develop confidence in numeracy,

interest in numeracy, and attainment in numeracy resulting in the development of better relationships with their parents and contributing to their developing their ideas about learning.

For the parents involved in family numeracy, the interviews revealed that the parents' own self esteem, confidence and their aspirations for their children were paramount. Further, the ways in which early involvement in the initiatives had impacted upon their own personal development as learners, and upon family life and parenting reinforces the value of those early year's area based initiatives which encourage parental involvement. This all points to the potential of the long lasting effect early parental involvement can have, concurring with the findings from Desforges and Abouchar (2003) whose study outlines the multiple benefits to early parental involvement.

In phase two of the study, the parents' perceptions of their involvement in the initiatives revealed the impact their involvement had had on the acquisition of new parenting skills, the development of relationships with their children, and the growth of their self perception of themselves as parents. The way in which the parents had formed images of the community contributed to the idea of community as a lived experience and examples of what it is actually like to live in an area labelled 'disadvantaged' provides insights from this study which are possibly replicated across the United Kingdom. The changing roles of parents in supporting their children's learning and development is apparent in the data gathered from this study and provides further verification that this phenomena is gathering momentum in the twenty first century.

In the next section, the use of critical ethnography and reflexivity are examined as two key aids to analysis of the data gathered in the two phases of this research.

## **9.2 From Ethnography to Reflexivity: an attempt to structure theory**

Spradley (1979, p15) suggests that:

*“Strategic research begins with an interest in human problems. These problems suggest needed changes and information needed to make such changes.”*

According to Carpsecken, (1996) ethnography should emphasize communicative experiences and structures as well as cultural typifications. The approaches to the involvement of parents within the organisational structures of the early years area based initiatives alongside the themes and images to emerge from the interviews all contributed to the formation of examples of cultural typifications. These cultural typifications, discussed next in this chapter describe not only what is happening in this small community but are indicative of those typifications which I suspect are currently being replicated in communities across the UK. Reflecting the hypothesis volunteered at the beginning of this study, this ‘suspicion’ concurs with the advice from Charmaz (2000) that hypothesis testing in grounded theory leads to confirmation or disconfirmation of the emerging theory. As Ryan and Bernard (2000, p782) explain:

*“Grounded theorists want to understand people’s experiences in as rigorous and detailed a manner as possible.”*

In an attempt to describe the ways in which this study contributes to developing phenomena, the use of reflexivity is used. Ellis and Bochner (2000, p 740) explain that:

*“In reflexive ethnographies, the researcher’s personal experience becomes important primarily in how it illuminates the culture under study.”*

Upon reflection, the way in which self – reflexivity has been employed in this study was integral to the research design. My own deep immersion in this small community, my increasing knowledge of government policy combined with parental involvement research and first- hand experience of the early years area based initiatives ensured that reflexivity, a two way process took place.

### **9.3 Initiative Overload?**

Whilst contemporary literature frequently refers to the rhetoric of ‘partnership’ and ‘collaboration’, professionals, practitioners and indeed families appear to be struggling with this. As a result, where professionals are challenged to balance the demands of both policy and practice, parents appear to be struggling with a raft of initiatives all competing for parental time energy and commitment. In an

attempt to unravel this prevalence for involving parents at various levels of the initiatives, the notion of 'initiative overload' has emerged. While this phrase has been used to describe the phenomenon of interventionist approaches, it has not been used to describe the impact serial involvement in early years area based initiatives has had on the families for whom the initiatives have been designed and introduced. While it does appear that initiative overload is occurring in this small community, interestingly this is not a concern voiced by the parents who participated in the study. It is evident that serial involvement in initiatives has become almost a 'coping' strategy for these parents who actually use what they want or need from each initiative for their own and their families' benefit. Where initiative overload is identified as an issue is when practitioners involved in the various activities are competing for the same set of parental involvement, attention and activity.

This study has revealed that the perceived problems currently facing UK families in the Twenty First Century include falling educational standards, poor parenting and poverty. The New Labour Government's response to this has been to intervene and introduce systems of micro- management in the imposition of initiatives designed to somehow compensate for the 'failings' of parents, schooling and the results of poverty. These initiatives appear to be based on the idea that when children fail at school it is in some part because their parents have failed at home. A major finding of this study is that unless these dichotomies are successfully addressed, there will continue to be a barrier to effective support and intervention for families. This study recommends that this could be addressed by the introduction of parenting education to young people whilst still at school themselves. It is only through raising awareness of the potential issues these young people will face when they become parents, that the barrier to effective support and intervention can be removed. In the same way that there has been the idea that the delivery of earlier sex education will prevent future teenage pregnancies on the scale currently occurring in the UK, this move would negate future barriers.

### **9.3.1 Registering attendance or impacting upon family life?**

As has already been stated earlier in this study, one of the ways in which professionals appear to measure involvement is by registering attendance at activities. One of the key recommendations from this study involves moving away from simplistic 'head counting' and this is perhaps illustrated with the following short vignette.

One mother attending an evening course on 'Playing with your Children' at the Sure Start Children's Centre discussed how the mothers in the group had learnt how to make play dough. She discussed how there were only mothers in attendance at this group but explained that many of the fathers would have been providing the childcare to enable the mothers to attend the course. This mother relayed how she had taken the play dough recipe home and had provided her husband with the ingredients and instructions. The following week while this mother was *'on me course'*, the father spent time with his young children making and playing with the play dough. The mother interviewed explained that she was *'giving him something to do with them while I am out'*.

Although this father did not attend the session, it could be argued that he got just as much out of the play dough session as his partner. This activity contributed to supporting this father in his relationship with his children and developing his perception as a father. This gives authority to a key finding from this study, that registering attendance at activities is simply not the most suitable way of measuring the impact of parental involvement activity on more creative models of parenting for the families involved. Where meeting a target becomes the primary motivation for encouraging parental involvement, the opportunity to develop 'true' parental partnerships (McKenna, 1998), which in turn encourages more creative models of parenting, will not be a realistic possibility. A further recommendation from this study is to be more accepting of the contribution fathers do make to their children's lives rather than viewing their inability, for whatever reason, to attend activities as the only way in which a positive contribution can be made.

### **9.3.2 Short-term funding and quick fixes?**

One of the possible reasons for the developing phenomena of initiative overload and the pre-occupation of practitioners to 'count heads' when involving parents, has to do with the nature of the short term funding of the initiatives and the expectation of a 'quick fix.' This study is unique in that it provides evidence that early intervention has impacted on the lives of both the parents and the children involved. It also appears to provide some proof that a short term funded initiative can actually yield some positive results. This research, however reveals that the government's pre-occupation with investment in short term funded initiatives cannot impact on either policy or practice in the long term. The notion that government policy is often intended to provide short- term fixes is a recurrent theme throughout

this research. The initiatives discussed in this study are based on Headstart (1969), an early intervention programme, largely judged to have failed in the USA. However recent Government policy and indeed the initiatives which have developed from that policy do not address the failure of Headstart. An analysis of the findings from the Headstart intervention reveals that it had an impact on the quality of life for the families involved both during attendance on the programme and in later life and that it saved the government and ultimately society a fortune. This then overshadows the fact that because it was based on an economic model where benefits were dependant upon attendance on the programme, it reached the families who arguably most needed such an intervention. The communities in this study have been identified as facing significant levels of deprivation and parents were often mistrustful of proposed initiatives designed to help them, with some parents reluctant to get involved in projects. One of the findings from this study revealed that it proved difficult for some parents to maintain their engagement with these types of projects while bids were being prepared to secure facilities and resources.

Timescales of external accountability are a key cause of concern because of the requirements to show evidence too early. As a consequence, parents known to be supportive are approached and as the parents in this study suggest, this may make it harder subsequently to reach other members of the community.

While it is widely accepted that initiatives such as Family Numeracy, Education Action Zones and Sure Start come with imposed time-scales and often fixed-term funding, practitioners involved in this study perceived that the Government's expectations of achievement from such initiatives were unrealistic and would, consequently be unachievable within the area, particularly if associated with definite targets and time-scales.

This type of 'project mentality', which only serves to emphasize the short-term nature of such projects was addressed to some extent in the Ofsted Family Learning Survey (2000: pp8-9), with the recommendation that every effort is made to end the pattern of short-term funding for such work. The rationale for this was the importance of the relationship of such projects to the social inclusion agenda.

### 9.3.3 Joined- up thinking?

The idea that the phenomenon occurring in this small community is somehow indicative of the intention to provide 'joined up thinking' is worthy of consideration. With the objective to provide *'joined up solutions to joined up problems'* (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998), Bagley, Ackerley and Rattray, (2004, p596) explain the rationale underpinning the attempt to solve a problem with a variety of policies:

*"The government's emphasis is placed on the need for policy to be strategic, ensuring different policies that contribute to the same issues are structured in a more holistic way."*

Because parental involvement, family learning and parenting support straddles so many policy objectives and government departments (Education, Social, Health, The Treasury and the Home Office), Frost, (2005, p16) considers that family policy presents a test for the rhetoric of joined-up public policy making.

*"The term joined-up thinking is clearly associated with the New Labour government elected in 1997. New Labour called on government and professionals to ensure that their work was 'joined-up', that is that services were streamlined and co-ordinated and that gaps and overlaps were addressed and eradicated."*

As Tett, (2003, p1) asserts, *'all too often governments in the past have tried to slice problems into separate packages.'* She goes on to propose that *'joined-up problems demand joined- up solutions.'*

The idea that family policies all aimed at somehow combating the same set of issues constitutes joined up thinking is a very simplistic way of trying to provide solutions to societal problems in the Twenty First Century. A further recommendation of this study urges stakeholders to understand and subscribe to the idea that they are all working towards some shared common goal in order for these policies to be truly 'joined- up'.

#### **9.4 A new paradigm of parental involvement?**

Analysis of the parental involvement literature has revealed that the term 'parental involvement' is being employed in contexts beyond both home and school. Although historically the term was used to describe schools' attempts to involve parents, it is more recently being used to describe parents' involvement in their children's lives per se. (Hannon, 1998; Henderson and Berla, 1994; Weinberger, 1996; Merttens, Newland and Webb, 1996 and McKenna, 2007). As a consequence, an interchangeable use of the terms 'parental involvement' and 'family support' appear to be being employed without adequate distinction between the two, to describe attempts to work with parents. While parental involvement appears to be used as a panacea for society's longstanding pre-occupations, Moran et al, (2004) remind us that although parental involvement interventions appear to be prolific, the involvement of parents alone will not remedy every social need.

However, if we consider the ways in which early years initiatives are currently operating in social, economical, and educational contexts; this provides us with a good way of considering the new paradigm of parental involvement. The initiatives themselves do not appear to affect the ways in which many parents support their children's learning and development, but they do provide those parents with the opportunities to play a greater part in their children's learning and development. This issue for policy makers and initiative led programmes therefore, is to ensure that these opportunities are maintained and expanded (through longer term funding) and to help develop new initiatives to encourage the expansion of parental involvement.

##### **9.4.1 The role of parents within a changing society**

The mothers in this study discussed the reasons for their perceived failures; negative school experiences, eleven- plus failures, products of the secondary modern school 'factory fodder' thinking, poor careers advice and a preponderance of teenage pregnancies. Alongside an examination of the cultural and historical images of wives and mothers in the north east of England, these mothers recognise that much needs to be addressed if they are indeed to meet their aim that life will be better for their children. However, being valued and having involvement, in many cases led to their success. This appears to be replicated in other studies and yet we do not appear to be learning any lessons from this. A recommendation from this study is that this should now be being built into current education

systems. Lessons about 'how to be a parent', mentioned earlier, alongside the introduction of a curriculum which examines social inclusion issues would be integral to such a development.

The fathers interviewed in this study provided an interesting insight into the ways in which they wanted to play a greater role in their children's lives. However there are two main implications to emerge from this suggesting that further work is needed into providing those practices which involve supporting men's parenting. Increasing the involvement of men in Children's Centres and supporting their parenting may require targeting their involvement in a more specific way and recognising male activities where men feel more comfortable. One of the ways this may be achieved is through undertaking further research into parenting roles which differentiates between male and female as opposed to using the generic term 'parent'.

As Kirby contends (2006) recent Government interventions can be considered to signal the way in which the state appears to be taking over the role of parents.

Guidance and advice from various government departments about parenting practices alongside the imposition of community initiatives designed to foster parental involvement are symptomatic of this government's thinking about families. One of the areas affecting families today is the changing nature of work. In the following two sections, issues around encouraging young parents back into work and attempts to establish a work life balance are examined.

#### **9.4.2 Encouraging young parents back into the workplace**

All three of the initiatives had an imperative to encourage young parents back into the workplace. The Public Service Agreement (Sure Start 2002) had the following as its fourth objective:

*"In fully operational programmes, to achieve by 2005-2006 a 12 per cent reduction in the proportion of young children (aged 0-4) living in households where no-one is working."*

As Levitas (2004) discusses, the promotion of parental employment reflects a specific policy choice to tackle family poverty and social exclusion. Penn (2007, p 14) however questions the way this has been addressed:

*“The poorest families are usually those where women don’t work. But why should mothers go out to work, if the alternatives are high-cost and (according to Ofsted) often not very good childcare provision, and inflexible working hours in low paid jobs.”*

In all three initiatives, parental involvement in family learning or parenting support programmes was very often the first step of the learning journey. The data collected in this study suggests that this was an effective way to promote the learning or acquisition of skills which ultimately would lead to employment. However as Graham (2007, p106) advises, Sure Start’s remit to involve parents appears contradictory to the ‘welfare to work’ initiative leaving some parents wondering “*whether ‘good’ parents should go out to work to provide for their children or stay at home and provide quality time with their children.*”

As one of the Sure Start mothers in this study said *‘I don’t want to go work and leave her in some nursery with loads of other babies. I want to be the person who brings her up. That’s what I had her for!’*

Glass (2005) is despairing of this re- focusing:

*“What started off as a family support programme for parents in deprived areas has become a programme in which the important thing is to get people back into work, with a focus on childcare services and employability.”* (Times Educational Supplement 15 April 2005)

A recommendation of this study is that as a society we need to be more accepting of those parents who choose to stay at home and provide childcare for their young children rather than return to the workplace. Parental choice, much talked about in government policy needs to become a reality rather than the illusion it appears to be today.

#### **9.4.3 Achieving a work/life balance**

Where it has been traditionally and culturally mothers who spend time with their children while they are young, changes in UK society have resulted in some fathers spending more time with their children.

This offers the opportunity to determine the effect of male involvement in family life as opposed to attendance at activities beyond the home.

We already know that British fathers work the longest hours in the European Union. After notching up 43 hours at work, many fathers also share the burden of child rearing and domestic duties in the Twenty First Century (Goldman, 2005). However, the work/life balance debate, and the practices which have subsequently changed have largely been conducted in terms of women as mothers. Only when the debate and policies are broadened to include men will there be a real possibility of them extending their family roles. Obviously this will present working parents with a series of dilemmas, not least of which is childcare. However, this study raises questions about government policy which appears to present a solution in the form of an extension of institutionalized care. With the promise of nursery places for two year olds and primary schools open from 8am to 6pm staffed by a variety of personnel other than teachers, it appears that nurseries and schools are being positioned to take over those things which parents 'appear' to be failing to do. Once again the 'compensatory' approach is in evidence with the belief that giving young children from poorer families access to the toys, books and attention, will help close the social class divide in academic achievement.

### **9.5 The Contribution of Parental Engagement Work**

One of the aims of this research was to examine the parents' perspectives for whom these policies and initiatives have been designed. When the parents were asked to consider ways in which their involvement in one or in some cases two of the initiatives, had contributed to the governments' three key objectives for education; responses were varied. There seemed to be a general consensus that involvement in any of the initiatives had in some way raised the educational or developmental standards of their children. Parents' interviewed considered that involvement in the initiatives had gone some way to raise expectations for their children's future achievements.

In terms of widening participation, it was the family numeracy parents who seemed to have taken advantage of the further education opportunities which had been introduced on the pilot family numeracy initiative. However, the data revealed that parents from the EAZ and Sure Start were beginning to take advantage of courses offered by the initiatives. Courses which were of interest to the

mothers involved in the initiatives included child development, baby massage and 'playing with your child'. Mothers who progressed to courses and training which encouraged their own personal development tended to be interested in child related study. However the fathers suggested that those courses which stimulated their involvement and interest within the initiatives included stereotypical activities such as football training and computer clubs. Fathers who took the opportunity to develop their own skills undertook plastering or ICT courses. When questioned about this aspect of the governments' objectives for education, the parents all discussed poverty, lack of childcare or unsuitable working practices as reasons for not pursuing further study. The reality is, many of these parents live difficult and challenging lives and embarking upon further education or training is simply not a consideration when they are attempting to cope with every- day life which includes paying bills or buying food for their families.

In terms of social inclusion, the parents' involvement in their children's education and well being appeared in most cases to 'open doors' for the parents as well. This manifested itself in many ways, from the mother who set up a playgroup in the local primary school, to the father who applied for a caretaking post within the Sure Start programme. It seems that children are indeed the entry route to social change (Weinberger, 2005).

One of the reasons for these findings could be explained by the capacity building approach (Weinberger, 2005) which is inherent during early involvement in the initiatives. The issue for me as a researcher has been to decide how this approach should be judged and whether it should be encouraged through government policy and practitioner agency or whether this phenomenon would occur naturally on its own.

This study has illustrated the extent to which government policy fails to distinguish between those communities labelled as economically disadvantaged, but which are actually 'culturally rich' in terms of community support and capacity. A main finding from this research revealed just how much '*invisible capital*' (Diamond, 2004) the participants in the disadvantaged community actually possessed. However, Dobrowolsky's (2002) notion of a 'Social Investment State', where children are considered workers of the future prevails in the twenty first century UK.

Recent findings from the Merrell and Tymms (2007) study revealed that children were no further advanced now than they were before New Labour's overhaul of education for pre-primary school youngsters. It is one of my contentions throughout this study that part of the UK government's current policy should be about addressing these shortcomings.

The way in which the early years area based initiatives have used policy to feed into their practice is evident. However, there is very little evidence to show that this happens the other way round. This is a further example of the ways in which policy and practice interact or fail to interact. I argue that there is some deep thinking to be done about New Labour's thinking about families and their ideas about the nature of support that families living in socio-economically deprived areas might need.

#### **9.5.1 Initiatives: What works best for the families involved?**

Barrett (2006) believes that previous research which has examined notions of early intervention shows that although it is demonstrable that most interventions work to some extent for most parents, such studies do not provide information about which elements have worked best for parents. In order to better understand the task of involving families in early year's area based initiatives, this study has revealed that perhaps we should be exploring the views of local people in different role involvement positions. This could also help to determine which locally based initiatives are best placed to provide the kinds of support and care which are appropriate for different people.

#### **9.6 Limitations of the study**

An obvious limitation of this study is that it was conducted in one small ward within a small local authority. Therefore, caution is required when suggesting that findings from this study are being replicated across the UK. In the same way, a further limitation is the newness and inimitability of the initiatives at that moment in time. The subsequent expansion and embedding of Children's Centre's and services which are designed to involve and support parents will ultimately ensure that future studies in this area will not be analysing something so new and radical. Knowledge and confidence in the constancy of government thinking and funding alongside an assimilation of practice will also have an effect on the way in which parental involvement and parental support programmes simply become a core offer available from such services and as such, an expectation of parents.

Analysis of the literature has revealed a whole new discourse surrounding parental engagement work. Section 2.3, which examines some of the classifications of characteristics of parental engagement work, alongside section 8.1.2 which examines features of involvement and non involvement and section 8.1.3 which examines parental agency begins to examine ways in which such parental activity is described. While this thesis demonstrates various attempts to describe or typify characteristics of parental involvement and indeed suggests some additions to the field, the need for the development of a taxonomy of parental engagement has emerged. Unfortunately, this is a limitation of this study but it may provide the stimulus for future work.

### **9.7 Future Research Possibilities**

A logical extension to this current study would be to conduct it in more than one 'disadvantaged' community. This would allow similarities and differences to be drawn from the data and would answer the broader question of whether the phenomenon of 'initiative overload' was occurring in similar communities. It would also provide further data as to the ways in which initiatives are employing the use of parental involvement as a means to contribute to meeting the governments' three key objectives for education.

An examination of the ways in which projects or initiatives are also appraised would provide a very current research focus. One of the problems identified by this study is the way in which short term initiatives carry with them the expectations of quick fix solutions and instant results. It would be interesting to examine the way in which we measure the impact of such initiatives several years after their conclusion.

### **9.8 Overview**

This study was an attempt to examine three early years' initiatives in one small community labelled as disadvantaged, each of which used parental involvement. Paramount to this study was that the perspectives of the parents living in this community were considered. This study revealed that the initiatives were often imposed rather than invited and that the views of the parents living in the community about what the community might need in terms of support and intervention were not taken into consideration. This study has highlighted that while the initiatives themselves can be considered successful to some extent in terms of community regeneration, raising standards, promoting social

inclusion and widening participation, the term parental involvement is simply not adequate to describe the plethora of parental engagement work currently emerging in the twenty first century.

Each parent interviewed discussed the ways in which they made the initiatives 'work for them'. The parents clearly chose to be involved in those activities which would benefit them or their children the most.

While the process of conducting this study has been illuminating, this research was not intended to simply consider the benefits and disadvantages of initiatives, per se, but to raise questions and challenge assumptions underpinning the current rhetoric about parental involvement, community regeneration, raising standards, widening participation and promoting social inclusion.

Data collected in this study points to the fact that there are many contradictions within the policy and practice designed to 'involve parents' and 'support families'. This often proves to be very confusing for both the professionals and the families involved. A conclusion to be drawn from this is that there is still a long way to go before the government's three key objectives for education can be met if we continue to use a deficit model when working with these families and communities.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly a key conclusion to be drawn from this study is that early intervention programmes which encourage parental involvement and parenting support work require on going investigation. As with all initiatives, impact of the intervention and ideas about what makes a difference are central to the further development of services. It is evident from this study that many of those parents and children involved in the initiatives have on the whole had advantageous experiences which may contribute in a small way to enabling the New Labour Government meet it's three key objectives for education.

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# **Appendices**

# **Appendix One**

Parents and Children consent form

Parents and Children  
**Consent Form**

**If you agree with each of the points below, please sign and date at the bottom before participating in the young people's group...**

√ The research has been explained to me.

√ I understand what taking part in the research involves.

√ I understand my comments in the group discussions can be used for research purposes.

√ I understand that my real name won't be used in any writing.

√ I agree to do my very best to participate in the groups when they take place.

√ I understand that I am free to change my mind about taking part at any time.

√ I am happy to take part in this research.

Name.....

Signed..... Date.....

ID Number: .....

# **Appendix Two**

Professionals and Practitioners  
consent form

Professionals and Practitioners

# Consent Form

**If you agree with each of the points below, please sign and date at the bottom before participating in the young people's group...**

✓ The research has been explained to me.

✓ I understand what taking part in the research involves.

✓ I understand my comments in the group discussions can be used for research purposes.

✓ I understand that my real name won't be used in any writing.

✓ I agree to do my very best to participate in the groups when they take place.

✓ I understand that I am free to change my mind about taking part at any time.

✓ I am happy to take part in this research.

Name.....

Signed..... Date.....

ID Number: .....

# **Appendix Three**

## Parents Family Numeracy Questionnaire

# Family Numeracy Programme

<b>Adult Profile</b>		Identifier <input type="text"/>	6-11
<b>Gender</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Male	<sup>12</sup> <b>Date of birth</b> / / <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>	<sup>13-18</sup> <b>Time in UK</b> <sup>19-22</sup> <input type="text"/> years <input type="text"/> months <sup>23</sup>	
<b>Ethnic group</b>			
<sup>1</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> White <sup>2</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Black – Caribbean <sup>3</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Black – African	<sup>4</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Black – other <sup>5</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Indian <sup>6</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Pakistani	<sup>7</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Bangladeshi <sup>8</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese <sup>9</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)	
<b>Occupational Status</b>			
<sup>1</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Full-time paid employee <sup>2</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Part-time paid employee <sup>3</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Full-time self-employed <sup>4</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Part-time self-employed	<sup>5</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed <sup>6</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Full-time education <sup>7</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Temporarily sick/disabled <sup>8</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Permanently sick/disabled	<sup>9</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Looking after home/family <sup>0</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)	<sup>24</sup>
<b>Children participating on the course</b> <sup>25</sup>		<b>Languages</b>	
Identifier	Date of birth	understood	spoken
<input type="text"/>	/ / <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="text"/>	/ / <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="text"/>	/ / <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="text"/>	/ / <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
			<sup>26-29</sup>
			<sup>30-33</sup>
			<sup>34-37</sup>
			<sup>38-41</sup>
<b>Education</b>			
Highest mathematics qualification awarded _____			<sup>42</sup>
Highest other qualification awarded _____			<sup>43</sup>
<b>Education in UK</b>			
Years in full-time education _____	Was this continuous?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	(please expand) <sup>46</sup>
	<sup>44-45</sup>		
<b>Education outside UK</b>			
Years in full-time education _____	Was this continuous?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	(please expand) <sup>49</sup>
	<sup>47-48</sup>		
Previous basic skills tuition	Yes	No	(please expand) <sup>50</sup>

# **Appendix Four**

Pilot Programme baseline  
results recording pro-forma

			more than week
--	--	--	-------------------

							Every day
--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--------------

--	--

**Family Numeracy  
Assessment Course Record**



Mathematics A. Number												
Child identifier no.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Sorts sets of objects by given criterion and explains sorting												
Counts objects accurately												
Shows awareness of using addition												
Solves numerical problems using addition and subtraction												
<b>Totals for each child</b>												

Mathematics B. Using Mathematical Language												
Child identifier no.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Can describe size												
Can describe position												
Recognise numbers to 10 and writes 1-10												
Can explain an addition sum												
<b>Totals for each child</b>												

# **Appendix Five**

Parents home mathematics  
Questionnaire

**Family Numeracy  
Home Activities Questionnaire**



Beginning/End of course    Date..... Identifier

<i>Does your child do any of these with you?</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>1-2 a year</i>	<i>1-2 a month</i>	<i>1 a week</i>	<i>2-3 a week</i>	<i>Every day</i>
Sort clothes, shopping, toys etc. in order of size						
Count out items of shopping, toys etc.						
Match items of clothing, toys, washing etc.						
Sort items of shopping, toys etc. in order of size						
Sort items of shopping, toys etc. in order of weight						
Fill and empty different size containers at bath time						
Sing number songs like 10 Green Bottles						
Cooking (e.g. weighing, counting out ingredients)						
Play clapping games						
Play games involving numbers or matching e.g. snap, bingo, board games, dominoes)						

Play computer games involving numbers						
Play with construction kits/building blocks						

<i>Does your child look at any of these with you?</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>1-2 a year</i>	<i>1-2 a month</i>	<i>1 a week</i>	<i>2-3 a week</i>	<i>Every day</i>
Numbers in the street						
Shapes in the street						
Calendars						
Prices in shops						
Number/Tell the time books						

	<i>Never</i>	<i>1 a year</i>	<i>1 a month</i>	<i>1 a week</i>	<i>More than 1 a week</i>
How often do you go to school activities?					
How often do you help with school activities?					
How often do you talk with your child's teacher?					

# **Appendix Six**

**The Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2  
Mathematics SAT results- raw  
data**

The Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 Mathematical SAT's results are presented in the following table:

<b>Child identifier number</b>	<b>Mathematics Key Stage 1 Result</b>	<b>Mathematics Key Stage 2 Result</b>
FN 1	1	3A
FN 2	1	3
FN 3	2A	5
FN 4	2A	4
FN 5	2B	4
FN 6	2A	4
FN 7	3	4
FN 8	2A	4
FN 9	2C	3
FN 10	1	3A
FN 11	2B	5
FN 12	2A	5
CONTROL 1	3	5
CONTROL 2	1	3A
CONTROL 3	2A	3
CONTROL 4	2B	3
CONTROL 5	2B	3
CONTROL 6	2C	3
CONTROL 7	2B	4
CONTROL 8	1	3
CONTROL 9	2C	3
CONTROL 10	1	3
CONTROL 11	3	5
CONTROL 12	2B	3

**Table 7.2 Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 Mathematical SAT's results**

