

New Deal for Communities

The National Evaluation

Research Reports

Parental Involvement in Education

Research Report 31

The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit is currently sponsoring the 2002-2005 national evaluation of New Deal for Communities. This evaluation is being undertaken by a consortium of organisations co-ordinated by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit.

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Parental Involvement in Education

Research Report 31

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CONTENTS

Executive summary i

Introduction..... 1

The Local Context 1

The Policy Context.....3

Nature of the Interventions5

Aims and Objectives.....8

Delivery9

Outcomes and Impact13

What Works?15

Problems Encountered/Barriers to be Overcome16

Conclusions.....19

References20

Executive summary

'it's about bringing parents into school life and about bringing schools into the community...' (Education Co-ordinator, Hackney)

Parents' involvement in the education of their children has been identified nationally as a major contributory factor in overall levels of attainment in school. Consequently, many NDC Partnerships have included parental involvement schemes among their education projects. In this report we draw on detailed case study visits to three Partnerships: Bristol (Community at Heart), Coventry (Wood End, Henley Green, Manor Farm and Deedmore) and Hackney (Shoreditch Our Way).

A wide range of projects are under way in the three Partnerships. The variety of work reflects the numerous ways in which parental involvement has become a focus for government policy and educational initiatives more generally. Notwithstanding this variety, the projects share a commitment to improving parents' understanding of the school system and securing their active involvement in their children's education, with the overall aim of improving pupils' attainment.

The projects have been especially **successful** in certain respects:

- sharing information about the availability of local services and support networks
- providing a mediation role between school and parents where communications have broken down
- raising parents' awareness of their children's courses of study and ways they can help
- family learning has been piloted successfully, including an example where primary pupils for whom English is an Additional Language learnt alongside their parents for a GCSE qualification
- dedicated support for parents of children designated as having Special Educational Needs (SEN) can be especially helpful, not least in creating and improving links with mainstream organisations
- breaking down mutual misunderstandings and suspicions between schools and residents

Key factors associated with successful initiatives are:

- linking with projects and organisations that are already in place
- adopting a 'bottom-up' strategy where problems and needs are identified by local people themselves
- involving local people in key project roles
- taking a broad view of the support on offer
- developing parental networks

Some **barriers and problems** remain:

- relationships between schools and parents can be strained, especially where schools feel unfairly criticised and/or parents feel patronized and unwelcome
- some parents remain especially unwilling or unable to access services
- local communities can include rivalries and conflicts: projects must be aware of these and try not to fall foul of them (especially where these involve different faith and/or ethnic groups)
- continuity is vitally important: problems arise where staff and/or accommodation change or become unavailable during school holidays
- it can be difficult to balance, on one hand, the need for financial accountability and forward planning, and on the other hand, the need for trust and freedom to plan and implement flexibly as appropriate locally

Introduction

Every NDC partnership has, so far, included some form of provision aimed at improving standards of attainment among local school pupils. National education policy has increasingly focused on the vital role that parents play and many NDC Partnerships have built parental involvement projects into their work plans.¹

Parental involvement can be defined in many different ways. It includes parents coming into schools informally; say for coffee and biscuits, as well as more formally, such as meetings with teachers or taking part in their children's education through classroom participation. In some cases it includes parents' own learning.² Improved communication with the school through home-school liaison workers or parental liaison workers also impacts on how children and their parents feel about their school.

For this report on parental involvement projects we wanted to explore some of the different types of projects that are taking shape in different NDC Partnerships. Having spoken with several Partnerships, we decided to focus on three areas in particular:

- Bristol (Community at Heart)
- Hackney (Shoreditch Our Way)
- Coventry (Wood End, Henley Green, Manor Farm and Deedmore)

This report covers the following areas:

- the context in which the parental involvement projects have been established and the issues that they are trying to address
- the way in which the parental projects have been delivered, in particular focusing on the different types of interventions that are offered and the assumptions behind these interventions
- current outcomes and impact of the projects (although these are limited given that the projects are in the early stages of development)
- key lessons that have been learned so far

The Local Context

Socio-economic context

The socio-economic context in which the parental involvement projects have been developed is common to all the NDC areas, with pronounced levels of disadvantage. A brief review of some key indicators gives a snap shot of some of the main issues.

Unemployment can be measured in various forms - either by looking at how many people claim job seekers' allowance or how many people of working age are not economically active. In either case the figures in NDC areas are much higher than the national average.

¹ In line with statutory instruments in this area, throughout this report our use of the term 'parents' includes relevant carers and guardians.

² This has relevance to the issue of 'lifelong learning', which is the subject of additional NDC education theme reports.

Table 1: Unemployment levels locally and nationally

Area	Unemployment
Bristol NDC	35% (not economically active)
Coventry NDC	37.7% (not economically active)
Hackney NDC	16%
National	3.1

Source: Partnership baseline information

Levels of educational achievement in the NDC areas is also well below the national average, as indicated, in Table 2. The low levels of adult certification suggest that a lack of local role models might also be a problem in relation to school achievement in these areas.

Table 2: Residents (working age only) without qualifications

Area	No qualifications
Bristol NDC	36.6% (Partnership information)
Coventry NDC	56% (Partnership information)
Hackney NDC	36%
National	16%

Source: MORI³

Achievement at GCSE level varies considerably from partnership to partnership. In Bristol 22% achieve 5 or more GCSE passes (A-C) and in Coventry 5% achieve 5 or more GCSE passes (A-C). In Hackney the information is analysed by gender and ethnicity with Bangladeshi girls scoring highest with 51% and Turkish/Cypriot Boys scoring lowest with 10% GCSE passes (A* - C).⁴ This links directly into parental involvement strategies that are a government priority and are being developed by schools.

Local barriers to education as seen by the residents

Confidence and lack of understanding: Parental confidence is often an issue in disadvantaged areas (as we noted in previous NDC Education Theme reports on *Raising Educational Achievement - Research Report 10* and *Widening Participation in Higher Education - Research Report 11*. For example, in Bristol we were told:

'I think it's parents' confidence in their own ability, because their children are learning stuff now that they were learning in senior school and it's becoming quite challenging for them I think, and they obviously don't want to look silly in front of the children. It's that lack of confidence, I think, on the parents' side.' (Parent Co-ordinator, Bristol)

This lack of parental confidence means that in some cases NDC and project staff need to be especially pro-active. In Coventry, for example, this means driving the parents to the courses they are interested in. It also means making sure parents understand what is available to them by using the same language and avoiding jargon wherever possible:

'And if you say "special needs" people automatically, for some reason, think they are going to be in wheelchairs. They don't realise that having difficulty with their behaviour is a special need.' (Outreach worker, Coventry)

³ NDC National Evaluation: Wave 1 Household Data: our thanks to Dr Mike Grimsley of Sheffield Hallam University for additional analyses of these data.

⁴ Partnership information, baseline data. Hackney figures are for 2000.

Poverty and work pressures: Poverty and work pressures put extra stress on families. This means that not all parents will be able to access the support offered due to time constraints and work commitments:

'The kind of pressures that the families experience on a day-to-day basis (...) the pressures of often having larger than average families in the community as a whole, certainly the problems of family poverty (...) where the men work, they often work extremely long hours for very little money, there's a whole kind of battery of pressures on families. I think there are (...) schools in challenging circumstances, where you have got kids from very unsettled backgrounds, refugees status, where you have got (...) enormous amount of cultural and linguistic diversity and sort of racial and cultural mix of complexities that are pretty demanding, so I think here a lot pressures on schools as well as families.'
(Consultant, Hackney)

The Policy Context

Government policy promotes the importance of parental involvement in a child's education and schooling, with proposed benefits for pupils, teachers, schools and parents. Research evidence suggests that parental involvement, and particularly support at home and interest in education, contributes significantly to improving pupils' progress and achievement at school. Nevertheless, conclusive evidence relating to specific forms of parental involvement can be problematic due to first, the wide-range of initiatives and modes of involvement that exist; and second, the tendency for such approaches to be small-scale and localised in practice. Furthermore, any analysis of parental involvement must address issues of which parents are involved, and what is the nature and effect of this involvement.⁵

A key statutory area of parental responsibility is the requirement to ensure that all children of compulsory school age (ages 5-16) receive full-time education. Although growing numbers of parents are selecting home schooling, the vast majority of parents register their child in a school and then have responsibility for ensuring regular school attendance. Parental rights in relation to school education broadly include:

- to receive information, e.g. pupil reports
- to participate in activities, e.g. votes in elections for parent governors
- to be asked to give consent, e.g. to the child taking part in school trips
- to be informed about meetings involving the child, e.g. a governors' meeting on the child's exclusion

Alongside consideration of these broad definitions, responsibilities and rights for parents, it is an obvious, but important, point that in practice there is a wide diversity of parents. This diversity includes changing family structures, differences in socio-economic circumstances and ethnic origin. In the majority of cases the parent that is most involved in their child's education is the mother. Parental involvement can also vary at different stages of a child's education, with closer home and school interaction more common during early years and primary schooling - such shifts can reflect changing school practices and students' concerns for less direct parental involvement during secondary schooling. Parental involvement also varies for children with different educational needs; in particular there are specific rights and opportunities for involvement for parents of children with designated special educational needs. Therefore,

⁵ Statutory definitions of a 'parent' are contained in Section 576 of the Education Act 1996, namely: All natural (biological) parents, whether they are married or not; any person who, although not a natural parent, has parental responsibility for a child or young person; any person who, although not a natural parent, has care of a child or young person.

blanket terms such as 'parental involvement' have to be treated with caution and applied with an understanding of the diversity of experiences, needs and practices.

In general parents are interested in their child's education, with recent research suggesting that the majority of parents surveyed in England want more involvement. Care has to be taken, however, in equating parental interest with active and visible involvement. With increasing numbers of lone parent families, rising female employment and an intensification of work, time and other constraints can significantly affect the capacity for some parents to devote substantial amounts of time and energy to their child's educational activities and school.

A range of policy strategies relating to parental involvement have been promoted and applied. These strategies vary in terms of whether they focus on parental choice of school place and/or parental involvement in learning and teaching matters once a child is in school. The strategies can be distinguished also in terms of whether the intention is to bring parents into the school or for the school to reach out to parents, families and communities. These strategies can vary in their focus on school standards and/or inclusion and regeneration. Recent developments concerning family services and lifelong learning relate also to providing support for parents and encouraging parents as learners. We briefly outline some of the current key strategies and modes of parental involvement below.

Parental Choice: For many parents, their prime mode of involvement in education is in the opportunity to exercise choice of school place for their child. Evidence relating to this field is highly contested but research findings point to inequalities with professional middle class parents being most effective in securing their choice of school place (Ball, 2003).

Home-School Links: The School Standards and Framework Act (1998) introduced the need for maintained schools to have home-school agreements. This agreement should be a statement explaining the school's aims and values, the school's responsibilities towards its pupils, the responsibilities of parents, and what the school expects of its pupils. While parents are expected to sign such agreements, this is not mandatory. Concerns have been expressed about the extent to which such agreements can contribute to establishing constructive parental involvement where this does not already exist. Approaches to further develop home-school links include the development of a home-school policy as part of a whole school policy for parental involvement. Strategies include also the identification or appointment of a home-school liaison worker.

Governing Bodies: Parents can become formally involved in school decision-making and policy formation by election as a parent governor. These are expected to act as 'representative parents' rather than 'parent representatives', which raises issues about the ethnicity, social class and gender distribution of those elected. Governing bodies have also a role in communicating with parents more widely. All governing bodies are responsible for publishing an annual report and for holding an annual parents' meeting. Governing bodies must also publish a school report in advance of each admissions' year. As we discuss (below), while parents generally welcome information this needs to be part of a communication process which includes two-way discussion.

Teacher-Parent Communications: Communication between teachers and parents takes a range of forms. All parents should receive a written report at least once a year concerning their child's achievements, progress, areas for improvement, behaviour and attendance. However, research suggests that some parents find written reports too general and difficult to understand. Face-to-face meetings with teachers are facilitated by parents' evenings, which should be provided by schools at least once per year. These meetings provide an opportunity for parents to discuss their child with teachers, and also offer the potential for the school to actively involve parents in supporting their child's school targets and learning. There can be difficulties where teachers and parents have different expectations for the meeting resulting in frustration and mismatched expectations (Vincent, 1996). Some schools are developing new forums and

modes of communication to attempt to ensure improved parental involvement, for example, through academic review days, class/tutor group meetings, newsletters and the use of information technology to link home and school. Despite a language of parent 'partnership', teachers' access to school information and professional expertise may give them more authority in such meetings.

Support for Children's Education: Parental involvement includes supporting their child's learning, working as a co-educator with the schools and, from the school's perspective, in a manner to complement the work at school. For example, parents are encouraged by the government to learn about curriculum materials and stages, target setting and action planning, and assessments (standard assessment tests - SATs) in order to support their child's progress. Similarly, parental involvement in supporting homework is considered to be important. There is scope also for parents to act as co-learners with their child, for example through family learning, home curriculum schemes and project work.

Parents as Learners: Opportunities for accreditation of parents' learning, either alongside their child or linked to parenting programmes, are growing. More generally, parental engagement with education can encourage parents to develop their own learning, for example through adult and community education provision. Such moves are supported by the promotion of lifelong learning through adult, further and higher education and the development of extended schools as community resources.

Parents as Volunteers: Parental involvement can extend to parents acting as volunteers to support the school, either through activity within schools (e.g. supporting in classrooms), on governing bodies, or in fundraising and community activities associated with schools. The Government's School Workforce Remodelling promotes routes for professional development and recognition of classroom support and assistants, which may provide opportunities for some parent volunteers to extend their employment opportunities.

Support for Parents: Schools, and other education providers, can act as a resource and support for parents. For example, parents' groups and classes can be provided. The movement to inter-agency working, such as through Sure Start, extended schools and the current Green Paper on children's services also develop the practice of schools becoming part of a hub of support and provision for children, parents and families.

It is clear, therefore, that there is a wide range of forms and approaches to parental involvement. Many developments tend to be localised and there can be a tension between needing locally targeted initiatives while also learning from and sharing existing practices. Although there is formal reporting and information requirements between schools and parents, the extent to which there is full dialogue is debatable, and varies between parent groups and schools. In general, parents are expected to support, rather than challenge, the work of educational providers.

Nature of the Interventions

Different projects and models of delivery have been developed focusing on local need and community requirements.

Bristol

The Parent Liaison Workers project is funded by the NDC and run through the Bristol Education Action Zone (EAZ). The main aim is to employ parent coordinators to organise activities and learning opportunities that engage and empower parents in supporting their children's learning. The parent coordinators are local and their own children attend local schools. They help raise

parental understanding and knowledge about education by helping parents to gain confidence in their own abilities and skills and by organising workshops and courses that the parents can take part in. There is an awareness that many minority ethnic parents with English as an Additional Language, especially if they have arrived in Bristol recently, may need extra help in understanding the English school system. The project is based on the assumption that for parents to encourage their children, it is necessary to have a relationship of mutual respect and trust between teachers and parents, and between parents and the school. Parent coordinators are seen as facilitating such a relationship:

'The primary schools and secondary schools in the NDC area each have a parent co-ordinator whose main function is if you like to engage parents in the education process through a range of opportunities; some of those are formally structured and some of those are informally structured, but also really getting people engaged in a way that means there are practical outcomes, which benefit the school and the (...) people themselves.' (Principal of the City Academy, Bristol)

The expansion of the EAZ project has allowed for all schools to have a reasonable amount of parent co-ordinator time allocated to them to deal with problems and issues which are specific to the school. The project will cost £216,758 in revenue spending and £4,000 in capital spending over three years.

Hackney (Shoreditch Our Way - SHOW)

The NDC programmes in Hackney are run through the Education Trust, the not-for-profit organisation established to support local education delivery and strategic improvement. There are several initiatives within the Home-School Links Project, which aim to increase parental involvement in schools, plus a new Turkish GCSE project (recently piloted in one school).

Home-School Links project (HSLP): The HSLP focuses on family learning and links between home and school. The project was established because there was low participation of parents and carers in their children's school life. The schools do an analysis of their needs and the home/school support worker can work towards meeting those needs. The schools have the possibility of tailoring their provision, although they operate in a common framework. The duties for the home-school link workers vary from school to school, depending on each school's action plan and educational development plan. For example, in some schools they run a toy library, they do home liaison work or they provide support work for teachers, such as translations. One of the schools has created a space where parents can drop in for advice every morning. In another school there are classes for both parents and children. Material for new parents has been developed in several languages and there is a special focus on refugee/asylum seeker children and families, who it is felt need extra support in understanding the local school system. It is hoped that by strengthening family learning and parental support there will be less disengagement. There is £410,000 allocated for this project for three years.⁶

'The collective thing is to increase parental involvement within the school community, and within a child's education. The outcome of that would be to raise attainment of children but within that there are also opportunities for parents. (...) So it's about bringing parents into school life and about bringing schools into the community. (...) It is also hoped that by engaging parents in the schools and school life, that parents will then become volunteers in the school. And again, that can contribute to raising attainment in children. It will also help to improve basic skills.' (Education Co-ordinator, Hackney)

⁶ Details of other activities undertaken in the ShOW Home-School Links project can be found in the First Annual Report which was produced, in July 2003, by Professor John Bastiani who is the project consultant.

Turkish GCSE: The idea behind this project is that bilingual children are given a chance to learn and use their mother tongue for official exams such as GCSEs and to do so with the help of their parents. It is a part of the Home-School Links Project and feeds into the category of supporting supplementary education and mother tongue schools. A pilot has been running at one school between 2002 and 2003. Five children (plus one parent each) studied for a GCSE in Turkish. The project was facilitated by a company that specialises in placing overseas trained teachers and providing tailor made training packages.

Coventry

Coventry NDC has arranged for the city-wide service of Parental Partnerships to have a branch in the NDC area. The Parental Partnership Service aims to support and inform parents of children with designated special educational needs. During its first eight years barely a handful of residents in the NDC area had contacted the service because it was too far away and not easily accessible:

The service was put in place at the request of residents who felt that parents of children with designated special educational needs had nowhere that they could turn to. Various surveys conducted at the advent of the NDC also revealed that there was twice the number of children who had statements in the NDC area compared to the rest of Coventry: 2% in primary education compared with a city average of 0.9% and 4% secondary compared with a city average of 1.6%. The proportion of children attending special schools is more than double the average for Coventry: 3.2% in primary compared to a city average of 1.2%; and 5.3% in secondary compared to a city average of 2.4%. This is in addition to high levels of underachievement in the area: 5% of pupils obtain 5 or more GCSE passes at A*-C compared with a city average of 41%.

The local NDC outreach service aims to offer a full range of support for parents at the local level. This means liaising with schools and networking with health, social services and voluntary organisations in order to help parents get as much support as they need or want. The outreach worker has set up a support group once a week for any parents experiencing difficulties with their children:

'It can be behaviour, learning, we've got a lady with children with a hearing problem. It's really to give them a voice.' (Outreach worker, Coventry)

Parents see this support group as multi-functional; a forum to discuss problems as well as a place to get information and help.

'We do a course on a Thursday morning (...) where a group of parents get together, and just support each other, through emotional problems, practical problems, and all parents in a similar situation, and we share information, hold each other's hands if we are having a bad week.' (Parent, Coventry)

During school terms a full-time outreach worker is funded plus a part-time clerical worker. The service has been running since May 2002. In 18 months well over 50 people have contacted the service. The project is co-funded by the LEA (Coventry City Council) and costs £311,777 over three years.

Aims and Objectives

A key aim of all the parental involvement schemes is to raise achievement by involving parents in schools and their children's learning. Parents are seen as a vital part of a child's education:

'...To improve children's achievement, educational achievement, and this is just another kind of approach in working with the parents. Because parents are the children's first educators and it's vitally important that they are working with their children and working with the school.' (Parent Co-ordinator, Bristol)

In disadvantaged areas it can be difficult to engage parents: the reasons for this are discussed in more detail below (see 'local barriers'). For school interventions to be successful, however, it is vital that parents engage with the school and get involved.

'The fact [is] that a lot of parents have had bad experiences at school themselves. And find it very difficult to talk to teachers in schools, particularly in the inner city area where we work, parental involvement is at quite a low level.' (Parent Co-ordinator, Bristol)

'It is to do with the very nature of this area and how difficult it was to engage parents and carers (...) in order for us to achieve what it is we are trying to achieve we have to get parents and carers on board in the first instance to actually progress the project.' (Education Co-ordinator, Coventry)

The schools increasingly see parental involvement as an important part of their strategy to raise achievement. Schools that see themselves as a part of the communities also serve a wider education purpose of educating families:

'It's just so important if we are to continue to raise the achievements of the children, that we involve parents at all stages. And we share the vision, to say actually, that is about (...) involving parents in their child's learning. And also providing learning opportunities for parents within the school.' (Headteacher, Hackney)

For these developments to be meaningful, it is essential that the dialogue is a two-way process.

'My aim is hopefully to give the parents an awareness and empower them to have more of a say in their child's education (...) to show the school that the parents do want a voice and they've got the right to choose and help towards their child's education really.' (Outreach worker, Coventry)

Parental meetings and support groups are an integral part of parental involvement. They can be used to increase information on what the schools are doing and on what help is available for parents. In Coventry the weekly support group meeting acts as an information forum:

'Once a month speakers will come to give a talk about particular problems, such as dyslexia or autism. The basic aim is to introduce the local residents to the support which is available to them and what the role of the various agencies and charities is. Like the school nurse, for example, they just thought they were there to check for head lice. Well, there's bullying, there's sexual awareness, there's puberty, there's loads of other things that she could talk to them about, that they were unaware of.' (Outreach worker, Coventry)

Parents find this helpful, as they generally would not know where to get the information. In many ways this is efficient also, as the service is introduced to a whole group of parents at the same time:

'They are bringing people in from different places, like psychiatrists and autistic, the autism place, and they come in here to give talks about what the options could be, or what they couldn't be, sort of thing, which is going to be very, very, helpful.' (Parent, Coventry)

The outreach worker in Coventry is currently putting together a directory of all the support organisations, voluntary and statutory. It is hoped that the directory will act as a supplement to the monthly talks, and as a resource for both parents and schools to use in the future.

In addition to keeping parents more informed, another aim is to create formal and informal networks of parents to help each other. In Coventry this is increasing the number of 'parent befrienders' in the area. This will create, in turn, a strong local network for parents, which may be useful for sustainability if the outreach service is discontinued at the end of NDC funding. It is hoped that one 'parent befriender' will be attached to each school in the area so that they are an immediate reference point for other parents.

Delivery

Improving communication between parents and schools

'We go to the school on a daily basis to deliver the children and collect the children and there's very little offered to us as parents. It's a case of drop your children off and they chuck them out at 3.15pm and that's the next thing, is they won't see them till 9.00am the next morning.' (Parent, Coventry)

Parents can feel frustrated at the nature of their relationship with schools. This can be especially the case for parents with children designated as having special needs:

'The school was quite difficult in the way it would not take any notice of what we were asking them or telling them, they were dismissing a lot and they claimed to be too busy, they have not got time to look into it, things like that. Any time I made an appointment to see any member of staff at the school, it was usually, we will have to get (back) to you, or we will telephone you or send you a letter, at a convenient time.' (Parent, Coventry)

Knowing that there is a parent coordinator or link worker to help, increases parental confidence and can re-open channels of communications. Both the schools and the parents have expressed relief that in difficult cases there was a 'mediator' they could turn to:

'I suppose it's kind of creating a point of contact really, between the parents and the staff, and being a kind of communicator or even kind of mediator between the two really.' (Parent Co-ordinator, Bristol)

One parent spoke of his personal situation, where he had to rely on the parental coordinator to get information about his children's school:

'Well, to be honest I'd be lost without them. (...) I don't want to run school down, but I had a lot of problems communicating with school, because I am separated and had to go through a court order to see my children. The court order was sent to the school, also solicitor's letters, and nobody bothered to reply to them. Rachel (parental co-ordinator) very kindly got in touch with me, because she knew I was desperately trying to find out about the kids and what happens in the school, and she's been very helpful to me ever since.' (Parent, Bristol)

Getting parents into schools

The lack of communication can also mean that parents avoid coming into schools for parent evenings or other meetings with the teachers. Some parents see the school as a forbidding place, reminiscent of their own negative childhood experiences:

'Unfortunately, within this particular area a lot of people have had difficult school experiences themselves. So what I'm trying to do (...) (is) just give them general ideas of - have you ever thought about it this way around? In their own jargon, down to earth and come across as sounding one of them. They've got a real thing, unfortunately, a lot of parents about authority. And the minute the school might ask to see them they automatically go back to when they were a child being summoned to the headteacher's office.' (Outreach worker, Coventry)

Making contact with the parents is the first step and this can happen in a range of ways, e.g. at parents' evenings, breakfast clubs or at the school gate. Once contact and trust are established, parents know whom to contact if they have a problem, or if they want to be more involved in school life:

'(The parent coordinator) come to breakfast club on numerous occasions and talked to people, and she attends things like parents evenings and distributes cups of coffee and tea while people are waiting and she always comes to any school events. So she really is demonstrating to people that she takes a interest in their children and we listen to the ideas they may have about the way each school can support them.' (Headteacher, Infant and Nursery School Bristol)

In Bristol and Hackney, the parent coordinator takes a lead role in facilitating activities that have been suggested by a wide range of people, including the parents themselves:

'When I started I did a sort of questionnaire to get some sort of feel for what people were interested in doing. And a couple of things came out of that, which was a play and learn lending library in the nursery school. And these dual language books in Somali. (...) I found that with this book I've had to really give people a lot of encouragement and help, and it's been very hands-on. Whereas with the play and learn library people have much more taken on tasks. There's probably about a dozen parents involved with that. We've got a rota for the lending sessions and a steering group, and more and more they've taken on running it with the idea that I kind of creep further and further back. Until it's running without me.' (Parent co-ordinator, Bristol)

As a result of coming into school, talking to other parents, teachers or the parent coordinators, parents now feel they have more information and that they are more involved in their children's education:

'I see my kids now and I come back from these meetings: "well, kids, you are going to have this and you are going to have that" (...) And I've been informed of it and I go and talk to them about how they feel about it, that sort of thing . (Parent, Bristol)

'More involved? Yes, a little bit, because of the football, helping out there, yeah. And with the things we do, like, with [the parent coordinator]. I'm helping out there, aren't I? So it's the football and then helping out with the school, like activities. If there's a cake sale I'll help out there...' (Parent, Bristol)

Parents' own learning

All the schools involved in this study had set up some sort of course for parents. In some cases these were formal, accredited courses; in others they were more informal. Examples

were ICT classes, ESOL classes, foreign language classes, and parental volunteer classes. In Coventry this took a particular form as parents were offered a parent befriender course that leads them to be able to support parents of children designated as having special educational needs:

'There are a few courses we direct them to. It's a parent befriender course and it's very light. It talks about the code of practice, which is very heavy, but in a very light-hearted way. They usually go, as you see from this leaflet...and what it generally is, these parents get brought up to date about what an IEP is, what School Action is, what School Action Plus is, what those stages mean. What happens with them and who can be connected to them?' (Outreach worker, Coventry)

This will eventually mean that parents can support each other, making the load lighter on the service and the outreach worker by building sustainability through local community capacity.

Parents and children learning together

A number of schools in Bristol and Hackney offer classes for both parents and children together. For example:

'We have got a family computer club that opens after school on a Wednesday, the whole family can come to, that's well attended...' (Acting Headteacher, Secondary School, Bristol)

In general these courses focus on ICT and languages. Schools realise that parents and children learning together will spill over into parents helping their children with homework and help with education more generally:

'I think it's really powerful as far as the children are concerned, because if a child sees that their parent comes and learns in school, that's a very powerful message.' (Headteacher, Hackney)

In Hackney this model has been taken one step further. A Turkish GCSE course was piloted at one of the Hackney primary schools from February to June 2003. There were three qualified teachers from Turkey and the project coordinator. Five parents with five children were coached to take the Turkish language GCSE exam, allowing parents to get their first ever English qualification, and children to start building up their GCSE portfolio early. The service provider, who was running the course, described the main aims as confidence building, improving family literacy, and improving the children's English. In addition a GCSE grade means that the children enter secondary school with added confidence. The Turkish teacher commented that:

'...There's another part, the children like to see their parents doing the same thing as they are doing, the same sharing, the same education...going to school together gave the children, most of the time, the confidence and sometimes they spoke to their parents and they get into the shadow of their parents help, "can you help me?", "how do you say this?'' (Turkish GCSE Programme Co-ordinator, Hackney)

The course is seen as linking in with supplementary and mother tongue schools as it is community based. The parents glow with pride when speaking about the course and the progress their children made in Turkish:

'(a fellow parent) says that it was very helpful for her son: he did not know much about the Turkish, but because of the classes they were taking before, and this GCSE Turkish helped him a lot and he got a very good grade. She said she is very happy about that.' (Turkish parent, Hackney)

It has also helped parent-child communication, as the parent does not seem so far removed from the child's school life any longer. As a mother explains:

'It helps a lot. Before they did not talk much about the school. (...) Her daughter reads a book, she shares it with her mother, she tell what the book was about but unfortunately her mother does not speak very good English, so she cannot help her with the English or maths or other subjects. But she tries her best, she's better than before.' (Translation of a Turkish parent, Hackney)

Children who were previously shy and did not participate in class have had their confidence boosted:

'After this test, this GCSE exam, she started being the most successful child, she really got out of her shell and she was very proud. (...) Just give them children a little success, once they taste this success they will know it and they will ask for more success.' (Turkish GCSE Programme Co-ordinator, Hackney)

The course benefits both children and parents. Only one of the parents taking the course had finished school and gone on to university: the four other parents had left secondary school after two years.

Support for parents of children designated with SEN

Coventry NDC is the only NDC in this study to offer targeted help for parents of children designated as having special educational needs. The Parental Partnership outreach service, as described previously, offers courses, information and practical support. This can extend to putting parents in touch with organisations who can help them cope and help their children be included in a wide range of mainstream activities:

'As you'll see this morning there is an awful lot of children that are on the autistic spectrum, and the parents are very worried about them going out to play. And we have a service here, which we link into, called play partners. And what that is, is there is a particularly trained person to take their little one to the local youth group and sort of shadow him. So they are actually taking part in the community activities, they are meeting new friends. Hopefully then it might tire them out a little bit, they might go to sleep, and then they'll react better at school, less behaviour problems. (...) And we've had lots of meetings with local... like the church, and the community centres, because, initially they wouldn't accept some of the children that have got difficulties because they were untrained. So we've come to an agreement now that as long as they've got a play partner who is trained, they are happy for those children to come along and join their sessions.' (Outreach worker, Coventry)

Sometimes parents do not know how to go about administrative processes to get the maximum help for their child. Parental Partnerships not only puts parents in touch with the relevant organisations, but will also help them fill out the forms (a deceptively simple but vital process):

'Due to my son having special needs and I have found a local school that he was attending at the time was not doing anything for the child, to give him support. I then contacted Parental Partnerships with a view to 'statementing' my son, and with the help of Parental Partnerships and their assistance of attending the school and the LEA, we managed to get my son 'statemented' (meaning that increased support and resources are made available), and throughout that time the Parental Partnerships have given support whenever I have needed it...' (Parent, Coventry)

The Coventry outreach service has helped over 50 parents, from giving out simple information to putting together tailor-made support packages for children in mainstream or special schools.

Support for minority ethnic parents

The NDC areas in Bristol and Hackney have significant minority ethnic populations. Some have language problems and some who have arrived recently do not know how the English education system works. In such cases a parent link worker, and various parent support groups, can be of great benefit:

'I've been trying to set up a group particularly for the Somali parents who can't speak English, and it's quite difficult within the school for them to converse with other parents. And we feel that might be important, to set up a group specifically for them, before they can integrate into a larger group with other parents.' (Parent Co-ordinator, Bristol)

Parent groups in Bristol and Hackney have been developing bilingual learning aids and materials for their children to use in class. Apart from keeping their children in touch with their mother tongue, it is also an enriching experience for the other children who learn about other languages and cultures:

'I try to help her to translate. She has finished the last Somali book and we meet her every Tuesday and we try to talk to her about children, and the meeting for the parents.' (Somali Parent, Bristol)

It is hoped that this will contribute to raising attainment and tackling underachievement amongst minority ethnic students:

'In Hackney I have heard this argument quite strongly that there are particular groups, quite specifically Turkish children and families, where the evidence shows they are, there's a pattern of consistent under achievement and on those grounds one would target particular groups in terms of setting groups, running sessions, translating material into community languages: all of which are kind of practical strategies that one would use for that.' (Consultant, Hackney)

Outcomes and Impact

Parental involvement projects in all three NDCs we visited have increased parental participation and improved communication between schools and families. In some cases it has opened new channels of communication. It has also improved parental engagement with education:

'I know for a fact, at one time, if I had to go in and sort something out at the schools, I'd just go in and blow them out, really, argumentative...but (parent co-ordinator) took me aside, she's said - look, go in, have eye-to-eye contact, don't explode. Now, you explain your version. Because sometimes you get the teachers and that in schools, they try to speak to you as if you are a kid, yourself. And that irritates me. So I start. But (parent co-ordinator) said "Look, you are not a child, and you want them to talk to you like an adult, because that's what you are, you are an adult." And since I've been doing that I've been a lot calmer with the schools.' (Parent, Coventry)

In Bristol, for example, the number of parents in contact with the project is over 330 (more than 100 are actively involved). In some cases it has meant that schools have been able to use the parental coordinator to try to better meet needs and wishes.

Parents who have taken part in courses and networks also stand to gain in their personal and professional life as their self-confidence increases. In one case a parent went on to train as a nurse and in another a parent became a school governor:

'I think the parent who has done the translation of the books, and she's also come along to meetings and done translations at meetings (...) I think it's really done a lot to build her confidence, and she's actually doing translation now for the city council.' (Parent Co-ordinator, Bristol)

'(One local parent) never even read a school letter before she came here, and now she's a school governor. And she can't believe she actually sits there.' (Outreach worker, Coventry)

Another impact has been in terms of learning about other families and cultures. For example, in one school, children from minority ethnic backgrounds were able to share books in their community languages with their peers and teachers: introducing others to their culture and addressing local suspicions and lack of understanding:

'one of the children who reads Somali took the book around the classroom and read the Somali to the other children. So it's generated a lot of interest, and a lot of interest with the staff as well, and them thinking about ways in which they can use the language within the classroom. Because we've got some nice dictionaries as well.' (Parent Co-ordinator, Bristol)

Barriers are also sometimes broken down when parents get to know each other:

'It's a positive thing. First of all we meet, the parents, and we know each other, because a lot of parents there, our children have been going to school together, but we do not know each other, who is parents. Sometimes my children say, "Can I play with them?" But I do not know their parents. So I will not send the children to their home to play with them. So it is good, we know each other.' (Somali parent, Bristol)

It has also meant that parents start to feel more positive about the schools and feel part of a larger community. This was evident at the presentation of the New City Academy in Bristol when a large number of parents attended:

'...Parents will be engaged when there are things to celebrate (...); if you take The City Academy that has succeeded (St George Community College) this September; 900 parents turned up to my presentations on the new school; now in each case the parent co-ordinator was involved helping to support those being there, helping with questions and those sort of issues and I think it was very beneficial but it just demonstrates that when there is real celebration or purpose to a event it is positive, people do turn out.' (Principal of the City Academy, Bristol)

'It's worked for me, it's worked for my kids, it's made the school a better school, I suppose, yeah. Because then it ain't left down to the teachers, then, is it, to do all the work? So yeah, I suppose yeah. I don't know how a teacher can put up with twenty kids in a classroom, but... they do it, so, you know what I mean?' (Parent, Bristol)

With regard to raising achievement it is difficult to link improved exam results with a specific parental involvement project. Research shows that parental involvement can enhance children's educational performance (Desforges with Abouchaar, 2003). One example of impact in terms of parental involvement linking to educational attainment is the Turkish GCSE project involving five children and their parents. Four out of the five parents had no formal qualifications and three of them had left school at the age of 13. The results were a staggering two grades at A*, seven grade A's and one pass. These children go on to secondary school with a GCSE already, which raises their attainment and self-confidence.

Therefore impacts can be identified in terms of improved parental involvement, communication and engagement, which can directly benefit family learning and affect pupil learning. Impacts in

terms of attainment measures are more difficult to discern in general, but as well as direct contributions (e.g. through the GCSE project) there are also indirect contributions associated with improved engagement in education.

What Works?

Working with already existing projects: In January 2001 Bristol EAZ set up the project with two parent co-ordinators for 23 schools. NDC funding allowed this project to be expanded and specific emphasis to be put on the schools in the NDC area by employing one full-time and two part-time co-ordinators who had to focus on only five schools. Working on the basis of a project that was already successfully addressing a local need means that many teething problems have been avoided. Aside from this it has also helped inter-agency cooperation and may in the future provide a basis for mainstreaming:

'I think the fact that we have worked with the Education Action Zone to do this has worked well. I think it's been a good partnership. Certainly in the school where my son is, it seems that...being a parent and a parent co-ordinator has had its difficulties, in some respects. But I think it's also had its benefits, because I've been able to make relationships with the teachers as well, and now I'm part of the staff...I go to staff meetings.' (Parent Co-ordinator, Bristol)

Bottom-up initiatives: When projects have been requested by the local community to meet a specific need they tend to be more successful. Targeted local initiatives address local problems in a way that projects imposed from above cannot. Again this is the case across all Partnerships we visited:

'We went out into the schools and found out what parents wanted and that was the basis for a lot of what we've taken on since.' (Parent co-ordinator, Bristol)

'...In (the nursery), it was actually driven by the parents. They had a family-learning course called 'Family Talks'. And they have bags that they took home to the children every week, based on themes, and there were various things in them, you could take the book and it linked together. And the children enjoyed it so much, and they did, that three of them decided they wanted to do this for the other parents in the school.' (Parent co-ordinator, Bristol)

This is partly about respect: it is schools and other professionals recognizing that local residents have an important voice and things to say. Similarly, projects have been successful where parents have been welcomed into the premises themselves.

'...We were intent on making it a true community school (...) and we had a room which became available when we moved our staff room, so we made that into a parents' room.' (Headteacher, Bristol)

Once parents feel that the schools welcome them, they become more involved, e.g. such as taking part in meetings.

Local knowledge: Having a local person involved has made a significant difference across all of the projects. Local knowledge seems to be crucial in gaining parental trust.

'What I think has worked really well is having somebody, a key worker, work in an average class day in a small geographical area who has got a good knowledge of here and who has worked in the area before and knows lots of parents and carers in the area and has their trust and confidence...' (Education Co-ordinator, Coventry)

Taking a broad view of the support on offer: By definition parent coordinators have a wide brief, but it seems to increase trust when local residents know that they can rely on the named contact person for non-school related problems as well. This is particularly the case with parents of children with designated special educational needs:

'It's knowing that you can go and I can phone up or come to the office and say to [parent coordinator] - I've got this problem, can you help? And straight away she'll go on the phone to whoever and say - we need to arrange a meeting to get this and this help for these people. And this is really helpful.' (Parent, Coventry)

'Well, my daughter, she has to have nappies at night-time, because she has kidney problems as well, and she weeps a lot during the night. And we have to have nappies for her. And at one time they weren't coming at all. So I said - [parent coordinator], we ain't getting no nappies through. So she phoned up them for me. (...) Went there, come back, and now we are getting the nappies.' (Parent, Coventry)

Parental networks: All the projects have as a planned outcome the creation of parental networks, where parents can share their concerns and problems, but also realise that their cases are not necessarily isolated ones. These networks also give parents a collective voice that they can use with various authorities:

'You meet up now with different parents, and explain it, or you are listening to them, talking about how their kids' what's-his-name's work. And you are thinking - oh, you are talking about my kids here. You know? Because a lot of the time you think you are the only one who is going through everything. But when you hear people start talking about what their kids are doing, or what they are going through, and you think - I'm not the only one because there are other people out there exactly the same.' (Parent, Coventry)

Problems Encountered/Barriers to be Overcome

Relationships with the schools

As we have noted (above) relationships with schools can be difficult sometimes due to parents' own experience with schools when they were younger. This can be helped by mediation through the parent coordinators. Nevertheless, relationships between the schools and the coordinators can turn sour when schools feel they are being criticised. This is a danger particularly for the Parental Partnership Service, as the outreach worker might be seen as taking the parents' side to the detriment of the school. A strong partnership between the schools and the co-ordinators is needed to avoid misunderstandings and acrimony:

'There is a breakdown in communication because the misunderstandings around the arrangements that schools make for parents with special needs and although both the schools and parents who are working towards a certain goal and they don't always appreciate that and the service is to bring people together.' (Project Officer, Coventry)

'The staff sometimes feels that they are in the middle of a war zone and they kind of batten down the hatches. Which actually can actually create hostility for parents...' (Parent Co-ordinator, Bristol)

'(The schools) attempt to involve parents when they can but again it is hard to reach the children with behavioural difficulties and parent don't want to go into the school because what they get is a list of things of what their kids have done wrong rather than what is good about their youngsters...' (Voluntary Co-ordinator, Coventry)

Contacting all parents and accessing parents who most need the service

Not all parents can be reached. In part this might be due to families wishing to deal with their problems privately, in part because there are cultural and language barriers which have not been overcome. When it comes to involving fathers all projects face an up-hill struggle. Traditionally schools have tended to have most contact with mothers and so even when fathers are single parents; there can be issues about ensuring they are involved. Seeking to include the most excluded groups can be very difficult:

'I often feel that the parents who most need help and support are the ones who are suspicious, and who don't always take things up.' (Parent Co-ordinator, Bristol)

'But I think there will always be, to be honest (...), families that we are never going to get hold of. I mean, I know a couple of families, very well, who have got real difficulties. And for love nor money... they do it within their own little family network. And they don't want any outsiders, for whatever reason' (Outreach worker, Coventry)

'I know that there is a group for instance asylum and refugees who would not know how to access the service.' (Volunteer Co-ordinator, Coventry)

Accessing the activities: Factions of people and problems of location

Some parents will not come to the projects on offer because they feel that the courses are dominated by a particular group of parents. Sometimes the venue is problematic and brings with it political connotations. This is the case in ethnically diverse NDCs as well as predominantly white NDC communities. Project coordinators have to pay heed to the local political culture and watch that no local divisions are played out through the projects on offer:

'... and they made it their own and they felt comfortable going there and it was not attached to any other school and there was lots of factions within a area like this, there certain places that some families will not access, I think St Patrick's was one of those neutral venues that many families felt comfortable using and so that's been a real difficulty using that and I think (parent co-ordinator) has had to work doubly hard in this area...' (Project officer, Coventry)

Most NDC Partnerships include ethnically diverse areas and this can be a particular source of misunderstanding and/or tension. For example, projects can become associated with one particular part of the community to the detriment of other residents. Clearly, where there are identifiable needs (for example around English as an Additional Language or refugee/asylum issues) it may be necessary to establish clearly designated services. On other occasions, however, it may be necessary to ensure that services do not become particularly associated with one or more ethnic groups (including whites) to the exclusion of others. These are difficult and challenging issues but need to be addressed and worked on throughout the life of projects (from inception to delivery and beyond).

'black parents will engage perhaps once with the group, though they were out numbered, and therefore they would not engage again. And I think that it was a mistake to operate in that way, I think that that we have to be realistic and say "that to give groups, parents' confidence to access the school system, the needs are different from one group to another". The Somali group, there are issues about language and experience with UK system, with African Caribbean parents that's not the case, but what is the case there is something about the expectations of the school and the school and community; within the Asian community again language can be an issue, but so are issues around how schools deal with faith communities. I think you can't have a group of parents without having those separate things and what I hope to do is then gradually amalgamate some of the activities together...' (Principal of the City Academy, Bristol)

The role of the individual link workers can be especially important in this regard. Minority ethnic link workers can provide targeted help and better understanding in certain circumstances. In some cases it will be necessary to explore the legal constraints and possibilities involved in recruiting specific workers for such roles. It is also important, of course, to reflect on whether some groups might feel excluded regardless of the project's intent:

'Because some of the home-school link workers themselves are representative of (minority) ethnic communities within the borough, that may mean that that, therefore, attracts ethnic parents. Parents of an (minority) ethnic community. And I am wondering how much the English, Scottish; Welsh parents come into school as well? Because if you look at the attainment of English, Scottish, Welsh, boys, in particular, that's quite low.' (Education Co-ordinator, Hackney)⁷

The need for continuity: people and places

A lack of continuity is a major problem for some projects. This works through both human and physical resources. For example, many of the projects only operate during school term time (and coordinators are often funded part time), this means that parents can struggle during school holidays. In Bristol, for example, one parent coordinator is employed full-time and the other two only part-time. All the parents that we interviewed mentioned that more co-ordinators were needed and that those who were already working needed to be funded for more hours.

'Two of the parent coordinators do 16.5 hour weeks, one of whom works with three organisations, the other works with two; the manager works with the school which is 1,000 strong and has a community that is as diverse as you can imagine.' (Education Co-ordinator, Bristol)

Even if staff are available during school holidays, projects sometimes find additional restrictions on their use of suitable accommodation:

'And you need a group like this, but this group also needs premises where they not only meet during school term, but they are allowed to meet during the school holidays.' (Parent, Coventry)

We have already noted (above) the problems that can be faced in identifying a suitable venue for services. It is especially frustrating when such accommodation is closed during holidays (when it may be needed most) or a change of location becomes necessary. Not only does this disrupt the stability of the project, but also parents might come after a prolonged absence and find the venue closed, meaning that they lose contact with the service:

'We have got a settled base and it's being well manned and people start using it and parents are becoming more aware and the fact they can just drop in and to suddenly lose that is quite a major blow for them.' (Project Officer, Coventry)

'The problem you are having that in this particular area there are a few buildings in which you can deliver services from, accommodation has been a crucial issue for us.' (Education Co-ordinator, Coventry)

⁷ A legacy of ethnic monitoring in the former Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) is that many London boroughs continue to use the phrase 'English, Scottish and Welsh' (ESW) as a short-hand for white.

Administration

As with many projects there have been some administrative problems. There is a balance to be struck between accountability for the use of funds and allowing participants a sense of trust and the freedom to implement plans in ways that are most appropriate:

'There have been certain approaches to financial management which have left all involved feeling very insecure. (...) I would have wanted all schools to have been very clear from the outset about how much was available for them to spend on the home school link workers' salaries and on costs. And how much was available for them to spend in terms of managing their action plan. And I think all heads involved would have wanted that as well. And I think difficulties around the budget have left people very insecure and that's not good enough.' (Education Co-ordinator, Hackney)⁸

'I would like schools to be trusted to manage resources themselves. I would like it not to be the model where schools have to claim for these things, but schools are automatically given the money and then have much more freedom. Given the money to get on with it (...) Every quarter we have to produce pages and pages of junk.' (Headteacher, Hackney)

Conclusions

Parental involvement in education is increasingly viewed as one of the most important factors that contribute to high levels of achievement. Numerous government initiatives have been launched in this field and, unsurprisingly, many NDC Partnerships view this as a key part of their attempts to raise levels of educational attainment for all age groups.

Many different approaches are being adopted and some of the NDC projects are showing significant signs of progress in this difficult and complex area.

The projects have been especially **successful** in certain respects:

- sharing information about the availability of local services and support networks
- providing a mediation role between school and parents where communications have broken down
- raising parents' awareness of their children's courses of study and ways they can help
- family learning has been piloted successfully, including an example where primary pupils for whom English is an Additional Language learnt alongside their parents for a GCSE qualification
- dedicated support for parents of children designated as having Special Educational Needs (SEN) can be especially helpful, not least in creating and improving links with mainstream organisations
- breaking down mutual misunderstandings and suspicions between schools and residents

Key factors associated with successful initiatives are:

- linking with projects and organisations that are already in place
- adopting a 'bottom-up' strategy where problems and needs are identified by local people themselves

⁸ 'Budgetary problems in the Hackney project have been vigorously addressed by the management team and decisions have been taken that should ensure a much easier time for project schools in the coming financial year.' (Project Consultant)

- involving local people in key project roles
- taking a broad view of the support on offer
- developing parental networks

Some **barriers and problems** remain:

- relationships between schools and parents can be strained, especially where schools feel unfairly criticised and/or parents feel patronized and unwelcome
- some parents remain especially unwilling or unable to access services
- local communities can include rivalries and conflicts: projects must be aware of these and try not to fall foul of them (especially where these involve different faith and/or ethnic groups)
- continuity is vitally important: problems arise where staff and/or accommodation change or become unavailable during school holidays
- it can be difficult to balance, on one hand, the need for financial accountability and forward planning, and on the other hand, the need for trust and freedom to plan and implement flexibly as appropriate locally

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