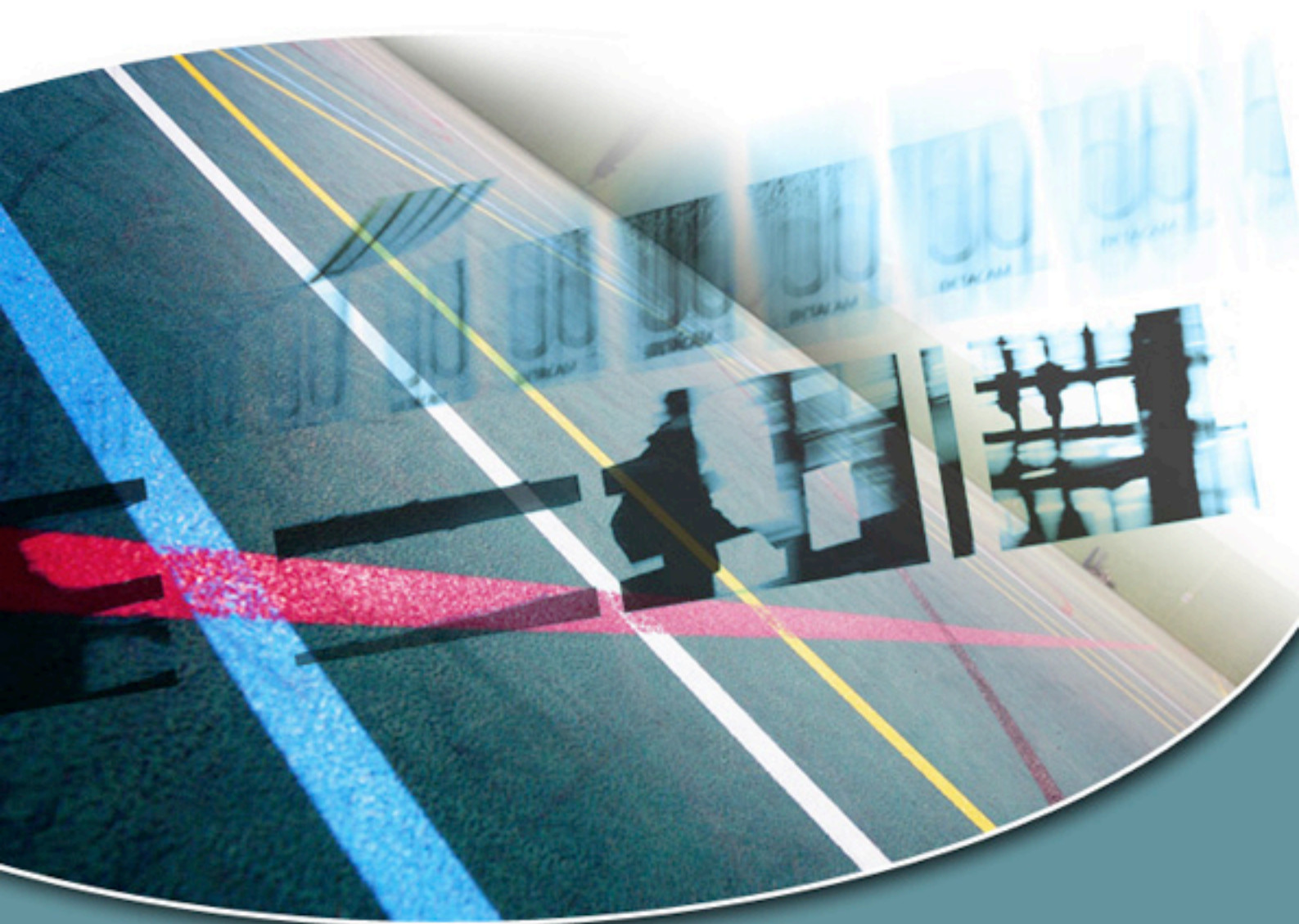


Review of Successful Parental Involvement Practice for 'hard to reach' Parents



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Executive summary

Parents' involvement in the education of their children has been identified nationally as a major contributory factor in overall levels of attainment in school. More recently home parenting has been seen by schools as the strongest driving force of pupil achievement. However, parental involvement policies tend to be conceived around what the schools perceive are model parents which does not necessarily take into account cultural and socio-economic barriers to parental involvement.

A wide range of projects are under way in London. 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 report makes clear that policy making has to reinforce initiatives which focus on:

- **Parent diversity:** developing flexible home-school liaison policies that take parent diversity into account and specifically focus on hard to reach parents.
- **Minority Ethnic Parents:** added cultural barriers of minority ethnic students require specific initiatives for BME parents.

The report is based on case study visits to four projects which all aim to involve parents (preferably in their children's learning), prioritising hard to reach parents and which operate in secondary schools.

The projects differ on the basis of the different target population and the varying issues (such as behaviour /discipline /punctuality /underachievement) they are trying to address.

The research has identified a number of key attributes of effective projects that make them successful, especially with regard to attracting 'hard to reach' parents:

- **Flexibility and bottom up initiatives and self-evaluation:** There is a need for constant evaluation of the impact of a programme or an activity. The projects need to be flexible and respond to the needs of the families they are trying to engage.
- **Local knowledge:** Having local people involved has made a significant difference across all the projects. Local knowledge and cultural sensitivity seems to be essential in gaining parental trust.
- **Relationships with the schools:** The schools have to take the projects on board and staff and senior management have to be seen to be behind the projects.
- **Accessing the activities:** Parents can only access activities and meetings if the logistics are taken care of. This is even more the case with 'hard to reach' parents who could get discouraged if help with childcare or translations are not given.

The research also suggests that the following areas require particular attention by schools wanting to engage hard to reach parents as well as by LEAs supporting educational initiatives:

- Not many parental involvement projects focus specifically on achievement. The survey undertaken showed that most projects did not link attainment and parental

involvement directly. The report found only two projects which had a direct, measurable impact on achievement.

- There is an important difference of parental involvement between secondary and primary schools as parents tend to have fewer contacts with schools as their children grow older. This is the case partly because children want to be more autonomous but also because parents feel less capable of helping children. The transition from primary to secondary school needs to be managed both with regard to pupils and parents and parents need to be kept on board at the start of secondary education.
- Despite schools' aims focus on how to improve attainment, their needs have to be secondary to the needs of the parents and the children who they are trying to engage. Often parents and their involvement are seen as crucial in improving standards; however this misses the point of differing family needs.
- Every school has a different set of 'hard to reach' parents – there is a need to get to know the barriers for each particular group and work at overcoming them in a partnership. The assumption that parents are not interested in their children's education is fundamentally incorrect.

Introduction

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 LEAs have encouraged schools to develop such projects or schemes.

A wide range of projects are under way in London. 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.

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. 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 across London LEAs. The review of existing projects and the choices made were based on the London Challenge priorities of engaging 'hard to reach' parents in secondary school education. The projects were also chosen with a bias on how directly they impacted on pupils' achievement.

Despite LEA and government priority being on measurable pupil attainment, few projects have been developed in a manner so as to impact on grades and exams directly. The research team came across only two projects that directly focused on improving results at school. Whilst other projects will have an indirect effect on achievement, the correlation between projects and raised attainment however cannot be made directly.

There are also very few projects focusing especially on 'hard to reach' parents. Most projects we came across were open to all parents, rather than targeted to the needs of particular groups such as single working parents, white working class or Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) families. The initiatives that are aimed in general at involving parents are seen as benefiting BME families if a significant proportion of the target audience are of BME heritage. This is a reasonable assumption but it repeats a common misperception that BME communities will benefit equally as educational standards are improved more generally. Unfortunately, experience in England has shown that this is not the case. Despite an overall improvement in standards since the late 1980s, the major inequalities of attainment remain between white pupils and their peers of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and African Caribbean heritage (Gillborn 2004). Similar inequalities also persist in the labour market (Strategy Unit 2003).

This report covers the following areas:

- The academic and policy literature on the subject;
- 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 involvement 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); and
- Key lessons that have been learned so far.

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, contribute 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.¹

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, 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

¹ 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.

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. 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 (see 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 crucially the Children Act 2004 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.

Literature Review

The purpose of this review is to:

- Investigate the principal theories relating to parental involvement;
- Focus specifically on hard to reach parents;
- Explore the particular aspects that characterise parental involvement of ethnic minority parents and the consequences on policy and practice.

I) Parental involvement: Promises and challenges

The attempts to understand persistent underachievement has led to the development of research on parental involvement. Parents' expectation and support was then identified as the most promising driving force of children's success as well as a source of inequalities between children. Socio-economic and cultural barriers have led to the identification of a heterogeneous group of hard to reach parents pleading not only for the need to expand parental involvement policies but also to facilitate their adaptation to the diversity of parents.

1) Origins and impact of parental involvement

Research demonstrates the crucial contribution of parental involvement to children's education success (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; Fan & Chen, 2001). Moreover, the literature suggests that among the non-school factors of school achievement like socio-economic background, parent's educational attainment, family structure, ethnicity and parental involvement, it is the latter which is the most strongly connected to attainment (Feinstein & Symons, 1999). Recent research has shown that parental aspiration/expectation on their children's achievements has a strong impact on results at school while the effect of supervision of their work is only marginal (Fan & Chen, 2001).

However parental involvement remains a complex concept, which involves a wide variety of actions and initiatives.

In a comprehensive review, Desforges and Abouchar list involvement initiatives as 'good parenting in the home, including the provision of a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of constructive social and educational values and high aspirations relating to personal fulfillment and good citizenship; contact with schools to share information; participation in school events; participation in the work of the school; and participation in school governance' (Desforge & Abouchar, 2003, p. 2).

Several other typologies of parental involvement have been proposed by authors (Edwards & Alldred, 2000). One of the most common is Epstein's typology which considers parental involvement as the results of 6 duties: parenting, communicating (school/home), volunteering (events), teaching at home, decision making, collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1996).

However, no matter which typology is chosen, parental involvement ranges from simple to complex activities, suggesting that some parents may experience some particular difficulties that prevent them from being as 'involved' as might be desired.

Many researchers have sought to investigate the different factors that potentially affect the capacity of parents to be 'involved' in their children's education.

2) What makes parents 'hard to reach'?

Most studies seek to explore who are these parents are and why they are considered 'hard to reach'. The results conclude that the factors are numerous and that any category of parents not in touch with schools can be considered 'hard to reach'. They also have shown that the constraints for parental involvement are external to the school and that on the whole parental involvement policies experience difficulties in integrating the wide range of these types of parents.

The constraints on parental involvement

Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) identified many factors that could influence parental involvement such as social class, maternal level of education, material deprivation, maternal psycho-social health, single parent status and, to a lesser degree, family ethnicity.

Chen and Fan found that ethnicity (similarly to age) did not influence the impact of parental involvement on achievement (2003). However this argument will be questioned in the next section that will focus on minority ethnic parents only.

The socio-economic factor is particularly prominent and many studies underline the difference of parental involvement between middle class and working class parents (Lareau, 1987; Crozier, 1997; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Ball, 2003).

The level of education is also an important factor and the cultural and social capital can strongly influence the parent involvement in schools in a positive way (West et al, 1998).

Problems can also arise with regard to gender, as women traditionally remain responsible for school choice and the child's education (David, 1993). However, Zick et al. show that women who work do not reduce their parental involvement (2001). This is particularly important when looking at single mothers (Standing, 2000). Research also shows that 'divorced parents, as a group, are less involved in the children's school path than parents from intact two parent's families' (Colpin, Vandemeulebroecke & Ghesquiere, 2004, p. 276). The erosion of social capital is an important constraint on parental involvement which leaves the school to fill up a vacuum (Coleman, 1987, p. 38).

All those external factors and constraints explain the diversity of what is called 'hard to reach' parents. It is very clear that there is no one such group and consequently there is a difficulty to develop targeted policies.

The need to integrate the diversity of parents and their specific problems

Indeed many researchers point out that parental involvement policies tend to 'neglect complex differentiations of class, ethnicity and gender' (Crozier, Reay & Vincent 2005, p.155). This leads to the fact that minority ethnic and working class parents have historically been perceived as a 'problem' by the school (Vincent, 1995, p.189).

The historical development of the parental involvement debate moves away from the sole need to ensure attendance to the gradual influence of parents as co-educators symbolised by the 1967 Plowden report which, according to Vincent, is 'pervaded by middle-class conception of ideal parent-child interaction' (1996, p. 75).

By underestimating the diversity of external influence on parents, national and school policies tend not to adapt to the particular needs of some parents. As Crozier has said: 'the adoption of a one size fits all approach to parental involvement prevails.' (2001, p. 330).

The main result from the Desforges and Abouchar review shows that parental involvement in learning at home is the most effective, while home school links have less impact (2003). As a result parental confidence is central. At the same time one can argue that home-school relations can be the way of creating or reactivating this confidence for some parents who experience difficulties. As Bastiani states, 'although family influences are crucial, schools do make a difference!' (1997, p. 9).

II) Are minority ethnic parents a specific group? Do they need targeted policies?

At the heart of the debate about parental involvement and the specific question of 'hard to reach' parents lies the question of minority ethnic parents. Such questions cannot be separated from broader issues on multicultural education (Ladson-Billings, Gillborn, 2004).

1) Minority ethnic pupils and the school

Some research has indicated differential and overrepresentation of minority ethnic pupils as less achieving and having problems with discipline. Whilst such problems can be related they have to be carefully interpreted and set in the context of specific barriers linking to the external environment and problems of perception from the school. Pathologising such parents has led to inappropriate structures to be perpetuated;

Underachievement?

The growing issue of minority ethnic parental involvement tends to be connected to the fact that more research and recent policy documents have acknowledged unequal achievement between white and minority ethnic pupils and between different minority ethnic groups (Bhattacharyya, Ison & Blair, 2003, p. 11; DfES 2005a). Gillborn and Youdell stress the underachievement of black pupils in GCSEs (2000) while Haque focuses on underachievement amongst Bangladeshi pupils (2000). This is confirmed by current data from the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) which shows better GCSE results for White, Indian and Chinese pupils than Black Caribbean, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black African pupils (DfES, 2003).

Economic disadvantage has a big impact on educational achievement and many minority ethnic families live in disadvantaged areas. Consequently many BME children are facing the same problems as working class children. In poorer areas, schools tend to have poorer outcomes (Bhattacharyya, Ison & Blair, 2003, p. 22).

Such results are confirmed by Gillborn and Mirza, who claim that achievement classifications may be of analytical interest but should be used with caution not to 'lead to a hierarchy of ethnic minorities based on assumptions of inherent ability' (2000, p. 7) as 'it can highlight areas where minority pupils might face additional unjustifiable barriers to success' (Gillborn & Gipps, 1996, p.1). Such caution is important with regard to the particular constraints that all minority groups can face.

First of all, there can be some direct 'institutional racism'. The 1999 Macpherson Report defined institutional racism as 'the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance and thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people' (McPherson, 1999).

Gillborn argues that teachers have 'different expectations on the basis of the pupil's ethnicity' (2002, p. 61). This has been observed in particular in the case of black pupils at both secondary and primary level (Gillborn, 2002). A manifestation of this bias can be found in the

overrepresentation of minority ethnic pupils in lower teaching groups (Hallam & Tanounji, 1996). Such initiatives show that in the same way as gender and social class, ethnicity can interfere with the sole criteria of ability when pupils are assigned to groups (Ireson et al, 2002, p. 11). This restricts their choice in term of curriculum and potentially increases inequality of attainment.

Discipline and exclusion

Achievement is not the only problem, discipline is an issue as well. 'Teachers operate with a heightened fear of disruption, or even aggression, from African Caribbean young people' (Gillborn, 2002). This is especially pronounced for black young men who are frequently considered 'undesirable learners' (Youdell, 2003). This stereotype is an important issue in a context where race is not accounted for as a factor of exclusion in policy discourse (Wright et al 2000).

Such issues are not only relevant to black pupils as, for example, other studies have shown that problems of attendance and drop out are particularly important for pupils from the Traveller community (Jordan, 2001). Particular strategies have been developed in order to tackle the specific problems of Traveller children ranging from truancy to the need to raise teachers' expectations of pupils (Foster & Horton, 2005, p. 17).

So the issue is not about establishing a link between discipline / achievement problems and ethnic minorities, but not to deny it. Denying it is a way to negate the external causes. The relationship between discipline and achievement should not be considered lightly as 'some ethnic minority children have in the past been wrongly placed in special schools' (Harris; Eden & Blair, 2000, p. 61).

There are a number of ways to raise achievement of ethnic minority children. These include the collection and analysis of the data on minority ethnic pupils to assist in setting targets, developing mentoring activities and staff development and training on BME issues. In more general policy terms, there is a need to emphasise that schools have to ensure and maintain a strong ethos toward achievement that will include all pupils. This implies closer links with parents (Bhattacharyya, Ison & Blair, 2003, p. 22). Liaison with ethnic minority parents can be a way for the school to understand external factors that can explain a child's underachievement and to adjust accordingly its policy.

The literature offers a view that the problems described above could be reduced by more parental involvement, especially if some barriers are removed.

2) The added constraints to minority ethnic parental involvement

It would be wrong to claim that all BME parents are hard to reach. However, there are some constraints that many minority ethnic parents share with other hard to reach parents. The most obvious is the socio-economic factor. Acknowledging that most research on this issue is American, Desforjes, & Albouchar, stated that parental involvement is correlated with socio-economic status which is itself linked with ethnicity (2003). In this respect, some of the BME parents share barriers that relate to socio-economic factors whatever ethnic or cultural origins are considered.

Gillborn shows that there are 'additional barriers that can hinder the inclusion of minority ethnic parents' (2002). Those barriers are mainly generated by society in general but in some cases can also be driven by school's policies or practice.

Language and cultural barriers in liaising with the school

The first set of barriers relate to the difficulty of communicating with the parents and making them confident to liaise with the school. Misunderstanding on a cultural and religious level can lead to further alienation of parents. Gillborn stresses that language is a crucial issue with respect to both written documents of information from the school and communication with teachers (2002). Problems of communication, especially in secondary schools, reflect a 'lack of strategies of monitoring and auditing queries'. (Thompson et al, 2004). One can suppose that the lack of home-school liaison is particularly prejudicial to hard to reach parents. This has been confirmed by recent research showing that information sent out by schools was not often read (Thompson et al, 2004, p. 6).

Vincent emphasises a clear distinction between information and communication, the latter being a two way process (2002, p. 87). The problem of assimilating information from the school or 'decode' the report' clearly disadvantages working class and minority ethnic parents (Power & Clarke, 2000, p. 39) and increases the gap with other parents (Crozier, 1997). A two way process implies that parents can respond to the information. However, they often do not know who to contact within the school. Beyond the formal language issue, Gundara argues that 'formal meetings...are intimidating and many parents do not have the skills, confidence or information to take part' (2000).

Those cultural barriers are sometimes ignored by the school or even exacerbated by a lack of interest.

Racism and discrimination

Again, institutional racism or stereotyping can lead to a lack of consideration of minority ethnic children and parents.

Crozier has shown that black parents were motivated about their children's schooling but because of their own experience of school and lack of communication with the school of their children, they have lost confidence in the system (1996, p. 265). Similar phenomena are put into evidence by Bhatti in the cases of Asian parents (1999). The importance of religion has been documented by Abbas who has shown that South Asian Muslims are perceived differently within schools and are at a disadvantage compared to Hindus and Sikhs (Abbas, 2002).

Pedagogic practices: Teachers and parents relations: lack of understanding

Many studies have shown that there is a need for 'an equitable dialogue between parents and teachers' (Crozier, Reay & Vincent, 2005, p. 159). Such a move is even more important in the case of minority ethnic parents.

This relates as well to cultural issues. As shown earlier, some teachers have low expectations of pupil achievement. Accordingly they also have lower expectations of minority ethnic parents' involvement in their children's education (Hill & Taylor, 2004). This situation tends to relate more to a general misunderstanding of the multicultural society and other cultures and a tendency to reason in term of stereotypes about ethnic minorities. For example, Huss-Keeler showed that Pakistani parents 'demonstrated their interest in their children's education in a culturally different way than middle class parents which was misinterpreted by the teachers as lack of interest' (1991).

Such misunderstandings are confirmed by Holden, Hughes and Desforges who showed that 'teachers correctly assumed that (minority ethnic) parents generally did not know much about the Standard Assessment Tests, but wrongly assumed that they were not interested in knowing more' (1996, p. 20).

According to Hill & Taylor, teachers are not aware of the fact that 'parental school involvement seems to function differently or serve different purposes in different ethnic and cultural groups' (2004, p. 162).

Such cultural barriers are exacerbated as minority ethnic teachers are underrepresented (DfES, 2005b). There are several issues here, as the idea that minority ethnic teachers would serve as powerful role models which would enhance minority ethnic children's perception of their ability to succeed in the same way as any other children. However, there has also been evidence that some minority ethnic teachers or teacher trainees suffered from racism from pupils and in some cases were discriminated against by their colleagues (Carrington & Skelton, 2003, p. 260).

It is important to note that teachers should not be stigmatised as the main responsibility lies with the whole educational system. The slow process of recognition of external barriers for minority ethnic parental involvement explains the lack of appropriate school policies and structures that could enhance the understanding of the cultural specificities of both parents and children.

III) The solutions?

Most measures to reduce barriers to ethnic minority parental involvement are beyond the scope of educational policies and relate to broader social policies. However, research suggests that there are opportunities through school policies to ease some constraints faced by hard to reach parents and particularly BME parents.

1) The end of deracialisation of parental involvement policies

The literature highlights the danger that a uniform parental involvement policy may aggravate inequalities according to class, gender and ethnicity by considering that all schools, parents, and pupils are homogenous (Brain & Reid, 2003, p. 293). Crozier and Davies argued that 'overall secondary schools demonstrated complacency or indifference to the diversity of their parents' (Crozier and Davis, 2005).

Tomlinson provides a historical perspective on the 'gulf of misunderstanding' between BME parents and schools that was detected as early as 1981 by the Hampton committee of inquiry into the education and minority ethnic children (1993, p. 132).

In order to avoid the increase of such gap, Crozier argues for the end of the deracialisation of parental involvement (Crozier, 2001). This is about recognising the particular difficulties and barriers faced by minority ethnic parents and the necessity of specific initiatives adapted to their needs.

However there are other voices too. Wolfendale warns that 'separate home-school policies for ethnic minority families would be separatist, invidious and ultimately racist' and supports the idea of temporal and transitional policies in order to prevent personal as well as institutional racism 'at the time of most significant immigration to accommodate to such societal phenomena and shift attitudes and practices accordingly,' (Wolfendale, 1999, p. 97).

2) Proposition to adapt policies to minority ethnic parents

The research literature provides insights in terms of current and potential good practice in order to increase involvement from ethnic minority parents. Most studies insist that parental involvement policies should be flexible in order to take account of the school's location which 'produced different overall sample in terms of ethnicity, gender, socio-economic background ... as well as a range of family norms' (Edwards & Aildred 2000).

Gillborn & Gipps stressed that case studies research 'highlight the potential for school based changes that involves teachers, pupils and local communities in a positive re-evaluation of the role and work of schools in a multi-ethnic society' (1996, p. 6).

Successful schools and reactivity

Blair & Bourne found that 'effective multi-ethnic schools had taken steps to identify and address some or all of these particular areas of concern, and that they shared several characteristics - which were also features of all successful schools - including: appropriate whole-school approaches; improved communication; effective collection and use of data; responsiveness to individual need' (1998). Their argument is that planning, evaluation and reactivity are the main characteristics which would make a project successful.

Within the classroom: the teachers

The big challenge is for teachers 'to see the world through the eyes of parents who do not fit the norm' (Crozier, Reay & Vincent, 2005, p. 158). Teacher training should include courses dealing with minority ethnic pupils and parents (Burtonwood, 2002). The establishment of direct contact between teacher and minority ethnic parents to learn about their culture is also seen as important (Tizard, Mortimore & Burchell, 1988).

There can be a double challenge as at times the need to develop parent/teachers collaboration within the school is acknowledged by neither of them. As Street finds 'parents of adolescents have little reason to be in school on a regular basis. Educators must recognise that parents, even of secondary school students, are partners in their child's learning' (Street, 1998). The challenge is particularly great as at secondary school level, students often do not want their parents to be as actively involved.

Continuity: Transition for primary to secondary schools

The investigation of Crozier and Davies on Pakistanis and Bangladeshi parents in the North East of England have shown that primary schools were more involved in communication with ethnic minorities parents than secondary schools (Crozier et al, 2004).

Networking: Improving home school relations

The development of parent groups should contribute 'to help promote a multicultural approach and help the school to explain its aims to the minority groups and respond to their needs' (Tizard et al, 1988, p. 74).

Most studies show that the expectation of the parents for their children to succeed at school is high but that there is a lack of cultural and social capital to transmit and build on at school level. Crozier and Reay propose to encourage 'working class and ethnic minority parents to network and develop their own resources of social capital' as middle class parents do (2005, p. 159).

There is a need for specific policies vis-à-vis BME parents which could be based on the adoption a multicultural approach facilitating the interaction with parents and explaining the objectives and methods of the school. This leads to bridges being built between schools and the community.

Outreach activities

The development of links with the community is certainly an important factor that can be enhanced through a number of initiatives. But no project or initiative can work until the

parents liaise personally with the school. It is important for schools to be persistent when wanting to involve the hard-to-reach parents (Aronson, 1996).

Home school workers are an integral and crucial of what Shah called the culturally-sensitive services (Shah, 2001, p. 254). Hamilton stresses that in the case of refugee parental involvement, schools need to develop parental education programmes and outreach programmes to suit their particular needs (2004).

The role of home school workers will stretch from outreach activities to facilitating the development of the relationship between parents and the schools: in short to bring the parents to the school and ensure that the new links solidify. As MacBeth States, the role of home school liaison consists of stimulating rather than replacing contacts between teachers and parents (1989, p. 109).

Conclusion:

The research literature suggests that parental involvement impacts on children's success and identifies parental involvement in learning at home as the strongest driving force of pupil achievement. Accordingly, a number of studies identified cultural and socio-economic barriers for home parenting that lead to exacerbate differentials in terms of achievement.

Critical studies stigmatise parental involvement policies that tends to be conceived around what the schools perceive are model parents. Such 'one size fits all' policy would generally have no effect on 'hard to reach parents' located mainly amongst the working class and minority ethnic groups.

Part of the literature defends the idea that some of those barriers could be removed by developing flexible, home-school liaison policies that could take parents' diversity into account and specifically focus on hard to reach parents.

Many studies insist on the added cultural barriers of minority ethnic students who require specific initiatives towards minority ethnic parents. Among those, the training of teaching and management staff on how to deal with minority ethnic children and parents proves to help in reducing cultural misunderstanding. Moreover, increased communication through outreach activities and the development of minority ethnic parent groups to explain the aims and methods of the school will automatically enhance parental involvement.

The recent policy developments such as the Children's Act 2004 seems to acknowledge such needs. One of its strategies to improve children's well being consists of 'encouraging schools to offer a range of extended services that help pupils engage and achieve, and build stronger relationships with parents and the wider community' (DfES, 2005c).

Methods

After an extensive literature review, a general survey was sent out to Chief Education Officers in all London LEAs to audit existing practice of parental involvement initiatives. The survey led us to identify 4 projects in London (among the 15 returned questionnaires). The main themes that a project had to combine were:

- To involve parents (preferably in their children's learning)
- To prioritise hard to reach parents
- To operate in secondary schools

Only very few projects combined all these elements. In fact it should be noted that it was not possible to find a project which related only to white working class parents through the survey and through further searches, which included LEAs outside of London.

Four projects were chosen on the basis of the different target populations they were focusing on. They were also selected on the basis of the different issues (such as behaviour /disciplines /punctuality /underachievement) they were trying to address. Identifying projects with different objectives was one of the aims of the research for this report.

38 semi structured interviews were conducted with teachers, parents and students in the selected case study areas. The interviewees were selected on the basis of the projects and therefore the interviews were not necessarily limited to one school. Most of the interviews were conducted face to face; however a few follow-up interviews with parents were conducted over the phone. This was done especially when parents could not stay on for the evaluation beyond the times of the project meetings.

Nature of the Interventions

As explained above different projects and models of delivery have been developed focusing on local need and community requirements that vary widely from LEA to LEA. Some projects prioritise the bridging between home and schools through improved communication, some the completion of homework and some the increased cooperation between parents and children whilst learning. They also operate very differently, being offered as after school workshops, discussion groups or formal lessons in and outside of schools, by schools or by non-school organisations bought in by the schools.

The Ocean Math Project: Tower Hamlets

Supported by the Ocean New Deal for Communities (NDC), the Ocean Math project aims to improve pupils' attainment in mathematics through the development of parental involvement activities. The project provides workshops in mathematics for the pupils and their parents. It also develops homework activities in collaboration with the school teaching staff. The team has investigated the project's activities within two secondary schools located in Tower Hamlets: the Central Foundation Girls School and the Stepney Green School. The population on the Ocean estate is over 90% of Bangladeshi origin. The area is considered one of the poorest areas in London, having been selected by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) for NDC regeneration money.

By far the most extensive of the projects on offer, this was also the one, which developed parental involvement in light of pupil achievement in a holistic way, meeting the needs of pupils, parents and teachers. Central to the project's success is the collaboration with the

school. Whilst there were some tension at the beginning with regard to extra-work load and the boundaries between the allocation of school and project time, this has now been worked out to everyone's satisfaction. Both the school and the project staff acknowledge that the project has become 'integrated' within the school. The combination works so well that some parents think that the project is a part of the structure of the school. A large part of this is based on the motivation of the people involved. The heads of schools have been supportive of the project and the school staff's motivation has been crucial in making the project and the school cooperate. Heads of maths and maths teachers have cooperated by teaching pupils and parents at the workshops. Many expressed that it was challenging at the beginning but they have come to like it, and some say that it has changed their way of teaching to a certain degree. The leader of the project is a maths teacher – in itself an important factor to understand the learning needs of the pupils as well as the teaching needs of the staff involved.

The project has been extremely successful in that it brings the parents to the schools and encourages them to return. The objectives of the project are multifaceted and include creating a bridge between school and parents as well as improving homework completion and achievement. The project coordinator understands that it is not the lack of parents interest which is at fault – but simply a steady drop off of parental involvement once children enter secondary education.

Now, when you look at the parental involvement, it doesn't matter which country it is and it doesn't matter what period of time it is, the parental involvement is significant when the children are little, when they first start primary school (...). And then it kind of- you find less and less parents coming as the children are growing up. And it suddenly drops when they go to the secondary school. (Ocean, Project coordinator)

With regard to building a bridge between the parents and the schools, the role of outreach workers appears to have been crucial. They are all Bangladeshi and combine their efforts vis-à-vis parents with a strong cultural sensitivity that led to an increasing success in persuading parents to come to school to attend the workshops. The parents have come to appreciate the project and have asked for workshops to be provided in subjects other than maths.

The results of the project are twofold. First of all the completion rate of homework and the quality of homework has improved. Some parents said that before attending the workshop the pupils would come back from school and when asked about what they had done there, they would say 'nothing'. Since the parents have been attending the workshops, this is no longer the case. As a result, there has been an increase in handing in homework of at least 22%. The second result is that attainment has improved. Most members of staff and directors confirmed that results in mathematics have gone up. From the time the project started to today, the increase in KS3 results in one school is 10% and 12% in the other. Today both schools have higher results than the London Borough of Tower Hamlets average in KS3 Mathematics.

The LEA is particularly supportive of the project, clearly impressed with the results:

So this particular project was born out of the view and idea to improve people's basic literacy and numeracy skills. One of the big issues has always been, in this authority, traditionally, that we have had relatively poor attainment in literacy, or in English and mathematics. And particularly in this particular neighbourhood. And the idea came about that this project was not only to improve pupils' abilities in mathematics and literacy, but also to improve the parents' skills in literacy and numeracy. The reason being that, actually, if we improved the skills of the parents then they're much better

able to support and help their pupils, their children rather, back at home. (Ocean, LEA rep).

Transferability

There are indeed good indications that the project could be transferred somewhere else and into another context. People from the project and the school are keen to share their experiences and help develop similar projects elsewhere. The efficiency of such a transfer would obviously depend on the context of the new place it would be implemented in.

It is essential that the key ingredients described above are taken into account when thinking of replicating this project elsewhere. The links between the project and the school activities have to be well defined. The responsibilities of the people involved have to be clear at the outset. It has to be understood that the project is not there to take over the school but is a complementary tool. The role of the outreach workers is central, as face-to-face contact with parents will guarantee a high rate of attendance and involvement. There is a particular importance in schools being aware of their community's needs and the cultural sensitivities when adapting any existing project.

Mothertongue GCSE (TGCSE) – Islington and Hackney

This project aims at improving parental involvement and the development of family literacy through the study of home languages and the preparation for a GCSE exam for both parents and children. 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. The project is delivered in schools by Empowering Learning Ltd, which is an education consultancy focusing on the recruitment, training and long-term placement of overseas-trained teachers living in the UK.

A pilot was run at one school between 2002 and 2003. Five children (plus one parent each) studied for a GCSE in Turkish. Despite the project being limited to a small number of pupils, the project has had an enormous impact on achievement. Nine out of ten Turkish-speakers achieved A or A* results in the GCSE exam. Because of the success of this project, 8 primary schools and 3 secondary schools in Hackney and Islington have now started similar projects in Turkish, French (for the Congolese community) and Bengali with 120 exam entries.

[We] had a hundred and twenty entries, and we had seventy-three percent 'A' to 'C's. Partly that lower number was down to the fact that it was the adults who, for some reason, couldn't attend one of the exams. (...) The children did very well, very well. But I feel that the whole thing achieved on the qualitative level because of the parents becoming much more involved with the school itself, because of the ones who didn't speak any English, and didn't communicate with their teachers, were trying to speak English. (TGCSE, Programme Coordinator)

Whilst the project is mainly based in primary schools, such a model is easily transferable to secondary education as shown by its successful implementation at the Highbury Grove Comprehensive School.

This project is principally orientated towards the Turkish speaking community, as it is understood that the community suffers from low achievement both in primary and secondary schools. The objectives of the project are to build a bridge between parents and schools, involve parents in their children's learning and improve attainment as well as boosting confidence.

The project allows for a one-hour lesson once a week after school, which is attended both by parents and children together. The teacher is a mother-tongue trained teacher, living in the UK. Whilst the pupils and the parents gain an officially recognised qualification, the teacher gains teaching experience at a school. The role of the community liaison officer is crucial in involving the parents in the project.

The results have been very positive so far: The GCSE exam gives a verifiable attainment result, which boosts the children's confidence. This is achieved on the back of cooperative learning with the parents, who in turn benefit by receiving what is often their first and only nationally recognised qualification. During this learning process parents and children learn to work together, and parents become closer to the school. This in turn transfers itself to parents working with their children on other school subjects as well.

Transferability

Again there are good indications that the project could be transferred somewhere else and into another context. The success of the project depends on the recruitment of a mother tongue trained teacher and an outreach worker for the community targeted. This can be done by outsourcing the teacher recruitment through a company or directly by the school.

Whilst this project is focused on BME communities with a different mother-tongue from English only, it nevertheless is a good model for schools and LEAs with large BME groups. In light of very few education projects actively focusing on the BME communities in the UK, it is a valuable project structure to take on board.

Black Parents Group (BPG) - Discussion between parents and teachers- Hillingdon

The main initiative behind the project is the Organisation of Black Parents at the Bishop Church of England Secondary School. The project is coordinated and supported by the Ethnic Minority Achievement Support Service of the London Borough of Hillingdon. The project, which started four years ago, consists of a series of regular termly evening discussions where parents and school staff meet to discuss issues and problems. The meetings are now owned by the parents: they have an agenda of items to discuss that involve the school and the senior management team. These evenings are designed to bridge the gap between parents and the staff from the school. The initiative was specifically tailored for parents of African and African Caribbean boys giving cause for concern at school. However this has now been extended into an open forum for all BME groups. The project has now also developed support for other projects such as mentoring in the school.

The school was having some problems with teachers relating to black boys and there was a lot of disquiet and a lot of bad behaviour but also a lot of disquiet from the teachers who were worried that some of the black boys were becoming very anti school and anti their lessons. (BPG, Project coordinator)

The problems the project aims to engage with is primarily the lower attainment of the African Caribbean/ Black African students. By creating a bridge between parents and the school it is expected that relations between staff and pupils and staff and families can be improved. The underlying assumptions of the project are that cultural differences and the lack of communication or miscommunication are in part responsible for the group's underachievement. Creating greater teacher and parent understanding is believed to have a direct impact on discipline and behaviour and consequently an indirect impact on attainment. The forum is used to discuss issues such as cultural differences and racism openly and to try and resolve conflict. The problems are presented from the pupils' point of view and

feedback from parents is listened to by school staff. At one session a Jane Elliot video on discrimination and racism was viewed by all present. The school staff present at the meeting, feed back to a teaching staff meeting. This has resulted in a suggestion for staff to receive training on BME and equality issues.

[T]he objectives of the project are to consult with, and get feedback from, parents, black parents, at this school. And really it's to...the aim I think is to improve relations between the school and the youngsters; raise achievement; to deal with any concerns that they have. Ultimately, the aims are, sort of, broadly, race equality aims. (BPG, EMSS)

The project has now branched out into developing a mentoring scheme to allow the pupils to be in touch with African Caribbean/ Black African role models. Cultural activities with parents to involve the wider community are also planned.

Transferability

The project is potentially transferable to any school and any community as long as the senior management of the school supports the aims and objectives of the project and is willing to sustain its development. This project is only indirectly linked to pupil attainment and really focuses on giving parents a voice in the school. Its success depends on the willingness the school has to listen and to take issues raised on board. The benefits are tremendous as it allows for real cooperation between parents and teachers, with pupils realising that their parents have a direct line to the school. The project is built on the importance of developing trust between the school and the local community.

It's very much about how a school uses its own school budget and resources to meet the issues faced by the school community. But I think- I think in terms of community cohesion work this could have a huge potential. (BPG, EMSS)

The Gypsy Roma support group (GRSG) - Hammersmith and Fulham

The project was established specifically to make links with Gypsy Roma parents and Irish Traveller families in Phoenix High School in Hammersmith and Fulham. This initiative is coordinated and supported by the Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service for the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham who employ a full time and a part time teacher and a specialised home school liaison officer. The Gypsy Roma support group meets at weekly meetings for two hours each time. A liaison officer speaking the local Roma languages attends to help translate. The project has only been in operation since September 2004 and was at first run as a pilot for four weeks. Due to popular demand it was extended and some parents have asked for the project to be extended to two sessions a week.

The objectives are to increase socialisation between the school and the parents whilst offering English language and ICT support. The problems the school hopes to resolve are truancy, discipline issues and low attainment of the gypsy and Traveller children. It is hoped that by attracting the interest of parents towards their children's education and by welcoming the parents to the schools, attainment will be improved in the long run.

And a year ago the level of concerns about their attendance was an issue, so we felt we needed to have an officer who would be really chasing up and finding out why children are not attending, or coming into school in the morning but not attending lessons, and try and do something to make sure that they get into the classrooms. (...) And, of course, to do that she's had to build relationships with parents so that

when a child isn't in school she can call up the parents and they know who she is, and she can ask pertinent questions and try and work in that way. (GRSG, EMTAS)

The results have been good as more than 12 parents attend regularly out of 20 pupils from the Roma community. It started with only four, but news has spread and new faces attend at every meeting. With regard to the pupils' punctuality and discipline have improved as children take on board that their parents are now involved with the school. It is hoped that attainment will increase as a result of the parental links.

Transferability

The project is potentially transferable to other schools and other BME communities. This project is again only indirectly linked to pupil attainment and really focuses on bridging what is one of the hardest to reach groups within the school. The support of the LEA's ethnic minority achievement service is crucial as a specialised teacher and home-school liaison worker have to be employed. It is also essential that the school welcomes the targeted community and aims to meet their needs, rather than focusing on the school's needs foremost in these meetings.

Aims and Objectives

Whilst all projects reviewed had the ultimate aim of engaging parents and improving pupils' attainment, the specific objectives differed according to the target group. Each LEA and every school has a different understanding of who their 'hard to reach' parents are. Often these are single parents, members of BME groups or white working class parents. The ethnic minorities the projects focused on were Bangladeshi families in the Ocean maths project, Turkish parents in the Turkish GCSE project, principally Black and Afro Caribbean parents in Hillingdon and Roma Gypsy parents and Irish Travellers at the Roma and Gypsy support group.

Often the target population of a particular project can change and expand to include other parents. This was the case in the Ocean maths project, where despite an intensive focus on the Bangladeshi community, the Somali parents started to increasingly attend workshops, as well as in Hillingdon where all BME groups were ultimately invited to join in the discussion with the school:

[I]t started, yes, it started out with...just with a group of parents that the school was concerned about. So they invited the parents of some of the black boys who were giving cause for concern. But they've opened it out now to parents, ethnic minority parents generally. So it's any parent who wants to, really, get involved from an ethnic minority group. (BPG, EMSS)

The needs of these communities vary widely and one size does not fit all – as a result projects and initiatives have to be tailored specifically to meet the needs of the targeted group. This includes breaking local barriers or negative perceptions related to schools and learning. It also includes making sure that parents can access the services by providing translations, and support such as childcare services or crèches.

[T]hey'll get forms – just even dealing with letters from school, the letters going out from school telling the parents about the stuff that's happening is in English. So, of course, this arrives and [inaudible], they don't respond to it, we think, oh, the parents are not interested. But it's not quite that. So we thought English would be a good thing. One of the other things we've also looked at was the parents' ability to support

their children in an area- in an area that would be useful out here in modern times, which was computers. (GRSG, Liaison officer)

Flexibility is also central as when parents cannot come, grandparents or siblings can stand in. Gender is often a concern as many fathers cannot leave their work to attend workshops or meetings and mainly those mothers who do not work full time are. It is also important when setting up a project that the strengths of that community are taken into account. This includes making use of mother tongue abilities the children and parents have when thinking about improving attainment:

I think people have to be thinking in a wider context when they're looking at encouraging the students, and not just saying, 'We'll teach French in the primary school.' Instead of looking at the languages the children have already and boosting that confidence so that maybe when they go to secondary school they're going to be able to transfer, and maybe into their third or fourth language. (TGCSE, Programme coordinator)

The reasons for starting the projects all aim directly or indirectly at improving attainment. However each project took place within a different socio-economic and cultural context involving different issues.

The maths project on the Ocean estate focused mainly on homework completion and attainment. The Turkish GCSE project widened its objectives to include self esteem and behaviour issues. In Hillingdon the parents' discussion group saw attainment as a possible outcome of the project; however the primary focus was on improved communication between teachers and pupils, as well as behaviour issues. Again discipline, punctuality and behaviour were the central themes of the GRSG in Hammersmith and Fulham, improved attainment being seen as directly linked to an improvement in these problem areas.

As a result the strategy the projects employed differed on whether the focus was on parents only (BPG and GRSG) or parents and pupils (Ocean and TGCSE).

When focusing on **parents only** the expected change at home was to boost the interest of parents and confidence of the children. Both the projects in Hillingdon and Hammersmith hoped that by increasing communication between the homes and the school cultural differences could be resolved without parents and teachers entrenching themselves into opposing camps. It is hoped this would give a message to pupils that their parents took the school seriously. It is also expected that the resulting improved behaviour and punctuality will affect achievement in the classroom.

Projects focusing on family learning and on **pupils and parents** working together such as the Ocean maths project or the Turkish GCSE tackle the issues the other way around. The project expects parents and pupils to learn together and thereby impact on exam results. Consequently punctuality, behaviour and communication between the home and the school are improved automatically as parents start to come to school and pupils feel that direct links between home and school are increased. It is hoped that the effect of improved learning will not be limited to the one subject, but spill over onto a range of subjects.

[T]he parents' participation at home is very varied amongst all parents, but we really wanted to encourage as many parents as possible to get interested in their daughters, to help their daughters to become more enthusiastic and more focused on learning. And also so there was, sort of, aspirations of doing well. And if the parents get involved at home it's going to make the daughter feel more encouraged to take part and to increase their learning. (Ocean, Head of maths 1)

We had about fifteen candidates, eight of them were parents and seven of them were children. The aim of the project was to encourage parents to work with their children. Once they get used to working with their children then they can work.... When they have numeracy problems, for example, they can work with their children at home as well because they get used to it, they learn how to work with their child. (TGCSE, Exam officer)

Delivery

The structure of the projects also varied widely and depended on where the resources for the project came from. The Ocean project is part of a New Deal for Community partnership and receives most of its funding through the NDC (£250,000 over the last 4 years for 2 schools for the first 3 years and 3 schools for the current year). Empowering Learning, which provides the Turkish GCSE has to be bought in by individual schools or the LEA. Both projects require a certain investment as they require direct face to face teaching time – often with a translator and or a link worker involved as well. The TGCSE project charges each schools £25,000 including all expenses such as salaries, exams, training, papers and books) Whilst on the Ocean maths project there is now, after four years, a quasi-integration of the project within the schools and staff from the project and the school's maths teachers deliver the mathematics workshops together. However, the GCSE project is very much separate from the daily school curriculum as staff are provided through the project.

The Hammersmith and Hillingdon projects are supported by the schools and a part of the Ethnic Minority Support Service of the borough. In both cases the schools host the projects and the responsibility is shared between the school and the ethnic minority achievement support service.

Essential for the successful delivery of all the projects is the motivation of the people and the will to collaborate. In all cases the coordinator and staff of the project must interact with the school's management and teaching staff and ensure that they are actively involved and committed to the project. In the past this has been an issue in the Ocean project where it took time to find the balance between the project and the school's staff involvement. In all cases it is essential to listen to the community needs. The project has to open channels of communication and the ensuing discussion has to be supported and taken on board by all parties.

L. runs the meetings. He's had support from the borough. He's had support from the leadership team to go to the meetings, particularly when, for example, haircuts have been quite a point of discussion. So the head of upper school and lower school went so the parents could hear their views and they could hear the parents' views, and to get to an agreed policy. (BPG, DH)

One of the critical things in attracting hard to reach parents and make them attend the meetings and events on a regular basis is an organised outreach service. Knowing the local language(s) and having a solid cultural understanding of the community is crucial. In many cases community members have to be trained as a link person. When workshops or meetings are held, the presence of an interpreter is vital when parents do not speak enough English to follow what is going on.

Contacting the parents by letter is often a start, but not enough. Most of the parents will need a visit from the outreach worker to convince them and help them in overcoming their reluctance or fear to come to the school.

And it did involve a lot of work because I wrote the letter, a very, very simple letter; I got V. to translate it for me so the letter went out in English and these languages. And we backed that up because it's a problem about getting them into school, so we backed that up with loads and loads of phone calls. (GRSG, Liaison officer)

For meetings to be successful the school environment has to be friendly and adapted to the parents' needs. Meeting/ workshop timings are important. They need to be well chosen and may be changed after feedback from the parents. Childcare again is essential as parents with younger children will only be able to attend and benefit from the project if there is a crèche on site. The quality of the materials is important in retaining the interests of both parents and pupils. With regard to the Ocean maths project, the homework was especially commissioned for the participating schools and the community was kept in mind:

Now, that style is different - the homework is printed on an A4 double-folded sheet, very glossy and colourful, and they actually write the answers on the sheet. So that, at the end of the year, if they collect them all together they have quite a nice portfolio of work. (Ocean, Assistant HT 1)

Rewards in the form of certificates for the parents and maths works sets given to the children have contributed to the success of the project.

Well, I think it's making maths enjoyable. The fact that there have (...) have you seen them? – calculator sets, or certificates, nonetheless they've enjoyed doing it. And they obviously like goodies. I think the parents like getting a certificate. (Ocean HT 1)

The colourful, adapted homework has made a difference, as the project coordinator admits that the homework completion culture was low at first in the local schools:

When I went to consult one of the heads of maths in a school, a secondary school, he said, 'What is the point of setting up a project like that? Nobody hands homework in.' So the culture of the school was that children didn't hand in homework. (...) Now, the rate of handing in of homework was very low to start off with, and it's wonderful now. (Ocean, Project coordinator)

When delivering a course such as the Maths or the Turkish GCSE programme, special training for the school teachers as well as the staff teaching on the project has to be worked into the delivery. The Ocean maths project provided training for teachers to be able to teach mixed classes of children and adults; later training for teaching support staff was added.

We've had training sessions for the teachers every half term, and I think these have been crucial because either the teachers- people haven't done GCSE orals before, or they're primary teachers. And we had a problem last year when one of the teachers allowed the children to write the answers in pencil. And we realised that that training of the teachers was very, very important. (TGCSE, Project coordinator)

As mentioned above, material for the Ocean maths project was specially developed and written for the participating schools. The Turkish GCSE project draws on past papers available on the internet – which works out to be cheaper. However, teachers have to be carefully chosen, as they will act as role models for the pupils they teach.

The GRSP was originally perceived as widening its scope to family learning and getting the children involved. However parental feedback has asked for the sessions to be held for parents alone. This again underlines the importance for listening to parental needs in differing circumstances.

It's good. And so talking with the parents I gave them the option, you know, 'What do you think? Would you like to have your children here learning [inaudible]?' 'No,' they said, 'not yet.' And I said, 'Well, when they feel that when they've got enough going for them then we can get them in.' So the idea is we will- they know their parents are coming, and from time to time I'll run a joint family event. So the children can come along to that where it's not specifically, like, English and so on, but they can also join in activities with their parents, saying, 'Come and see us here doing this.' (GRSG, Liaison officer)

Flexibility in delivery is also a central feature of all the projects described. The Ocean maths project has expanded and altered its delivery of workshops from parents only to parents and pupils in accordance with the request from the local community.

I know that other black parents' groups haven't been successful and maybe it's because they've been too structured, too much the school loading on the agenda rather than hearing what the parents have to say, you know. (BPG, EMSS)

In Tower Hamlets this has meant adapting the project around the parents' timetable and trying to engage them at a range of possible times.

We also run mini-workshops, where, if parents are in school for another reason, such as a subject or parents' evening, or just been invited to the school to, for example, for open evening, we'll just have a mini-workshop that they can sort of join in for ten minutes as they're going round the school or while they're waiting to see teachers. (Ocean Assistant HT 1)

Outcomes and Impact

The views of all those interviewed are globally positive for all projects reflecting the direct and indirect contribution the projects are making to the schools and parents.

There have been clear attainment results for the Ocean maths project. An increased rate of completion and quality of homework and a rise in pupil attainment has been measured. All results have been entered on a database and are carefully monitored by the project staff and the school. There has been a spill over effect as the progress is not only in maths but also in other subjects.

[I]t's no good by just saying, 'So many children have handed in homework.' And we used to mark them as handing in homework and when you looked at them there was hardly anything written [?]. Now, what do you say? Is that handing in homework? So we started- I started looking at the quality, how much was actually done, how many had actually completed the homework. It's not just completing the homework, I mean, we are now tracking the progress of every child, every pupil. How have they done for each and every question. Is it right, is it wrong? How well have they attempted it, what is their understanding of it? So we've created a database and all that is going to be recorded. (Ocean, Project coordinator)

I am very aware that the results in the national curriculum levels through years seven and eight as well as the formal SATs tests have gone up, which tells me, really, what it's about. (Ocean HT 1)

The direct result from the Turkish GCSE project is measurable attainment through GCSE results, which have been excellent (83% got A). The indirect effect has been that the bridging between the parents and the school provoked a boost of confidence with the pupils.

We know that there was a huge difference in confidence with the children going into secondary school. One head of year seven reported to me that the boy walked in for his year seven interview and said, first words, 'I have Turkish GCSE.' And we know from another girl who's very quiet, who was a late arrival in primary, and didn't do well in her key stage two SATs, has flown since she's been in secondary school. (TGCSE, Programme Coordinator)

There has also been improved attainment in Hammersmith. Two Roma pupils experienced a dramatic increase of their results due to mentoring support and more parental involvement.

And this is my dream, that it will make an impact on their attendance, punctuality, and achievement and attainment. But at least we are showing them facts, how to check for example...how to check homework daily. Very basic things. (GRSG, Teacher/interpreter)

In Hillingdon, feedback from parents, children and management staff suggest that some miscommunications have been settled and that this will boost the confidence of the pupils and improve the schools' atmosphere.

I think it's already translating in terms of good relations, certainly, and youngsters getting into less trouble. (...) And, again, they're noticing good working relations with parents are developing; the kids are much more settled; they know that the parents and the school are in tune with each other; they know that if there are issues they don't have to fight their own battles, their parents can talk to the schools about it. (Hill, EMSS)

Views from the staff

The interviews of school staff and project staff revealed an interesting picture on what the projects can contribute to school life.

Head teachers and staff alike were very enthusiastic and supportive of the Ocean maths project.

The ones who come to the workshop and enjoy it like that, they might sort of see maths as a whole new subject. I know we had somebody who came in, who told us that she's hated maths at school. You know, and then she'd gone back and actually tried it again very recently and she said that, you know, that she enjoyed this. (Ocean, Head of Maths 2)

The links between work done at school, work done at the workshops and work submitted as homework has been coordinated so as to create a logical whole.

The workshops need to mirror the sorts of work the children are doing, so that there are these links. And it is all made clear; you can see how it all hangs together. What wouldn't have been very useful if the workshops didn't in some way relate to what the children are doing, in some way. (Ocean, LEA rep)

The project has brought with it a re-evaluation of teaching for the schools' staff. Teaching is now focusing on the pupil's needs and results have led to increased confidence and cooperation between teachers, pupils and parents.

Teachers were spending, in my opinion, too much time ticking and crossing and not enough time really thinking what the child understands and what they needed to do next in order to further that understanding. (Ocean Assistant HT 1)

The Turkish GCSE was highly acclaimed as heads and teachers alike understand that the better pupils become in using their mother tongue, the better they will be able to bridge the home and school experience.

[T]his way their English improves... The better he learns his mother tongue the better he learns at school. (TGCSE, Teacher 1)

[I]t shows that we can value the home language, and that parents' experience is valid and useful to the children even if (...) they're using one language and they're not able to use English. (...) the more fluent and more able and the more literate children are in their first language, the more easy they will find it to succeed in English as a second language. (TGCSE, Head Teacher1)

The spill-over effects have been clear in all projects. As intended the parents are more present in school, the pupils are more disciplined and the relations between families and teachers have improved dramatically.

Attendance, punctuality, in key families there's been a definite improvement. Just also in the level of engagement with learning and just confidence. We've got now groups of children who will perform Turkish dancing, for example, in assembly. The parents are physically a lot more in school. They approach the teachers more confidently (TGCSE, Head Teacher1)

There has also been a significant improvement of self-esteem, especially in the Ocean maths and the Turkish GCSE projects as pupils see that the extra work translates into concrete results for all to see.

[T]his gave them a chance to prove themselves, that they're not stupid children. It's because of their language that they are not- they were not really successful. So there was a girl who came two years ago from Turkey. She could read in Turkish, she could write in Turkish. Then she learnt some English as well, but not as good as other children. And she got an 'A-star'. And this, of course, encouraged her a lot. And her friends' idea changed about her; they didn't see her as a stupid child. She was very bright and she proved it. (TGCSE, Exam officer)

In the projects which focus primarily on improved communication there have been equally concrete results in tackling difficult areas such as racism and anti social behaviour.

We became aware that, probably more Afro-Caribbean boys, but just the Afro-Caribbean community within our school, sometimes felt that they were dealt with unfairly by certain staff and that they hadn't had full opportunity to develop their potential. Sometimes they felt that they took a greater punishment for some of the troubles that they got in to. (...) It particularly came up when we had a student who was permanently excluded and the parents felt strongly that some of the staff had dealt with their son in a racist manner, hadn't been fair, had not done anything positive in terms of role models to support that youngster. (BPG, Deputy Head)

The project coordinator feeds back the parental concerns and complaints to the staff at special staff meetings.

The reaction was very mixed. (...) A small minority were very angry about the comments of the parents, (...) a small minority sort of accepted the criticism, but the majority felt that well we need to do a bit more thinking, a bit more discussion about it, and most of them felt we should spend more time discussing the issues that I raised at that meeting. (BPG, project coordinator)

As for the GRSG project, it has encouraged parents to come to school despite their own lack of confidence. This means that they will be able to find out what their children are learning and how best to support them. Being aware that homework needs to be checked every day as well as getting to know staff who teach their children are equally important in improving attainment.

The idea of coming into a school, the idea of having to learn, you know, they would feel a lack of confidence going straight into adult education, because they all think people will laugh at them (...). And I think it's just giving them that in a very safe environment, giving them that opportunity to then go on a course. So about half past three when the parents come up, V. will come up, M. comes up as well, so that they all work together, with J. And the parents know V. and M. are working with their children so there's a comfort zone there, you know. (GRSG, EMTAS)

Parents and pupils have expressed enthusiasm for all four projects. The next few pages will give a sample of feedback that speaks for itself.

In the Hillingdon based parent discussion group, parents are cautiously happy with the progress that has been made:

... it seemed a very good project and I should think in time it will be very helpful for the parents as long as they get support... (BPG, Parent 1)

Being listened to was also felt to be important and this has meant that first parents of African Caribbean girls and now other ethnic minority families are being included in the discussion group.

... and then we went and then they said it was mainly boys and I've got a daughter also, so I said it would be a good idea that parents of girls were invited, hence that's what they've done, so obviously you know things are getting to be positive because we all have the same issues we'd like to discuss....so I'm very pleased with that. (BPG, Parent 2)

Parents are happy that their feedback is being taken on board by the school staff. Things can be discussed in a rational manner and the feedback given between the parents' meeting and the staff meeting ensures improved dialogue and connections.

[T]here's a lot of animosity or misunderstandings, but things seem to be working, because if the facts are being discussed with them, ...that parents have discussed something, he's taken it as the third person to them and discussed it with them and then they have the opportunity to be aware of what parents and pupils are thinking. And things seem to be working out well. We've just got the feedback from the last training session he had with the teachers and some of them realise that you know, they didn't realise that they were speaking to students, not necessarily black

students, but some of the students they didn't realise their attitudes, so there seems to be something coming out of it. (BPG, Parent 2)

Family learning has resulted in high levels of enthusiasm with both parents and children at the Turkish GCSE project. All are happy to be working together, and very proud that it will lead to a nationally recognised certificate. The Turkish speaking parents feel distinctly that the school is doing something positive especially for them and this results in increased support for the school.

Turkish GCSE - parents

She's saying she thinks it's a fantastic school and her views have changed even more because of the lots of things that are happening, these good chances for the children to do certain things. She said she's really happy about that. She loves the school and it provides different things that they're offering them. (TGCSE, Mother 1, translation)

... because I come from Cyprus I can speak very well Turkish. I worry about my daughter, and she did it very well today. (TGCSE, Mother 2)

I think for future it is very good experience for her because she knows what is this kind of, you know, exam. And after she can go, 'Yes, I did it. This one is no problem for me. (TGCSE, Mother 2)

We have improved because, like, before we didn't have this Turkish GCSE homework thing. We, like, we couldn't read and we couldn't write. We couldn't- we'd done all of them but, like, we didn't improve this much. (TGCSE, Mother 3)

Although I was a bit worried in the beginning, I don't know, maybe she's too young, I didn't want to put her through too much pressure and stress. But she loves- I mean, she's really enjoying it. So, I don't know, I'm really pleased with all this. (TGCSE, Mother 4)

Yeah, already done a GCSE and then next year she'll be relaxed, not when...giving more time for Turkish, maybe learning different language. (TGCSE, Mother 5)

It makes us involved with the school. It makes other parents to come together. It makes better us better parents with our children. It's a good project. (TGCSE, Mother 6)

She likes it very much. She comes with an aim, you know, she wants to come. She likes it when we go together in the classroom, we learn together, when we learn together. (Mother 6)

It did help anyway, for me as well, because I was getting more involved with the teacher and my child in the school. (TGCSE, Mother 7)

If they've got bigger families then it's difficult. Or work-wise if they've got full time jobs then it's difficult. But some, I don't know, some people can make it, some people don't; some people don't bother; so, it depends. I wanted to do it to challenge myself, and plus for D., because D., I know she's good at Turkish talking but I wanted to make sure she was good at writing and reading. (TGCSE, Mother 7)

Ocean Maths, parents

Having come to the workshop I found it very interesting, and I thought, 'Oh God, I wish I'd have had it, you know, so many years back to, you know, to help my other daughter.' (Ocean, Parent 2)

So it's very important to find a way to motivate parents, who in turn they'll motivate the children. And the children, once they know parents are involved that is a big motivation, I find as a parent, when they know that you're involved, they know you ask them for their homework, so they will get on to it. So it's a big motivation from the parents. (Ocean, Parent 2)

First of all, I congratulate the people who thought of this idea. I think this is an excellent idea. Like the other parents said it helps (...) the bonding between the child and the parents. And the homework is so important. (...) My only request about this thing is if it is possible to have this kind of thing for the other subjects that will be even better. (Ocean, Parent 3)

But there was an openness, there was an openness. When you come to school, because you've been called by your- by the teachers, as a parent you think, 'Oh gosh, what's it going to be like?' you know, 'What did she do?' You know, you start worrying. But here was an openness there. You know, the parents themselves were very afraid to come, and they thoroughly enjoyed their time, you know? (Ocean, Parent 3)

And he feels like if this kind of activity runs all along throughout the year obviously the children are going to do well in GCSE and in their further education as well. And it's- since maths is a very important subject it really helps the children to do good in their mainstream education and this is, of course, a very good initiative he thinks. (Ocean, Parent 6 in translation)

I mean, attended about ten-twelve workshops, or it might be fifteen. I have seen that most of the parents are really, really interested because, I mean, what we are doing in the project is all about their children's benefit. So, I mean, obviously they are interested and they are rather happy to spend time come and join the workshop. And the idea of giving certificates and small gifts, which is a kind of encouragement to them... (Ocean, Parent 5)

I think if the project expands then it will be able to cover up many, many schools, initially in Tower Hamlets then eventually they can go to other boroughs and then people will come to know about it. (Ocean, Parent 6)

What he was telling me is, like, since all the workshops are not the same, and each and every workshop has got some different activities, so it's good for us, like if we attend all the workshops we come to know.... In every workshop we kind of learn new things and new activities, which is really good. (Ocean, Parent 7 in translation)

I like to see my son learn different subjects. Nowadays you need a sharp brain to live in this world. The old day is finished; my age is finished. You know, so I never learnt anything. We never had any chance to learn something like this. I'm very proud my son can learn something. (Ocean, Parent 8)

From the children's perspectives the projects have increased their interest in learning, making school a more exciting place where they can be successful. Many were too shy to make long statements during the interviews conducted, however they all seemed happy.

I really enjoy it. I can't wait to start the tests. (Turkish pupil)

With regard to the GRSG children have watched carefully how things developed:

They're quite embarrassed to begin with. They rush home after school so they wouldn't bump into their parents, grandparents and fathers. But I think deep down they're proud. There's some pride that, you know, my mum is learning, I'm learning, and it's all sort of better. (GRSG, Mentor/ HS liaison officer)

The focus group held with the Ocean pupils however gave some clear and mainly supportive feedback:

Ocean Maths - pupils

Before the workshop my mum used to always ask about school, and after the workshop now she particularly often asks about how I'm doing in maths. She's always trying to help with my maths homework. She like, 'Oh, you have to do that and do that.' (Ocean, Pupil 1)

I feel confident and I think it's helped me a lot. I've improved (...) and all through it's been helping me a lot. (Ocean, Pupil 2)

I think the workshop helped me more because I understand it now. And my dad (...) and he always asks me what I'm doing. (Ocean, Pupil 3)

I'm not going to lie, but I hate maths, and it's very boring, but I don't think I have improved. I'm still the same level. (...) I still hate maths, yeah. I do. (Ocean, Pupil 4)

Me, my dad and my mum don't like my maths very much, and ever since we started getting the questions for homework, my mum- and we started to enjoy it a bit more. I find the Ocean maths project useful because, not usually in English, we don't sit with our parents and talk about it, but during the project I get to sit down with my parents and talk about it, and they understand more about what I'm doing at school, and they're improving their maths as well. (Ocean, Pupil 5)

I'm...I'm not that confident in maths, but since I've been doing the Ocean maths I think my skills have improved. (Ocean, Pupil 6)

Conclusions

What Works

The review of these successful projects has shown that there are a few common points which make them a success, especially with regard to attracting 'hard to reach' parents.

Flexibility and bottom up initiatives and self-evaluation: There is a need for a constant evaluation of the impact of a programme or an activity. The projects need to be flexible and respond to the needs of the families they are trying to engage. The schools' needs in this capacity have to remain secondary, as not listening to parents' views will defeat the original purpose of bridging homes and schools. Targeted local initiatives address local problems in a way that projects imposed from above cannot. The realisation that one size does not fit all is crucial.

Local knowledge: Having local people involved has made a significant difference across all of the projects. Local knowledge and cultural sensitivity seems to be essential in gaining parental trust. By definition home-school link workers 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. Contacting all parents and accessing parents who most need the service is essential to make sure that parents know where to go and what is available and for what purpose.

Relationships with the schools: The schools have to take the projects on board and staff and senior management have to be seen to be behind the projects. This is especially the case when dealing with difficult issues such as racial equality.

Accessing the activities: Parents can only access activities and meetings if the logistics are taken care of. This is even more the case with 'hard to reach' parents who could get discouraged if help with childcare or translations are not given. The school has to eliminate the barriers and listen to parental feedback if it is to increase involvement. Small things such as adjusting the times of meetings can make a marked difference.

The research also suggests that the following areas require particular attention in the future:

Soft or hard schemes? The survey of existing projects revealed that not many parental involvement projects focus specifically on achievement. The survey undertaken showed that most projects did not link attainment and parental involvement directly. The research only identified two projects which had a direct, measurable impact on achievement, despite an extensive search.

Erosion of parental involvement? There is an important difference of parental involvement in secondary and primary schools as parents tend to have fewer contacts with schools as their children grow older. This is the case partly because children want to be more autonomous but also because parents feel less capable of helping children. The transition from primary to secondary school needs to be managed both in terms of pupils and parents. The report clearly underlines the transferability of all four projects from primary to secondary schools with minor adaptations and effective results.

Parents' needs first? In view of league tables and policy pressures schools' primary aims are increasingly on improving attainment. Often parents and their involvement are seen as crucial in improving standards, however this misses the point of differing parental needs. Schools' needs have to be secondary to the needs of the parents who they are trying to engage if the projects are to be successful.

Contingencies: Every school has a different set of 'hard to reach' parents – there is a need to get to know the barriers for that particular group and work at overcoming them in a partnership. The assumption that parents are not interested in their children's education is fundamentally incorrect and based on misunderstanding. The central point here is that a 'one size fits all' policy is not an option and that the preparation and the organisation of a project must be conceived as an interface between the school and those particular targeted parents and their specific external environment. The report shows that all four projects were tailored according to those principles and evolved according to contingencies attached to families and the wider community.

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