PARENTS AND SCHOOLS: PARTNERSHIPS IN EARLY PRIMARY EDUCATION

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SYNOPSIS

This article investigates how schools can facilitate the engagement of parents as partners in their children's learning through a study of primary schools in one Scottish city that were participating in an 'Early Intervention Programme'. A two-phase study was conducted involving questionnaire surveys of the views and experiences of (a) headteachers and members of school boards and (b) parents of children in Primary 1. It argues that whilst teachers are committed to involving parents they are not necessarily adept at sharing information with them or at suggesting ways in which they can assist their children. Staff made frequent, friendly school-home contacts and made their schools open to parents but most did not go beyond merely making broad suggestions to parents about how they could be more actively involved in raising their children's literacy and numeracy knowledge, understanding and achievement. What appears to be necessary is to focus on involving *schools* with parents rather than involving *parents* in schools. Parents are always involved with their children's education but schools are not adept at recognising parents' important educational role.

INTRODUCTION

Many researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have documented the importance of parental involvement. A significant body of research (Fraser, 1996; Henderson & Berla, 1994; McMillan and Leslie, 1998; Olmstead & Rubin, 1983) indicates that when parents participate in their children's education, the result is an increase in student achievement and an improvement of students' attitudes. Increased attendance, fewer disciplinary problems, and higher aspirations have also been correlated with an increase in parent involvement even after socio-economic status and student ability have been taken into account (Epstein, 1987; Eagle, 1989). Furthermore, if increased parental involvement creates the perception that the school is more effective, it is likely that student achievement will increase (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1992).

More recent understandings of the ways in which young children learn recognise the child as an 'active learner' relying on and learning from a wide range of experiences beyond the school boundary. Viewing children as 'active learners' highlights that not all learning takes place in school. The importance of home and family as environments for learning and the role of parents as educators are now recognised. There is a consensus of opinion that much of children's early literacy and numeracy development happens outside the school (see Hannon, 1998; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Weinberger, 1996). It occurs within the social context of home and family (see Merttens, Newland & Webb, 1996). This new understanding demonstrates that parents play a crucial role as educators of their own children.

Parents benefit as well as their children if they are seen as having a role in their children's education. They develop a greater appreciation of their role, an improved sense of self worth, stronger social networks, and even the desire to continue their own education (Cairney, 1996). They also come to understand more about their schools and teaching and learning activities in general (Davies 1988; Liontos 1994). Teachers report that they are encouraged by strong support from involved parents to raise their expectations for both children and parents (SOED, 1996).

Whilst the literature provides evidence for the benefits of involving parents' in their children's education it also demonstrates the problems that teachers have in working with parents as partners especially those whom they see as different including those from the minority ethnic groups and the working class. A great deal of research (e.g. Crozier, 1998; Cuckle, 1996; Luttrell, 1997; Reay, 1998; Tett and Crowther, 1998; Tizard *et al* 1988; Vincent and Warren, 1998) has shown the importance of class and culture in parents' interactions with teachers. For example Reay (1998) in her ethnographic study of two inner-London schools, shows how working-class women brought to the school an approach often shaped by educational failure which made them very tentative in their interactions with teachers. This resulted in them feeling that teachers did not seem to understand what they were saying. Although all the mothers in her study undertook educational work in the home with their child often the working class mothers' support was characterised by lack of knowledge of appropriate educational standards, and uncertainty and self doubt about their competence as educators.

In the light of this research a study was commissioned by a Scottish Council's Education Department as part of an initiative under the 'Excellence Fund' to investigate how parents could support their children's learning in the early years. It also sought to ascertain how schools could facilitate the engagement of parents as partners in their children's learning. It investigated the factors that encouraged and discouraged parental involvement in schools located in socio-economically-excluded communities. More specifically it examined what the managers of schools, located in such communities, communicated to parents about their children's early learning, how they communicated and how effective they thought their communications were. These views were compared and contrasted with the views of parents from four case study schools.

METHODOLOGY

The study was divided into two phases. The first involved a survey of all 35 Primary schools in one Scottish city that were based in areas of socio-economic disadvantage and were participating in an 'Early Intervention Programme'. A survey questionnaire was designed that was sent to Headteachers and the Chairpersons of the School Boards and Parent Teacher Associations, where such bodies were in existence. It was structured in such a way as to allow the respondents to give short open-ended responses covering the benefits of involving parents, the methods used for involving parents, how parents' supported their children's early literacy and numeracy and what support was available to the school. The content of the questionnaire was identical for all 3 groups in the study but the responses were colour coded so that the different groupings could be identified.

The second phase of the study involved a more in-depth analysis of four schools - those that had been identified as showing the most improved levels of attainment in literacy and numeracy. Here a questionnaire was again used, this time the focus being the parents of children in Primary 1. Parents were asked to identify the ways in which they helped their child to learn, what they could do help their child in other ways, how the school communicated with them and what involvement they had had with the school. These questionnaires were mailed out and returned via the Education Department to 108 parents of children in the 4 schools using pre-paid reply envelopes. In addition during this phase of the study the four members of the research team took responsibility for carrying out a case study of each of these schools. This involved making visits and conducting interviews with groups of parents at the school as well as key persons such as the Headteacher, Depute, Homelink teacher, Family Learning workers and others working under the 'Early Intervention Programme' initiative. In addition relevant documentation, from a variety of sources, was collated

in order to provide information on the policy and practice of the Council, Scottish Executive Education Department and background factors, such as the socio-economic composition of the pupils, related to the schools.

RESULTS

Analyses of the results of the two surveys are based upon the two questionnaires. 40 questionnaires were returned from sample of School Headteachers and Chairpersons of School Boards & Parent Teacher Associations (Thirty out of 35 school head teachers responded and a further 8 School Board and 2 PTA questionnaires were returned). 47 individual replies (out of 108, a 44% return rate.) from the Primary 1 parents surveyed in the four case study schools were returned. These included four questionnaires that were completed by the interviewers in 2 of the case study schools from replies given by parents.

The responses are from both surveys with the most frequently cited responses (in descending order) being listed under each question. The responses are grouped under broad subheadings of areas of interest identified by a review of the literature.

Key to questions HC =Headteacher/Chairpersons of School Board/ PTA
P = Parents of Primary 1 children

SECTION A: WHY WORK WITH PARENTS?

HC. What would you say are main benefits of parental involvement in their child's education in the early years?

The most popular response centred upon parents becoming aware of the teaching and learning methods at school as well as its general mode of operation. It was also thought beneficial that parents learnt the value of support & encouragement & reinforcement of learning at home. This was thought to lead to the building of a foundation for a longer-term school parent partnership. It was also seen as important that both parties got a clearer idea of expectations, strengths & learning needs of the child, leading to improved motivation, performance and attainment of children at school.

HC. How effective in general do you think your school is in involving parents?

To this general question around 40% of respondents thought the school was either extremely or very effective.

HC. What evidence do you have to support this?

The replies focussed upon the attendance (or upward trend in attendance) of parents at various events located at the school- e.g. workshops & classes for parents, parents evenings, other meetings and gatherings (e.g. coffee mornings etc). The other main indicator was having an active School Board and /or an active PTA.

P. Many people have said that the parent is the child's first teacher. What are the main ways that you have helped your child to learn?

The most popular suggestions were: teaching and learning using materials & everyday life, good access to books, learning letters of the alphabet, numbers and counting, shapes and colours, writing, drawing and painting, and using videos. Much stress was placed on the following activities – conversation, reading, asking and answering questions, telling stories, play. Many of the parents wrote about social behaviour: discipline, right & wrong, having good manners, social interaction with others, encouragement, curiosity about the world, experimentation & investigation. There was also some mention of physical development e.g. of fine and gross motor skills

SECTION B: COMMUNICATION AND SUPPORT

HC. Please list the different forms of written communications used in contact between the school and parents.

A great variety of these were noted including newsletters; letters and notes; booklets/ handbooks/brochures/magazines; report cards/reading records/positive behaviour certificates; homework diaries: leaflets & flyers; posters and other information on notice boards.

HC. Please list what other practical arrangements exist for maintaining communication and contact between the school and parents

Many of the EIP schools encouraged an open door policy and easy staff availability (at times without needing an appointment) whether this happened simply as informal chats in the playground etc or more formal consultations. The School Board and the PTA were mentioned once more. Noted also were events (e.g. nativity play, harvest festival); homework & homework clubs; phone calls; provision of parents' rooms.

P. What would help you to become more involved?

Lack of time was the biggest problem especially for those in full-time work or with younger children. It was suggested that a flexible, rather than a rigid, timetable for weekly activities, more happening in the evenings and at weekends rather than on weekdays would help parents to be more involved. Only a few parents requested more communication and information - most were satisfied with the range of opportunities for involvement on offer.

P. What is the most effective way of finding out what your child does at school?

There was a fairly even split between asking the child and asking the child's teachers (usually the Class teacher but sometimes the Head or Depute were preferred). A good deal of store was set on the effectiveness of formal communication via parents evenings (some wanted more than 2 or 3 per year) and school reports. Reading newsletters, homework, books or anything else the child might bring home in schoolbag; asking the child's friends were other suggestions. Many respondents indicated that the staff were always willing to offer help and advice.

P. Have you attended school events designed to help you promote learning at home?

About twice as many answered in the negative as in the positive - but of those who had attended there was mention of induction and also bilingual events.

P. Have you received booklets and materials to demonstrate ways of helping your child learn?

About twice as many parents said 'yes' as 'no' to this. Amongst the materials mentioned were the Local Council's guidelines, teachers' notes in child's jotters, reports on the child, booklets outlining what will be taught in the forthcoming year.

SECTION C: ROLES FOR PARENTS

HC. Please list the most frequently used methods of involving parents

The schools looked to enlist parent volunteers - in class, school or on outings whilst also paying attention to parent-teacher consultations/meetings. Many also hosted parent groups and clubs and gave information talks. There were also a range of social events (e.g. summer fairs) and parents were involved in making resources e.g. story

sacks, word walls. In many schools workshops for parents took place (e.g. for early literacy, numeracy, transition). Most of the schools produced a newsletter (often weekly). Informal chats in the playground or wherever had their place whilst reading records and homework diaries were regularly sent home. An increasing emphasis was being placed upon home visits. The relevant chairperson respondents as well as the Heads flagged up the impact of the PTA and School Board. Parents were encouraged to attend children's assemblies, performances and awards ceremonies. Some schools were beginning to offer homework clubs.

HC. Please list the ways in which parents try to support their children's early literacy and numeracy

The most popular replies were supervision of homework followed by attendance at school workshops; visits to libraries, bookshops etc. Home-based activities such as playing games that involved counting etc, reading stories, rhymes, phonics were mentioned. Other suggestions for parents were: being clasroom volunteers, using story sacks and using numbers in everyday indoor & outdoor situations (e.g. shopping, cooking).

HC. Please list the specific forms of support given to parents in order to encourage their involvement in their children's early literacy and numeracy

The most popular listed item was the provision by the school of workshops, parents' nights and meetings (e.g. on reading recovery programmes). Other areas of support with frequent mentions were: Homelink; advice booklets; family literacy and learning programmes; an open door policy allowing parents to observe classroom activity/assessments; daily reading diaries & worksheets; parent groups.

HC. Please list the ways parents can support other aspects of their children's development such as social and emotional development

A great variety of suggestions were made with the most popular being talking & listening & spending time with children. These were followed by: moral guidance, fairness, honesty etc; encouraging & rewarding children; partnership with teachers; encouraging interests; educational visits; volunteering to help with the school or nursery play; fostering friendships; discussions with other professionals such as social workers.

P. What do you think is the best start that parents can give their children before they go to school?

The greatest stress was put upon intellectual learning; listening, making learning fun and interesting, praise and encouragement, reading books, rhyming, colouring, writing name. It was deemed important to make use of opportunities for pre-school education such as playgroups, nurseries that encouraged familiarisation and interaction with other children. There was almost an equal emphasis placed upon social and emotional and physical health- giving them love, support & encouragement for self - esteem and self-confidence, balanced diet, fresh air and exercise.

P. What opportunities have you been offered for involvement within the school?

Most often parents were offered places as helpers on class outings or secondly helping within the classroom e.g. working with children's reading groups /paired reading or making up story or number sacks. Parents received invitations to talks e.g. on hygiene ('bug-busting'), early intervention strategies. Parents were invited to attend at school assemblies, coffee morning's etc and given opportunities for

attending classes/workshops e.g. on parenting, on multicultural courses. For those who required it provision was made for contact with bilingual staff. Also of course there was the possibility of membership of the School Board or PTA (with associated fundraising & social activities).

P. Which of these opportunities have you been involved in?

Of the choices on offer most took up either the chance to help on outings or within the classroom usually reading activities. Parents also supported events within the school.

P. Of the activities you take part in with your child what sort of things do you think best help your child's learning?

Reading got the most mentions followed by counting, playing games and discussion. Other responses included outdoor activities and visits to libraries, museums etc and supporting schoolwork/supervising homework

P. Has the school offered you any activities for use at home with your child? Please list what these are.

The majority said yes, typically mentioning the sacks containing books and audiotapes and games plus picture cards, alphabet charts and word-walls, homework and reading books

SECTION D: RESOURCES TO DEVELOP THE LEARNING STRATEGIES

HC. List the resources (human and materials) that have been available thus far

The overall response was headed by the Homelink teachers/co-ordinators. Next often mentioned were monies for books, information packs, story sacks, tapes & videos. The other human resources included family literacy workers, class teachers, nursery nurses, auxiliaries (inc. bilingual speakers) & classroom assistants, other professionals such as health visitors, psychologists and social workers

HC. Tell us about forms of support for parental involvement already in place at the school

Amongst those mentioned were: parent volunteers; family learning/literacy workers; multidisciplinary agents; Homelink; also meetings and parenting classes, school liaison groups, PTA and School Board. Also included were facilities such as the Parents' Room and Crèches.

HC. What additional forms of support might prove helpful in future?

The most popular suggestion was for full-time Homelink teachers. Other ideas mooted were: more workshops & groups for parents; more money for resources; senior staff released from teaching load & delegated to parental involvement; more parental consultation at transition; more home visiting; more liaison with other agencies in the community and a suggestion for abridged copies of teachers' lesson notes.

HC. Do you have any other comments about how schools may be more effective in developing parental involvement?

Stress was placed upon the need to build up relationships, the problems of working parents, the problems of parents who themselves are young. A need was perceived for more dedicated time for freeing - up staff for liaison & home visiting roles (e.g.

full-time Homelink teachers) with associated improved staffing levels and greater management time. Other suggestions included more social events as first step to encourage involvement and evening curricular meetings

P. What do you think are the most important things your child needs to learn in Primary 1?

The responses were split fairly evenly between cognitive skills - especially literacy and numeracy (but also science and information technology were mentioned) - and social/behavioural skills of mixing with others and also coping with discipline & routine.

DISCUSSION

Why work with Parents?

As we have seen when asked about the importance of their role in their child's learning, all parents either agreed or strongly agreed that their role was *equally* important to that of the teachers. Parents arrive, with their child at school, on the basis that they are partners in learning and have a significant contribution to make. The issue, therefore, is how do they continue this partnership in the context of the school and how does the school facilitate and develop parents' contributions?

Schools were also strongly affirmative about the role of parents. However, there was an underlying dilemma for the process of building a partnership between the school and parents. Although there was overlap between the learning that parents support and that which schools develop, they were not necessarily mirror images of each other. To what extent, therefore, should and can schools build partnerships with parents based on supporting the learning parents do as part of their role in the home and community? Or should the partnership focus on how parents support the curriculum of the school? Or, indeed, should it include both? Certainly, the desirability of building a partnership seems to be affirmed – we did not get the impression of rhetorical responses or, indeed, negative replies. However, there should be some consideration given, prior to the process of developing strategies to build partnerships, about what they are intended to achieve.

It was clear from the data that all schools had given considerable thought about how to increase parental involvement and offered a wide variety of opportunities for involvement. Our impression from the schools visited would also corroborate that schools can succeed in involving parents in different ways.

Supporting Teacher-Parent Relationships

Creating the right ethos or culture, that school is a welcoming place, by means of an open door policy was seen to be the starting point for communicating with parents. In the schools we visited this was strongly evident, however, there were sometimes small practical details e.g. entry systems that made simple access into the building a hurdle.

We did not get any sense that parents felt inadequately informed about activities going on in the school. They found speaking to the class teacher the most effective means of finding things out, however, parents' evenings were also highly valued. Many respondents indicated that teachers were always willing to offer help and advice. However, when it came to specific information about their own child, and their progress in the school, the response was more mixed. The evidence seems to indicate, therefore, that schools are doing well at communicating with parents, but they are not necessarily communicating the things parents want to know most about.

Some schools with a significant number of families whose first language was not English made special efforts to reach out to them, usually through a bilingual

worker who would communicate with parents in their first language either face to face or by telephone. Parents in one of the case study schools were particularly appreciative of the efforts made by the school to develop attitudes and policies that were reflective of, and sensitive to, their communities. In this school bilingual workers helped parents to feel comfortable with the staff and the school and showed parents, in collaboration with school staff, how to help their children at home. Many bi-lingual families needed to be convinced that 'play' involved learning as much as more formal activities.

Lack of time for parents in work and/or with younger children, was cited as the biggest problem for parents becoming more involved in the school. One remedy for this was seen to be more opportunities should be made available for involving parents through events outwith normal school hours' e.g. weekends and evenings. As most of the opportunities schools offered to parents require them to 'be there' there is a need to explore further innovative ways of developing involvement opportunities and of sharing information with parents in ways which fit well with the realities of a busy family life.

In the school, responsibility for developing work with parents was often allocated to the role of a specific teacher. This might be a senior member of staff (e.g. head teacher) or a teacher with a primary one class. Whilst this focuses the role on particular posts and the more senior the post the greater its legitimacy, the other side of the coin is that it relieves other members of staff of responsibility. The unintended outcome of this may be that involving parents is not addressed as a whole school issue. What has to be recognised, of course, is that not all parents, or all teachers, want to be involved to the same degree with the school. This should be regarded as entirely legitimate. Nevertheless, there is widespread agreement – and therefore goodwill – that parental involvement is important. The issue, therefore, is to what extent schools can develop a whole school approach that enables all staff to contribute to involving parents in *ways they find suitable*. Teachers have to be partners before, in one sense, parents can be. Their commitment has to be harnessed, firstly within the school and, secondly, the local authority then has to find ways of supporting it. The fact that building partnerships can involve many different activities, may be a useful resource for developing this because it will enable teachers and parents to find ways of working in partnership. Diversity should be encouraged in the context of an overall agreed policy aim.

Roles for Parents at Home and in School

Within the home parents saw their role as strongly linked to personal and social development. This included, 'help give them confidence' 'developing child's natural curiosity and desire to learn or as helping them by introducing them to a 'basic knowledge of alphabet and number'. Parental responses suggested that although parents recognise that they have a role to play in supporting their child's learning many of them believed that the teachers' had a more important role to play than they did. This is partly because, while many parents see that the role of giving their children 'a smile and a playpiece' as central, schools do not offer enough information about the importance of the parents' role of supporting children's learning at home. Communication from the class teacher in the course of her/his everyday role was seen to be the main opportunity that parents had of getting information about how to help their child. Although schools refered to encouraging the parental role in playing games, reading stories etc there is an issue about the extent to which schools recognise parents as sources of information. Schools appeared to have few structures in place to listen to parents and to identify their priorities.

Where there was specific support for how parents can help their child at home it tended to be concentrated on particular needs. The focus most mentioned was support

for bi-lingual parents or centred on key moments such as during transition and at start of the school year. The practical challenge of helping parents to understand what teachers are doing in the classroom highlights the importance of valuing and building on the experiences and opportunities for learning offered in the contexts of the home and community. However, 'overseeing homework', was identified by schools as one of the main opportunities for involvement because 'it reaches the majority of parents'. Yet these 'home activities' e.g. homework, spelling, maths, primarily focus on how parents can support and prepare their child for school practices at home. One parent identified that she received 'Reading sheets, number sheets, work exercises. However if he has a learning problem that is not addressed then my time is wasted'.

One school suggested that 'we still have to convince parents that the wider picture involves them'. Do they? Although in-school strategies may enhance parental confidence and competence it does raise an issue about the extent to which extending open invitations to 'assist' 'help', 'attend' 'fundraise' will raise parents' perceptions of the important role they play in supporting their own child's learning. It is also unlikely to be effective in enhancing parents' confidence and competence in their role as co-educator. Schools need to encourage more meaningful discussion about how children's early numeracy / literacy development is supported in a wide variety of contexts. The most effective way to get the message across to parents that what they do is valued is to help parents understand what they are already doing to support their child's learning. To make them aware of literacy/ numeracy activities they are already involved in and just as importantly to show parents how experiences gained in home and community contexts can be incorporated into school practice. The main aim in involving parents in early learning is to develop their role as complimentary educators and an 'educational resource' in supporting their own child's learning. Schools can realise the full potential of parents' skills, interests and knowledge of their child as an educational resource in the school and family context if they are able to build on what parents already do in the home (see Auerbach, 1995).

CONCLUSION

The schools studied have used a mixture of informal and formal activities to engage parents. Often parents have become involved through social and recreational activities and then begun to work with their children on school-related activities. Schools, however, have been less successful in developing strategies that build on 'at-home' activities. This is mainly because teachers were often not aware of what parents were doing at home with their children. Our research leads us to conclude that teachers are committed to involving parents but are not necessarily adept at sharing information with parents or at suggesting ways in which they can assist their children.

Schools identified some barriers to parental involvement such as childcare and transportation but found it difficult to provide adequate support on their own. Similarly, although schools were aware that events should be held at times that would make it easier for parents to attend it was difficult to make these arrangements. Staff made frequent, friendly school-home contacts and made their schools open to parents but most did not give parents a real understanding of school education, or help them to contribute to it. It is important that teachers go beyond merely making broad suggestions to parents about how they can be more actively involved in raising their children's literacy and numeracy knowledge, understanding and achievement (see Hannon, 1998). Some schools tried to create an atmosphere which valued parental involvement by developing policies and practices that put involvement at the school and guiding parents in how to help at home at the centre of their strategy. In these circumstances parents felt that the educational role they played was valued and valuable and this contributed to their self-esteem (see Cairney, 1996).

Supporting parents to influence early learning, particularly in the home, will not be a cheap option. Most of the head teachers identified the need for more staff, especially home-link teachers, in order to help them develop a more comprehensive strategy for involving parents. Different approaches, it was suggested, should be used with different families but without knowledge of individual families homogenous approaches were made that inadvertently excluded a number of parents. These included parents whose first language was not English and those who had had negative school experiences themselves that made them unwilling to participate in the school.

All schools identified a variety of resources that were available to them to support parental involvement, but these were sometimes not completely complimentary in their approach to parents. Head teachers highlighted the importance of liasing with other agencies in the community, but were unclear about whose role this was. A number were aware that many parents had their own educational needs that should be addressed if their children were to benefit but again were unsure about whose role this was. This suggests a clear need for a whole school policy backed up by a Council policy that involves joined up thinking and action in relation to involving parents.

What appears to be necessary for an effective policy is to think about involving *schools* with parents rather than thinking about involving *parents* in schools. Parents are always going to be involved with their children's education as our parent questionnaires and interviews showed. It is schools that are not so adept at involving parents and recognising their important educational role.

One key to involving all parents is creating an atmosphere in which teachers, administrators, and families are all seen as valuing parental involvement (Dauber & Epstein, 1989). Schools that are serious about developing partnerships with parents can provide information to parents about different ways they can be involved and understand the barriers that keep parents from being more active (Chavkin & Williams, 1993). The literature indicates that work needs to be done at the school and the education authority level to develop policies and practices that encourage involvement at the school and guide parents in how to help at home (Reay, 1998).

It is important to recognise that parents have considerable power to influence early learning, particularly in the home, but at the same time they need support in key aspects of their role. In relation to school policy, the need is to be clear about the aims and what level of commitment to parents is appropriate. Different levels of involvement will require different levels of staff time and funding. What is clear as Hannon (1998: 141) points out, is that 'to involve parents is not to give away teachers' professional expertise. [Rather it is] to take on the challenge and stimulation of working with adults and young children in the conviction that anything that teachers believe they can accomplish alone, they can do better in collaboration with parents'.

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