Parental involvement in multi-ethnic schools

Introduction

Part of a research project which provides positive and practical insights into the characteristics and strategies of successful multi-ethnic schools. ('Making the difference: teaching and learning strategies in successful multi-ethnic schools', by Maud Blair and Jill Bourne, 1998.)

Staff in all the schools we visited talked about the importance of involving parents in the education of their children if attainment was to be raised. Similarly, all the parents who took part in the study agreed that their participation in their children's education was very important. However, our discussions with minority ethnic group parents in the focus groups indicated that there is often a difference of perception between schools and parents as to the nature and purpose of parental involvement in their children's education.

From parents' accounts, it seems that schools do not communicate clearly what they expect of parents, nor do they always understand what parents expect of them. This results in systems of communication which parents do not always find helpful or appropriate, and in discussions about children which do not address some basic concerns which parents have. In some situations, cultural and language gaps were obviously an obstacle to effective communication. However, parents' experiences as reported in our focus groups suggested either that schools do not do enough to bridge this gap with many parents, or that such cultural and language gaps are not the only obstacle. One Community Liaison Officer was of the view that teachers did not always realise that they 'talked down' to minority ethnic group parents and dictated what parents should be doing rather than listening to what parents themselves had to say and valuing their contribution as the primary carers of the child.

Racism, much of it unconscious rather than blatant, was also seen as a major obstacle to communication. Some parents thought that racial assumptions about the different ethnic groups were prevalent and that this prevented teachers from relating to them and respecting them as partners in the education of the children.

It is clear that in many of the schools we visited there were genuine attempts to communicate with parents, although it was not always clear how far 'parental involvement' meant responding to parents' own agendas rather than simply keeping parents informed of and helpful in implementing the school's agenda. One Head of Year questioned the extent to which teachers really wanted parents to be involved. She thought that what teachers wanted and what parents wanted could sometimes be 'worlds apart', and that teachers did not necessarily want parents who were too 'empowered' so that they felt that the school was theirs and they had a right to complain about things:

> *"In my mind, teachers expect parents to come in here just for the parents' evening, the disciplining… I think that teachers expect parents to support the school when it suits the teachers for the parents to support the school. But if the parents come in about something that they want, then it's like, 'This is our school and parents should not be involved in that'."*

We did note, however, a number of schools where serious attempts were being made to work with parents through one-to-one meetings on children's progress, workshops on the curriculum, and consulting parents through parents' groups and associations on educational matters. In some schools minority ethnic group parents were represented on school governing bodies. These features of provision made a difference to parents who felt intimidated and excluded, and encouraged them to participate in school activities which they might not otherwise have

done. ‘Link’ teachers, bilingual teachers and home-school workers seem to be a valuable resource in this process.

Home-school liaison
An effective way of making contact with parents

Home visits were considered by all those interviewed to be an effective way of making contact with parents in multi-ethnic schools, particularly with parents who do not speak English. At Northshire Comprehensive, the Headteacher personally carried out visits, accompanied by the school-funded Community Liaison Officer, to the homes of all the new Year 7 students. Although this personal show of caring only occurred once, it was said to be most appreciated by the parents who felt more comfortable and confident about visiting the school and about taking part in school events. Thereafter, such visits were carried out by the Community Liaison Officer.

The Advisor for Refugees in one LEA did, however, add a note of caution:

> *"Parents might appreciate a home visit, but I think it depends on how you actually approach it. It's one thing writing to them that you're coming to visit them, but if they don't know what it's all about, they'll get frightened, you know, worried about it. So you have to make yourself absolutely clear. I think then it would work because they would open out to you and tell you what their concerns are about."*

Home visits were, however, time-consuming unless a school had a home-school liaison officer on the staff. Most schools did not have such a member of staff and the bulk of the responsibility for visiting parents seemed to be carried out by bilingual members of staff. Home-school liaison workers and bilingual staff were key members of the school for making such visits possible and for ensuring effective exchanges of information between parents and schools at meetings. Many schools benefited from formalising a home-school liaison post.

Home-school liaison staffing

While schools were making strides with increasing attendance at open evenings and meetings, it was not always easy to get parents to contact the school about their own concerns and those of their children. Many working class or non-English speaking parents, and gypsy traveller parents were said to feel intimidated by schools.

An effective method for these groups was to have a direct telephone line, bypassing the school switchboard, to an identified person in the school whom the parents knew and to whom they had the confidence to speak. One way to avoid misunderstanding was to have a 'link' person in the school, that is, someone who either spoke the language of the parents, or, as in the case of the gypsy traveller students at Southern Metropolitan, someone who was known to and trusted by families, to do the liaison work with parents. This 'link' person allowed for a two-way process of communication to occur because it provided an opening for parents to talk about their own concerns and not always to have to wait for the school to contact them. The more that parents felt able to approach the school, the more confidence they developed to take part in other aspects of school life.

This strategy was found at Northshire School to be valued by parents with little English. The 'link' person was the school's full-time Community Liaison Officer, funded out of the school's own budget, who spoke the language of most families. Parents were able to develop the confidence to approach the school with issues that bothered them. Information could be passed on to the Heads of Year and contact made with the school's supportive parents' group. The 'link' officer was also able to pass on information about events and meetings in the school and usually carried out additional duties of translating and interpreting at meetings and parents' evenings.

Not all 'link' persons need to be from the community, however. Where that was not possible, members of the school staff who have either volunteered or been timetabled to take on such a role have done valuable work. We have described in the chapter on provision for refugee students how at Southern Metropolitan, one Head of Year earned the trust and respect of local travelling families which encouraged not only the families, but also the children, including ex-students, to participate more in school life. The idea of a 'link' person was also useful for refugee students, and Northern Metropolitan Secondary School included the role of home-school liaison as well as in-class support in the role of the Section 11-funded refugee workers based in the school.

A home-school liaison teacher or worker who knows the parents can mediate between teacher and parent, and clear up misunderstandings. For example, an issue that parents sometimes did not understand and about which they wanted clear information was the system of setting and banding. Parents sometimes thought that if their child was in a bottom set and achieving grade As, that meant that the child was capable of being in the top set of a subject, and could not understand why the school refused to move him or her. The home-school liaison worker had an important mediating role in this sort of circumstance.

The employment of a home-school liaison worker, however, can be a complex one unless management structures and the boundaries of the role are crystal clear. In Northshire School, the Community Liaison Officer was not invited to Heads of Year meetings as she was not a qualified teacher. Although a full-time worker, funded by the school and accountable directly to the Head, her role had not been written into the pastoral structure. There were no formal structures whereby she met with Heads of Year. This led to some unfortunate tension. As she explained:

> *"When somebody from the community contacts me or they come in, the question [that is then] asked is, 'Why have they contacted you, [when] I am the Head of the Year?', or 'We are the pastoral staff', or 'If a family has been sent a letter about an exclusion and I haven't been told about it, that puts me in a awful situation because the parents will contact me and I hear one side of the story about what the parents are saying but I am not aware of what has actually happened in the school. Then when I take the information back to a member of staff, they say 'We don't see why you have to be involved'. What they forget is that I am in that community and people will approach me and they want me to be involved."*

Lines of communication between the home-school worker and staff need to be clearly defined so that the liaison worker is not caught between the demands for help from the parents and the staff's perspective of what the role is or should be.

Parent/teacher consultations and open evenings
Breaking through barriers between home and school

All three primary schools in our case studies recognised parents' desire for their children to succeed. They focused on listening carefully and being responsive to parents. As a result, very good relationships had gradually been built up with parents, who in return had become very supportive of the schools. Most of the primary schools studied reported at least 90% turnout for parents' evenings, even though some parents were unable to speak English. This was a result of some effort on the part of the schools initially to break through barriers between home and school, and to make parents feel welcome partners in the education of their children.

Northern Infants had set up a Parent Interview project, which had been running for several years. Initially, the Home-School Liaison Teacher visited homes individually to invite people to interviews, with a leaflet, and went round again on the day before, asking "Will you come?". She recalled that talking with parents in their homes was "like a dress rehearsal", so they knew what teachers would be likely to ask when they came up to school. The school fixed appointments on certain afternoons for different language speakers, and booked an appropriate interpreter for each session. As this had been successful, the school then decided to release a class teacher every Wednesday afternoon for consultations, and notes were sent home giving appointments. Interpreters continued to be provided.

As well as discussing issues raised by parents, parents were given advice at these meetings on ways of helping their children; for example by using libraries, giving children quiet space and time, if possible, for reaching and encouraging school work and learning to carry on at home. Special needs issues were also raised with parents where necessary. The child joined the meeting for the last five minutes to discuss the targets that had been set with the parents, and, importantly, to see that the parents and teachers were in agreement on these targets. The school had a strong commitment to maintaining this highly successful one-to-one encounter between parents and teachers. The Head commented: "If we have to stop everything else, this stays; parent interviews have been the most important thing in raising achievement."

All agreed that the one-to-one consultations at a parents' evening (or open evening) were the single most important event which focused the attention of the parents and teachers on the progress of each child. Whilst the purpose of these meetings was supported by all, the way they were conducted and the effects they had on some parents were the source of either amusement or frustration to parents in our focus groups. For some parents, the open evening was at best a wasted opportunity and at worst a waste of their own time. Experiences of open evenings were recounted by parents with some amusement.

Pakistani parent: "There's a whole queue right outside waiting for you to have your say and get out so they can get in, have their say and then that's it until the next one comes in… 'Oh, your child's fine', that's it, off, next one…"

Pakistani parent: "The people who can't speak English, they are just asked to check their children's work, sign a piece of paper, and if they [seem] satisfied, she just says that your child is very, very good, takes the paper, looks at her watch…" (laughter from rest of group).

The apparent amusement hid some deep concerns not only about the conduct of open evenings, but about the relationship that teachers had with minority ethnic group parents and students. This was discussed in an earlier chapter on parental views. Most of all, they felt that they wanted to be treated with respect and for teachers not to assume that language or culture rendered them incapable of understanding or deciding what was best for their children.

The discussions about open evenings exposed some of the weaknesses of a system that is considered by many to be an important area of parental involvement in children's education. Most parents felt that there needed to be more flexibility in the arrangements for parents to meet with teachers. Some parents were unable to go to the school at the time allotted to them and felt unsure about how welcome they would be if they arranged to go to the school at a different time. Some did not feel confident enough to make these arrangements and thought the school would consider this to be an imposition. In many instances, it seemed to them that teachers measured parents' interest in their children's education by the parents' attendance at open evenings. It was common to hear teachers say, "It's those parents who we really need to see that don't turn up". However, in some schools, meetings seemed fixed in a way that took no account of working parents.

African-Caribbean parent:

> *"They give you three choices [of appointment times]. I filled in the choice that was best for me and I wrote to say why, because I'm at college, but then, on the Friday, they just sent a letter back with the children, saying that this is the time, this is the date… I am very concerned about that because I am at college that day and I wouldn't like to give the impression that I'm not interested in my child because I am very, very interested in what my child is doing."*

Timing meetings is difficult: some cannot leave children alone at home in the evening, some work days, others work shifts, some parents fear being out after dark. Smalltown Primary varied the timing of its termly 'consultation evenings' from after-school to early evening, in order to reach parents with different needs at some time over the year at least. It was important to realise that most parents cared deeply about their children's progress, and to find different strategies for reaching them.

Other parents worried about attending open evenings because they thought language might be a barrier and were unsure of the arrangements for interpreters. Alton Primary took care to let all parents know that interpreters would be present. The primary schools we visited arranged a number of opportunities to communicate with parents about their child's learning: termly consultation meetings, after-school open-door sessions on set days of the week, briefing sessions on school curriculum issues, the sending of curriculum outlines home each half-term, curriculum outlines written up on posters outside the school door, and home-school reading diaries.

In relation to the general concerns of parents, it was clear that what parents wanted was useful information about their children – information which gave them an understanding of what their children were doing, how they were doing and what parents could do to help. The opening evening, if organised well and parents' interest in their children taken seriously, was a good opportunity to discuss this.

One black Headteacher at a focus group meeting summed up well some of the concerns of minority group parents:

> *"There's an issue that comes up constantly, you know about choosing schools for their boys and all the worries the parents have about where they might end up and whether they'll follow their peer group."*

With poorer families, "… it's issues about affording things, you know, having the vouchers to buy the uniform."

With refugee parents:

> *"… There's a real issue of disconnection from their children… You get parents coming in, almost bewildered because they don't know what's happening to their children. You get the boys starting to absent themselves from school. They spend their time in the snooker hall, they gamble, and I suspect [have] quite serious connections with drugs. I think the gap you get between the parents and the children can be enormous because if you don't speak the same language as your child, there's a real issue about how you see the world, isn't there?"*

Parents did not only want consultation on academic achievement. There were fears expressed about their children slipping away from their control and becoming involved in sub-cultures which were detrimental to education. Parents expressed disquiet about the cultural gap that occurred between themselves and their children when their children reached adolescence. They wanted opportunities to discuss what was happening with teachers and for teachers to share with the parents the privileged information which they had about young people in Britain today. Teachers, it was felt, had enormous influence on the children because the children spent so much more time with their teachers than they did with their parents. The teachers were more likely to know what the children were up to during the day than the parents.

Bangladeshi parent:

> *"In our community, when the children are 12, 13 years, they are taking drugs, they are smoking, they are bunking school… Schools and parents and teachers and parents should communicate about that. Schools can take the initiative… The parents are not educated to know what is their responsibility. They don't know what their children are doing, whether their boys or girls were in school that day or gone somewhere taking drugs."*

The issue of homework was another issue on which parents wanted to be kept informed.

Bangladeshi parent: "When the children go home the parents should know what they do in school, what subjects they are doing, if they had a test, what grade they had. The parents and the teachers have to work together…"

Parents did not think that important issues like children not doing their homework, or not coming to school, or misbehaving, should be left to the annual or biennial meeting, but that parents should be informed at once, via the telephone wherever possible.

Communication with parents
Requiring greater resourcefulness and imagination than in other schools

Most discussions, whether with parents or teachers, centred on the systems of communication set up by schools to enable parents to participate more fully in their children's education. It was clear that for a variety of reasons, systems of communication in multi-ethnic schools required greater resourcefulness and imagination than they did in other schools. Strategies for communicating with parents which apply to all schools generally, include letters, telephone calls, students' reports and open or parents' evenings. The best schools had developed good 'front desk' reception practice, which showed awareness of minority ethnic group needs and sensitivities (including bilingual office staff where needed).

Most of the schools in our study also had regular newsletters which went out to parents to inform them of current and forthcoming events in the school. Schools also made efforts to translate information for parents. One produced its entire prospectus in Bengali as well as English, whilst another linguistically diverse school had the prospectus and standard letters available in each of the major languages. This school's newsletter also went out to parents in all major languages, every six weeks. One primary school had translated its parents' guide to reading with their children into a number of languages. Northern Infants paid for a translator so that letters could regularly be sent home in Bengali. At one secondary school, all communication with parents, including the school prospectus, was in both Urdu and English.

However, the letter was not generally seen as the most efficient system of communication. There were problems of letters getting lost, not being delivered by children, or being intercepted by children and so never reaching the parents. There was also the problem that parents might not be able to read. Parents told us that this was not their preferred method of communication.

African-Caribbean parent: "They tend to send you a letter with the dates of things happening for a whole term. Now that piece of paper could go missing. Or they'll send you a letter the day before asking you to come into school."

Bangladeshi parent: "I think an approach that would be better than writing letters would be to give them (parents) a quick call, a personal call on the phone, 'We need you here at 2 o'clock'. That type of approach would be better than just dropping this paper into a five-year-old's hand."

Most schools found that the personal phone call was the method most appreciated and therefore most effective for communicating about individual children. In some schools the telephone was generally used to inform parents about a student's absence, a disciplinary issue, and in some situations to commend a student for his or her achievements. As parents could come to expect a telephone call from their child's school to be bad news, some schools went out of their way to ensure that where individuals had done something good, parents were informed personally by telephone and the child given a letter of congratulation.

Secondary teacher:

> *"We had an African-Caribbean boy who was quite difficult and challenging. He lived with his grandma. The school gave a party for the old folks in the area and the students hosted and entertained the old people. This boy just took control of the party and made it a huge success. At the end, the grandma was phoned and was heard in the background saying, 'I hope you are not in trouble again!' Grandma was over the moon when she heard about what he had done and the fact that the party had been such a success had been down to him."*

This teacher was of the opinion that there were important lessons to be learnt about how to communicate with parents from minority ethnic groups. She thought that some groups (and in particular the mothers) might consider that a letter to the family about a child was a comment about the whole family and how the child was brought up. It was important to make sure that parents knew that judgement was not being passed on how they brought up their children.

There were other issues which parents thought could be better communicated at an organised meeting of parents rather than through letters. The question of extended leave was one example, and sex education was another.

Schools paid attention to dietary needs. A menu for the week was displayed outside the canteen at Midlands Primary, and Muslim parents in particular found this very useful. One explained how she could plan with her child what he was going to eat, and so was sure that he was eating appropriately. For Muslim parents, the importance a school gave to making menus clear, and making it easy for students and, for primary children, their parents to signal choices easily, was taken as an indication of respect.

Involvement in the curriculum
Aiming to be open with parents

Schools, and especially the primary schools, aimed to be open to parents. Parents were welcomed as helpers, and involved in a variety of activities. Some schools invited parents to read stories in their own languages as part of Book Weeks. Some had a number of parent helpers, and some class teachers had an 'open door' policy at the end of every school day, when parents could come in to look at children's work, and talk to the teacher. Most schools also received help from parents with fund-raising and particular projects.

Parents' assemblies in primary schools are a regular feature, and help to involve the parents in what their children are learning. In City Infants, assemblies were held first thing in the morning, to encourage parents to stay on after bringing their children to school. In Alton School, whole school assemblies focusing on presenting curriculum activities took place last thing on Friday afternoon, and were very well attended by parents, especially as they were conducted bilingually, with children interpreting and introducing their work in Bengali.

While many schools encouraged parent volunteers, East Road Primary had introduced another way of working with parents, through a reading project. Several parents were paid for half-an-hour, three to five mornings a week, and given training to work with small groups of children in Years 1 and 2, who were identified as needing extra help. Apart from the support given for reading skills, parents themselves came to understand better the school's way of teaching reading. The Headteacher commented that the project had "massive spin-off", and that " …it's part of the community-family feel".

An example of the effort to involve parents at Northshire Comprehensive was a series of bilingual workshops for groups of bilingual mothers of Year 7 students, which were organised by the Head of Year 7 and the bilingual Community Liaison Officer. "Group tutors used their knowledge of the students in their groups to nominate those whose families might benefit most from the opportunity to participate in this scheme. This provided an opportunity to meet and discuss with the Headteacher, Head of Year and a Group Tutor, as well as see several departments at work" (Headteacher's *Report to Governing Body*, 1996).

The six workshops which were run for the mothers (it's the fathers who generally attend parents' evenings, so it was important to have daytime sessions for mums) included an introductory session, and sessions on special needs, on science, modern languages, a tour of the school which involved a brief lesson on the computers, and a feedback session. Setting up these workshops involved "a lot of time, a lot of work, and a lot of planning", including the hiring of a minibus to pick up the parents. But as the Head of Year who helped organise them said:

> *"I think some members of staff will always question whether or not it is worth the money and the time that is going into it. But I think that a lot of people have seen the improvement in attendance at parents' evenings as well as the benefits pastorally. I think some staff would say they have seen a difference in the attitudes of parents [who now] actually question academic things and take more of an interest because they feel more comfortable with coming into school and discussing things."*

At Northern Metropolitan, the Head of Section 11 and the Urdu teacher were described as "well respected members of the local Pakistani community who do valuable work of liaising with and mediating between the school and the community". Through this link, the school was able to organise successful discussions with Muslim parents about different curriculum issues in the school. For example, two events were organised on the subject of sex education. One was a meeting of all interested parents at which the content and methods of teaching the subject were explained to parents. At the second event, mothers were invited to attend sex education

classes with their children so that they could see for themselves how the subject was taught. Both events were well attended, and parents were able to put aside any doubts or fears they might have had about the teaching of the subject to their children.

Where schools offered consultation on policy and the curriculum for those parents who wished to become involved, they were explicitly acknowledging that education is a partnership between parents and school. Schools also gained valuable support by recognising the skills and expertise which many parents had to offer, and drawing these into the school, classrooms and curriculum wherever possible.

Homework

Several primary schools sent work home for parents and children to do together, often involving games and activities which could be carried out bilingually, for example, finding the area of a hand or foot by counting the squares after drawing round a hand on squared paper, or doing some 'kitchen maths'. In one school, a Turkish interpreter from the LEA came into school to give a preliminary talk explaining the homework scheme and its aims to Turkish and Kurdish parents. The minority ethnic group parents we spoke to valued homework, and wanted to support it.

Bangladeshi parent: "If a child fails to bring his or her homework, the school should contact the parents and say this is what your child is doing, so the parent will know. I never hear, or know myself a teacher that has ever done this."

Pakistani parent: "The children need homework. It keeps them busy, it keeps them out of mischief."

Most schools had a system of homework diaries and parents were encouraged to make sure the children did the homework and to sign it off. Some parents could do this confidently. However, this was something that could not be taken for granted. Parents told us:

> *"… that's only for parents who are educated themselves. You know, who know what to do."*

> *"When the children get their homework, sometimes they do not understand… Some of our parents do not know much English so they can't explain, or tell their daughters or sons how to answer this or how to write that."*

In those LEAs and schools where there were after-school homework or study centres, these were greatly appreciated. However, once again timing was important for bilingual and Muslim students who regularly attend community languages classes and Mosque schools after school. In Northshire Comprehensive, lunchtime study centres received a good attendance. Other schools tried to consult with the community class organisers and the Mosque and to organise study centre sessions directly after school, giving students enough time to have a break for tea before beginning their other work.

It was really a question of never taking patterns of daily life for granted according to white, monolingual norms, and finding ways to timetable important areas of school life inclusively.

Governing bodies

Although there was little minority ethnic group involvement on the governing boards in many schools, some schools had been successful in recruiting minority ethnic group representation on their governing bodies. At Northern Infants, for example, the Chair of Governors was a parent at the school, of Bangladeshi origin, born and brought up locally, with a university degree, and who was also a local magistrate.

City Infants was another school with strong representation from the local African-Caribbean community on its governing body, including a parent and local education professionals. Most secondary schools visited had at least one black governor. The Chair of Governors at South Eastern Comprehensive and the Deputy Chair at Northern Catholic High School were both black. The latter stressed the importance of having black parents involved in the decision-making processes of a school.

Parents' meetings and parents' associations

Another strategy used by some schools to involve minority group parents was forming a parents' group or association. Some schools had organised successful parents' groups. One we observed in Northshire Comprehensive was attended by 10–12 parents each time, including some fathers, with an ethnically diverse group of parents.

At Northern Catholic, a group was formed which was for black parents and for the parents of black children. This was in order to, in the words of the Headteacher, "Give a voice to these parents so that we can be sure that we are hearing the voices of all parents who care for black children." Such an initiative was seen as necessary for groups that were in the minority in a school.

Schools also recognised the importance of holding special cultural events at which the whole school community can meet together. As well as the more usual 'International Evenings', we also heard of family events to celebrate Diwali, Haile Selassie's crowning, Eid and Guru Nanak's birthday.

Other ways of bringing parents into the school included: at Alton, classes for parents were held on the school site; at City Infants, the Headteacher led a successful parents' choir and there was also a well-attended parent and toddler group, and a popular toy and video library; while East Road Primary encouraged the community into the school by allowing the school premises to be used at weekends for supplementary community-run classes for children.

Working with community organisations to raise standards of attainment as well as with individual parents could also be a way forward for schools. One Headteacher told us:

> *"They've now got this massive community school where they try to bring themselves into the mainstream and get funding and support so that they can get the parents coming into school and understanding what's going on with their children."*

Discipline

Another issue that was troubling for parents was that of discipline and how that was handled and/or dealt with by the school. Parents acknowledged the difficulties faced by teachers especially when they had to try to control large classes with students who were disaffected or engaged in negative youth cultures. But there was also parental concern about unfairness, as discussed earlier in this report.

African-Caribbean parent:

> *"If I could afford to stay at home and teach him myself then I would because I have just got no hope at all. I heard that X School has got a very good special needs section, but then I know that X School spits black boys out for exclusion of silly little things."*

To exclude a child from school was seen as a bizarre way of disciplining children. It was seen as a method that was more likely to encourage rather than discourage bad behaviour.

> *" …. Now, say that my son has done something, they will send him home to stress me. I phoned them and said to them, 'Look, I don't see that as punishment, that is not punishment. The kids are glad when you send them home. What you do is take him out of basketball and let him stay in and do some writing, let him do something, some education that is going to help him. Don't send him home to me!' "*

City Infants was involved in a project in which parents and teachers were working together to reach a shared approach to handling children. The case studies in this report stress the importance of negotiating rules and routines with parents as well as with students, and once agreed, making these clear and explicit, so parents can feel assured of the fairness of the treatment of their children.

Extended absences
Being seen to be fair

Fairness seems also to be an issue in the handling of what was found to be a point of real concern for many minority ethnic group parents, and that was the question of extended absences overseas to visit relatives.

There is increasing anxiety about levels of extended absences from schools. A similar and related concern is that of 'unauthorised absences' by gypsy traveller students. However, travelling families have a special position in law recognised by Section 199(6) of the 1993 Education Act, which "protects parents from prosecution if it can be demonstrated that they are engaged in a trade or business of such nature as requires them to travel from place to place" (OFSTED, *The education of travelling children*, 1996).

This is very different from the position of minority ethnic group parents who nevertheless have a very natural desire for their children to meet and keep in touch with relatives whose distance makes visits expensive and to whom longer visits seem to make more sense. A common feature, however, is the threat of exclusions from school which gypsy traveller parents previously faced and which these other minority groups now seem to face if schools do not recognise and work sensitively with parents.

In the year 1996/97, 6% of Tower Hamlets' students were away at any one time. Tower Hamlets has conducted research which suggests that students taking extended leave were twice as likely to leave school without any GCSEs as regular attendees (*TES*, 16 January 1998). Communicating such facts to parents is important in helping them to understand the seriousness of the issue.

Overall, parents of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin who took part in the focus group acknowledged the contentious nature of this subject and the possible misunderstandings that could arise between parents and schools. For families, the issue was the length of time they would be allowed to take away, without losing their children's place in the school. They also wanted to discuss the willingness of teachers to provide work for children to do whilst they were away.

There was a view that many parents did not understand the disruptive effect of an extended absence on their children, especially secondary school children, and that these parents needed to have this properly explained. On the other hand, parents thought that there was not enough understanding in schools of the importance of the visit to the traditional homeland nor of the practical difficulties entailed in arranging this kind of holiday to fit in with the British school year.

The parents interviewed had experienced a range of responses from schools, from "If you leave before the school officially closes your child will lose his/her place" to "I went to the school and told them and I am going for such and such a time and could they give [my daughter] some work, and they did. They gave her a whole set folder with a lot of paper work in there with reading books and everything and she did all that while she was abroad."

It was acknowledged that some families did not inform schools of their plans to go and also that a child's place could not be held indefinitely by a school. The main problem lay in the secondary school as the disruption to the child's education could have longer-term effects on examination results. Students themselves admitted to the disruptive effect of a long absence from school.

Fifteen-year-old girl: "It took me such a long time to get back into the swing of things. I had lost so much time in school and my mind was just like, on my holiday and my family in Pakistan and that."

On the whole, parents felt that a mutual arrangement could be arrived at between a family and the school, and that reason and common sense should be the prevailing factors as illustrated by this discussion in a focus group meeting of Pakistani parents:

> *"But the teacher told me that there is a waiting list. If school is being started 3 September, and if you come on the 8th or 9th, the other children who are on the waiting list, they'll come and you've lost your children's place…"*
>
> *"September is a very important time because of moving classes, it's a change to a different teacher, different year and all that. I suppose Christmas is the best time to go because everybody is unwinding and it's a holiday period…"*
>
> *"Well, the best way to do it is to sit down and have a word with the Headmaster and see what he can do. And if they say 'No', then I mean, why not come back two weeks before, what's two weeks? It's only a holiday at the end of the day and you have to come back."*
>
> *"It all depends on the school teachers, you know, if they are helpful. If you go and ask them nicely I am sure they will help you out."*

In the year in which our study took place, 38 children went away on extended absences at Alton Primary School. New LEA rules had been introduced to attempt to cut down on these extended periods of leave. The new school rules as Alton implemented them permitted a maximum of four extended weeks' absence in a year, with two optional extra weeks allowed only for emergencies. In addition, Alton had recently sent out a letter to parents saying that they did not expect to have any extended absences in the National Curriculum Assessment years (Years 2 and 6). If parents did take children out during the National Curriculum Assessment year, the children's names would be taken off the school roll, and they would not be given a place on their return.

The parents we interviewed in the school understood the reasons for such a rule, and seemed willing to comply. Like Brook Primary School, some of the parents were paying for private tuition for their children to support their transition to secondary school, in addition to paying for Bengali classes. There was real concern that their children should do well in school.

It seems, from our discussions, that what is needed is a consistent approach across all schools, and one which aims to balance the needs of the family with the effects of an extended absence on the children's education.

In some LEAs, it might be that fixed holiday dates might be reconsidered for the whole borough, to give parents more flexibility to arrange leave in the more appropriate seasons. Some account might be taken through 'value added' calculations to lessen schools' particular anxieties about absences in years where National Curriculum Assessment results were crucial for the school's position in the league tables, giving recognition to minority group families' pattern of life. Given firm and clear national parameters developed in full consultation with the relevant minority groups, equity of treatment would be transparent, and exclusions avoided.

*NB: the names of schools have been changed.

Case Study 1: Brook Primary School
Relationship with parents

Brook Primary School is a popular, oversubscribed, inner city school which achieves excellent results, at or above the national average at Key Stage 1 (in 1997: Reading: 91%; Writing: 85%; Mathematics: 91%) and well above the national average at Key Stage 2 (English: 80%; Mathematics: 80%; Science: 98%). In the Year 6 cohort sitting the National Curriculum Assessments there was one statemented child (Stage 5), and 11 children on the SEN register (Stages 2–4).

Free school meals taken were higher than the LEA average (41%) at 48% in 1997, according to school data. Attendance was in line with the national average, and the rate of unauthorised absence below the national average. There had been no permanent exclusions in the last year, and temporary exclusions were very rare. Against all measures, Brook Primary is clearly a very good school, meeting the needs of its pupil intake.

This is particularly striking in the UK context given the profile of the school's intake. The children attending the school come from very diverse backgrounds. According to school data collected in 1997, 28% were of black Caribbean origin; 6% black African; and 12% 'black other', mainly children of dual heritage. Children of South Asian origin make up less than 3% of the intake (Indian: 1%; Pakistani: 1%). Only 37% of children in the school were classified as from a UK white background. The remaining 17% consisted of small numbers of children from a wide variety of other language backgrounds, including children with the following home languages: Arabic, Bengali, Chi, Danish, Dutch, Fante, Farsi, French, French Creole, German, Greek, Gujerati, Hindi, Italian, Luo, Norwegian, Punjabi, Polish, Portuguese (some from Angola), Spanish, Swedish, Tagalog, Yoruba, Urdu and others. One of the biggest groups was Portuguese speakers (nine children including those of Portuguese, Mozambican and Angolan parentage), followed by Arabic speakers (eight) and Yoruba speakers (seven).

At the time of the last OFSTED visit in 1995, 15% of the children were assessed as needing English language support, at between Stages 1–3 of fluency in English as an additional language based on LEA criteria. By 1997 this had risen to 23%, according to school records, but was still less than the LEA average of 30% EAL learners.

However, this language survey data does not illustrate the true complexity of the school's intake. Many of the children were of mixed ethnic group parentage; for example, one child categorised as 'Indian' had a Goan father and lived with a white UK mother. This is not an exceptional case, for this is essentially one of the late 20th-century inner city areas in which multi-ethnic cultural groupings and diverse new cultural forms are emerging, in which traditional or heritage cultures are only one element among other constructions of identity signalled in clothing, choice of music, choice of food and other affiliations.

This new urban and changing social background was also seen in the school records on the children's religious affiliations. While the majority (60%) of parents claimed to be Christian, as many as 31% claimed to have no religious affiliations at all. There were only 4% Muslim, then 2% Hindu, 1% Buddhist and 1% Jewish children.

Housing in the area was mixed, including large municipal housing estates, some mainly owner-occupied terraces close to the school, and some larger Victorian houses. There was a significant minority of children from professional families, who supported the school energetically through its governing body and parents' association, raising useful extra funds for resources and extra-curricular activities. Although including, like most inner city districts, transient families including a few resettled refugee and asylum seeking families, the majority of people in the area seemed to have been there over more than a generation.

During the research we met a number of parents of Caribbean origin who told us that they had themselves attended Brook Primary. Some had remained living in the area; others had moved away but still had a parent living nearby, who provided childcare before and after school for the working parents, and who had therefore brought their own children back to the school.

Overall, the school community seemed relatively stable, allowing space for the school to build up and maintain its own strong culture and ethos, and to incorporate into this any new children entering into the later years of the school with little disruption. This may be one intake-related factor in the school's success.

On the surface, the composition of the staff appeared very different from the diversity found among the students. There was only one bilingual teacher (Polish) in the school, and only one bilingual (South Asian) assistant, working as a classroom assistant.

However, closer acquaintance suggests this impression is rather misleading. Just as many of the children had complex and multiple ethnic identities, so did many of the families the staff belonged to. For example, the Headteacher was herself married to someone of South Asian family origin and they had children of dual heritage. At least one white classroom assistant was the mother of a black child attending the school. In this sense, then, Brook Primary was an intercultural school. It made the casual ascription of racial and ethnic identities problematic.

In this context, the school worked by creating a strong and distinctive school culture and ethos of its own, which it successfully and confidently communicated to children and parents. In this way it was unlike City Infants, whose case study follows, which gained its success by identifying with, celebrating and trying hard to incorporate the local community. Yet both schools seem equally successful in raising attainment for their students. Long-term research would be needed to see if there were differences in outcome for students at later stages in their school careers.

The Headteacher told us that the success of the school's high expectations for the children relied upon gaining the support and involvement of parents in their children's education. The school aimed to work with parents so that they were "behind us and with us".

Our one-to-one interviews with a large number of individual parents attending a parents' evening suggested that in this the school had been very successful, and particularly with the parents of Caribbean family origin. The Headteacher was clearly held in great respect as someone who knew the community. As parents told us: "Mrs X is so totally tuned in to what's going on out there! She's respected, she's very well thought of." Another said: "Mrs X actually understands people — she's a people's person — and I also don't believe she has anyone on her team who doesn't understand people... You know, they work together as a team, and they help the parents as a team, and basically, in this school, the students, the teachers and the parents are one big team... I believe Mrs X sets herself high standards, but she expects that of her team as well."

Many of the parents had chosen the school from other parents' recommendations, as well as claiming to have read about the school in the local press as a high achieving school. For example, one mother of Caribbean origin explained: "Well, to be honest, a couple of my friends' children came to this school. I had thought of sending mine to Church of England, but then I read up a lot of reports on this school, and then Brook Primary came on top, and I thought, well, it's on my doorstep, you know."

Another said that she had visited and been impressed by "the structure of the school, and other kids were sitting nicely and getting on with their work, while in other schools they'd be running

around and distracting each other... Here, honest, you could have heard a pin drop; no throwing string and paper around, and hitting each other, like the other school."

The parents were proud of the school and the public recognition and media coverage it had received in recent years. They felt success had a lot to do with parental involvement. "Whatever your child done, they come to us and they say 'Look, your child has done such and such', and they tell the parents, so that the parents know what their children are doing." One mother worked as a midday supervisor in another school. At that school she said: "Really, we've been abused, and the Head knew, and she never let the child come and say sorry." She believed this would not happen at Brook Primary, where "the children are supposed to acknowledge that they are wrong; it's very important, when they've done something wrong, to let them be responsible for what they have done."

Another black parent explained:

> *"There was a problem that I had with my son just after he joined the school, where someone had just pushed him in the playground and called him 'boy', and I wrote to the Head. I had a letter back the same day; the child had to apologise to my son, and write him a letter of apology. Mrs X actually dealt with that very confidently, wrote me a letter and told me that it had been dealt with."*

Clear rules and close communication were, then, appreciated. Other parents told us how easy it was to come and talk to teachers about problems: "I can come in, I don't need to take an appointment, and have a quick chat with my son's teacher at any time."

One mother whose child had recently come from Jamaica and had some difficulties in adjusting to his new life in the UK explained: "If anything happens, they'll phone me up, and I'll pop in and check on him to see how he's getting on, and things like that. It's very good." Communication between home and school was effective: "We always get letters home, always, about what they're doing — newsletters always come home. They always let us know what's happening by letter."

Parents were expected to be involved in supporting their children's learning. Each term an outline of the curriculum and what was planned for each subject area was sent home to parents.

The parents told us they liked the regular homework: "I think that's one of the most important things, you know, when they're taking home work, and I can work alongside with him and explain to him what he doesn't understand, because I know that the teacher hasn't got time to spend a lot with individual children as much as she wants." They appreciated the one-to-one parents' consultation meetings held three times a year: "Because you know, I work, and I had to take time out today, because I said to his dad, because he always brings my son in to school, 'You're the one who always sees the teachers, so I'll take time out now!' And they gave me enough notice, and I said I'd come down and have a word, and I'm very happy about it."

Overall, they felt that Brook Primary was a successful school. "The teachers have a hell of a workload here, but they do care, and I believe that they want every pupil to do well."

Case Study 2: City Infants School
Parents and the school

In the second primary case study, we focus on City Infants School. Like Brook Primary, City had developed its own high expectations of children's attainment as well as explicit rules for their behaviour which are shared with children and their families, providing the conditions for learning to take place. However, it provided a different pattern of provision in many ways.

City was a school in change and development. It did not have the long and stable history of success which Brook was building upon, while the Infant School was also due to amalgamate with the separate Junior School, on the same site, in autumn 1997, under the Infant School Head. Joint staff development towards the amalgamation was taking place at the time of our study. We found a school actively constructing a new ethos, and the expectations of behaviour and standards of learning that were required within it. This was a successful school in the process of recreating itself.

To be successful, the Headteacher knew, it had to engage with the local community, to take parents and carers with it. It was also a school tackling the particular issues which arise in trying to meet the needs of children from refugee and asylum seeking families in the context of tight budgets and mounting external pressures. In this context, it placed an emphasis on developing unqualified support staff as a valuable resource.

City Infants is located in an inner city residential area, close to a busy main road and tube, railway and bus centres. In the main road there are a number of community advice centres and social clubs specifically for members of a number of different ethnic communities. Alongside these, there have more recently been added a number of new wine bars and restaurants catering for the young, privately-rented flat dwellers moving into the community, which includes the tenants of council estates and the owner-occupiers of terraced houses. There are also a number of refugee or asylum seeking families, mainly Kurds and Somalis, as well as other displaced families, living in bed and breakfast type accommodation, sometimes over long periods, sometimes experiencing a succession of temporary homes.

Details of the school's ethnic mix, according to the school's own records for December 1996 and excluding the nursery data, were as follows:

UK: 27%	Turkish: 3%
Mixed race: 14%	Italian: 2%
Kurdish: 4%	Indian: 1%
Mauritian: 2%	Pakistani: 1%
Chinese: 2%	Bangladeshi: 1%
Greek: 1%	Other European: 3%
Afro-Caribbean: 25%	Other: 1%
Black African: 12%	

The school's 1996 OFSTED report comments: "There is high unemployment in the area. There are a high number of social issues... The headteacher has set out to create a school about and involving real people, where education is a partnership between home, school and community, in which staff have the highest expectations of all students and where social background is no

excuse for accepting low standards." The percentage of free school meals is 57%, compared to the LEA average of 41%.

One feature of the school's success as a 'community school' is the fact that a number of the parents of children in the school had themselves attended City Infants in the past. The Headteacher was once herself a local resident, bringing up her family in the area (her own children had attended the school), and a number of the school staff live locally and their sons and daughters currently attend the school. The Headteacher told us: "I felt I had the opportunity to establish something here and create something in the community. At the heart of the community."

Another feature supporting the school's success is that the LEA made generous local pre-school provision. Most of the children attending the school had either attended the school's own nursery or one of the other local nurseries provided in the area. A further feature was the powerful influence of an LEA-funded facility for before and after school hours care provided for all ages in the extended day and holiday centre attached to the school. Working parents could bring their children here in the morning, before school, and know that they would be cared for at the end of the school day as well as in the school holidays.

Although the centre had been opened 20 years earlier, it was the much more recent amalgamation of the Nursery and Infant School with the extended hours provision facility which had steadily increased the school's intake. The play centre impacted directly on school provision because the staff at the centre were timetabled to work within the school classrooms as nursery officers during the school day. This provided continuity for the children, but also brought a deeper knowledge of the families and their circumstances into the school.

We were able to talk to a number of parents, both informally, and also by bringing together a small group of five parents and carers (four of them African-Caribbean and one white) and one (African-Caribbean) foster parent. The parents/carers felt strongly that all children were encouraged and supported to get to know their roots. "The children from minorities, they all feel important here, that's why they are excelling. Each one is just as important as the next person." Another black parent explained why she felt the school was so successful: "My daughter just started here this year. She has excelled here. It is the welcome — when we first arrived the Head and Nursery teacher were at the door, waiting for us. As I came in, my first impressions of the school, with all the images presented on the walls here, were overwhelming."

Parents and carers appreciated the high standards of presentation and behaviour expected of the children. One carer who had chosen the school for her foster child even though it meant coming across the LEA boundary commented especially on the importance of the uniform in creating a feeling of 'belonging'. Her child was proud to wear it, and she felt it made a difference to the way the children were seen walking to and from the school.

Parental knowledge and skills were recognised, valued and drawn on across the curriculum. A parent said: "If you've got the knowledge, she asks you to bring stuff in. This week in their topic on 'Communications', my son said, 'My mum knows sign language'. So I'm in on Monday now to demonstrate!" Another parent said: "From day one they let you know you can come in and help. You can turn up any morning and offer to help and they welcome you."

The school had an active parents' and community association, mainly involved in fund-raising for the school, but also operating as a pressure group where necessary, for example campaigning on secondary transition in the LEA. It met once a term.

The school was producing a booklet called *Helping hands for teachers* for parents who offer to support in the classroom, in collaboration with the association. In recent months efforts to

extend committee membership to include more people from minority groups had begun to pay off, with the election of two African-Caribbean women as co-chair and treasurer.

“Parents feel as much part of this school as the children do,” another parent explained. The school gave parents confidence in their right to “walk in and ask questions”, something they felt they would now have to take on into the secondary schools their children went on to; even where those schools might not encourage parents’ attempts to be involved.

However, City Infants School was also thought to make parents ‘recognise their responsibilities’, in relation to attendance, punctuality and homework: helping collect items for topic work or for the ‘letter of the week’ phonics table, for example, as well as for their children’s behaviour. One black parent said: “We need to take responsibility for this as parents. We have to acknowledge that, yes, our children might bully. We can’t just say ‘He’s not like this at home!’ We have to come into school and find out how our children are doing.”