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Children's Workforce
Development Council

Towards effective home
communication for better school
attendance: a study with the
Somali community

Sharing our experience

This report is part of CWDC's Practitioner-Led Research (PLR) programme. Now in its third year, the programme gives practitioners the opportunity to explore, describe and evaluate ways in which services are currently being delivered within the children's workforce.

Working alongside mentors from Making Research Count (MRC), practitioners design and conduct their own small-scale research and then produce a report which is centred around the delivery of Integrated Working.

The reports are used to improve ways of working, recognise success and provide examples of good practice.

This year, 41 teams of practitioners completed projects in a number of areas including:

- Adoption
- Bullying
- CAF
- Child trafficking
- Disability
- Early Years
- Education Support
- Parenting
- Participation
- Social care
- Social work
- Travellers
- Youth

The reports have provided valuable insights into the children and young people's workforce, and the issues and challenges practitioners and service users face when working in an integrated environment. This will help to further inform workforce development throughout England.

This practitioner-led research project builds on the views and experiences of the individual projects and should not be considered the opinions and policies of CWDC.

Towards effective home communication for better school attendance: a study with the Somali community

Abstract

This is a study of the intergenerational tensions within the Somali refugee community in Camden, London. A series of focus groups and video diaries were undertaken in order to better understand the communication problems between parents and children in the Somali community. The study was a partnership between the Camden Education Welfare Service and the Somali Youth Development Resource Centre. The key aims of the research were:

♣ to identify interventions that can facilitate better communication between generations in order to improve school attendance from pupils within the Somali community
♣ to elicit the drivers and barriers of communication across the generations of Somali young women
♣ to explore ways of bridging communication barriers
♣ to explore how integrated working could help better reach hard-to-reach communities.
♣
The key findings of the project include the gender roles disparities between parents and young women as well as the language barriers, differing life expectations, conflicting values and educational aspirations. A complex picture of the challenging relationships between home, school and pupil emerged through the study, as well as examples of the ways in which integrated working could help engage marginalized communities in accessing services.

Introduction

This project investigated the nature of intergenerational tensions in the Somali refugee community in Camden and how local services can best respond to the situation. Talk of intergenerational problems in the Somali community first arose following the murder of Mahir Osman in Camden in January 2006. In the public meetings that took place after the death, concerns were raised over a gap in communication and understanding between younger and older Somalis. Much of the earlier focus however was on the possible effect of this gap on negative youth behaviour such as gang involvement and drug use. As an Attendance Welfare Officer in the Camden Education Welfare Service it was important for me to explore this intergenerational tension and to see how the Camden Education Welfare Service could better engage with the Somali community. Camden has a local Somali population of approximately 6,000 to 8,000 members whose rates of school attendance are lower than the Camden average. The research project was conducted in partnership with the Somali Youth Resource Development Centre (SYDRC)

Aims of the project

- To identify interventions that can facilitate better communication between generations in order to improve attendance within the Somali community.
- To elicit self-reported drivers and barriers of communication across the generation from Somali young women.
- To explore ways of bridging these communication barriers.
- To explore how integrated working could be used to engage with hard-to-reach communities.

The aims of this project have changed slightly from what was initially intended. The main objective, which has always been to improve attendance for Somali pupils in Camden, has remained consistent and the central objective of the project. However, one of the earlier aims was to measure the effectiveness of the use of parenting groups in improving communication between parents and children and to see if this affected levels of school attendance. This work was also to focus on the transition years, which show the lowest rates of attendance for the Somali community in Camden. These aims were altered as the arrangement to undergo this work did not come to fruition for various reasons. One of the difficulties with integrated work is the possibility of plans not working out. Therefore, those who wish to undertake integrated work must be flexible in their approach as initial plans may not always work out. Although the initial aims of the project were altered, improving attendance by improving inter-family communication remained central. With the change in partner organization came a change in plan due to the different clientele, approach and priorities of the partner organization. Even though there were some setbacks, the project itself was a success and the new arrangements provided an even better opportunity to hear the voices of a group within the larger community that is not often heard.

Context

Our local data shows that Somali refugees in Camden have poorer attendance than pupils in our schools from different backgrounds. One hypothesis for why this is, is the lack of good communication between home and school. Studies have shown that family factors are one of the key causes of absence from school (Kinder et al. 1995). Further research has shown that good communication between home, the school and the child is important for school attendance. However, most schools have assumed that there is only a problem between communication between the school and the family and that there are few communication problems between parents and children within the Somali community itself (Paskell 2007). This has been the traditional assumption – that there are communication barriers between the school and Somali families and that this negatively affects school attendance but in addition to this it is increasingly being understood that there are communication problems at home as well (Paskell 2007).

There is a growing body of evidence that there is poor communication between parents and children within the Somali community (Paskell 2007). There is also a double communication problem for Somali parents, both internally within the family and externally with the school. These studies have highlighted the need for better preventative strategies to improve attendance. What good are punitive measures when there are such profound communication problems between parents and children. Punitive measures can only be effective to a certain extent but the root causes of poor attendance need to be addressed to change a culture of absenteeism. Atkinson et al. (2000) highlight the need for effective preventative interventions in order to establish ways of promoting good school attendance. Multi-agency working has been identified as a good strategy to reduce poor school attendance (Malcolm et al. 2003).

It is with this in mind that Camden wished to strengthen its links with community based organizations and to expand its prevention strategies as a means of being less reliant on punitive measures. The context for this study was thus an increasing understanding that intergenerational problems are affecting good communication between Somali parents and their children (Ali and Jones 2000) and a realization that any work with this community that aimed to be effective needed to be inclusive and draw on the skills, contacts and networks of the local Somali community to address common concerns.

Methodology

Focus groups and video diaries

I chose to use focus groups mainly because I felt this would give the young women the courage to share some personal issues which they may otherwise have felt difficult to say on their own. The peer support seemed to provide them with strength to speak their minds. However, there were also reasons to do with the strength of focus groups in qualitative study. Qualitative research approaches are good when you need to explore and discover new topics. Focus group research can be useful in learning about the beliefs and attitudes held by individuals (about a particular topic) when little is currently known (Morgan 1998). The advantage of focus groups over other qualitative methods (eg one-to-one interviews) lies in the group dynamic.

From an initial starting point provided by myself I was able to guide the participants into a free-flowing group discussion which took the conversation into areas that were unanticipated by myself. If I had been simply asking questions then I might not have asked some questions in particular. Therefore, this method generated a wealth of data that would otherwise have been missed. Also, the process of sharing, comparing and justifying viewpoints that spontaneously occurred between participants added a level of depth to the data. The participants seemed to draw strength from the group dynamic and even the video diaries afterwards, which were intended to be conducted individually, ended up being a group process as the participants preferred to speak on camera in a small group. Since little was currently known about the reasons why some intergenerational tensions exist within the Somali community, I felt I couldn't develop questions which could accurately explore the causes or contributing factors to it and so the focus group method seemed the best option for gaining insight at this stage in the research process.

Video diaries were offered as an alternative to focus groups for those who wanted to be interviewed individually. We used this innovative idea as we thought that this would be something that young people of the YouTube generation would relate to. It was explained to them that their faces would be blurred and their voices distorted to ensure anonymity. The same topic guide was used for the video interviews as for the focus groups to ensure consistency.

Development of the focus group and video diaries topic guide

During the focus group, I used a topic guide to ensure that the key subject areas were covered. The topic guide was designed by me to reflect the needs of the study yet remain sensitive to the requirements of participants from a particularly vulnerable social group. The topic guide was designed to be a flexible instrument and amendments were made to it in light of my experience with each focus group and feedback from participants (which I actively sought at the end of each session).

Study design

Two focus groups, each comprising 6 to 8 Somali young women, were conducted. Each group consisted of Somali young women between the ages of 16 and 20 who live in Camden. Four participants also participated in the recording of a video diary. Participants were either attending a Camden school or had attended a Camden school in the past. The vast majority of participants were invited to participate by a female youth worker from SYDRC. A snowball effect ensued from this and those who were invited were asked to invite others they thought might be interested in participating.

Findings

Expectations

The participants stated their parents' expectations were based on the expectations their own parents had of them while growing up in Somalia. The girls said their parents would often make comparisons between the experiences of themselves as young women at the age of their daughters and the current lifestyles, habits and behaviours of their daughters. For example, one participant said her mother would say 'I was cooking for the family by the age of seven.' The participant could not relate to this and thought a seven year old should not be cooking at all. Another participant said 'They want us to do the things they did when they were young in Somalia but we are not in Somalia, they need to forget that. We are in England.'

Education

Participants said their parents had high educational expectations of them. Their parents insisted that they become doctors or lawyers. One participant said 'our parents want us to be doctors or lawyers and they don't even help us with our course work'. It appeared that the participants thought it was unlikely that they would become doctors or lawyers and therefore not be seen as successful by their parents.

The participants reported that their parents trusted the teachers and school staff more than them. Whenever there was a dispute at school, their parents sided with the school staff rather than with them. They seemed disheartened over this. On participant said that to avoid arguments she would just admit to doing things she had not done. There was a sense that their word did not count for much and the word of school staff was of more value.

Gender roles

The participants reported that their brothers were given more freedom and had less household responsibilities. When participants asked their parents why their brothers do not share in the household chores, they were told that they were boys, implying

that male duties do not include household chores. The participants did not seem to approve of this justification, rather they seemed to resent it. It also seemed to be the cause of difficult relations between themselves and their brothers. A number of the participants acknowledged that they did not get along with their brothers. Their brothers were also encouraged to behave like the men of the house and enforce the household rules even if they were younger in age. The participants did not like the benefits awarded to their brothers simply because they were boys. One participant suggested that a system based on age should be implemented; the older you are the later the curfew.

Communication

The participants stated that they found it difficult to communicate with their parents. They pointed out that they found it easier to communicate with their mothers than their fathers. Among reasons given for this was that their fathers were not always home and did not know much about what was going on in their lives. They also said their fathers were the disciplinarians and their mothers were a soft touch. They mentioned that they preferred to communicate with older sisters, cousins or aunts when they were not able to speak to their parents. They found these other family members less threatening and more open.

Participants expressed the difficulty they had in speaking to their parents in Somali. They found themselves speaking English while their parents speak to them in Somali. They shared that they felt limited when they spoke in Somali and were not able to express themselves adequately. They sometimes had siblings who spoke Somali better than they did themselves and these siblings would translate between them and their parents and this created a language barrier

One participant pointed out that her two parents did not appear to have good communication between themselves and so there was little hope therefore for there being good communication between the children and parents.   All the participants acknowledged a desire to improve communication with their parents. They all expressed the desire to be truthful about where they were going and what they would be doing there but said they currently did not tell their parents the truth because their parents would not allow them to go where they wanted or do the things they wanted.

Implications for practice (including integrated working)

This project was particularly successful in engaging with Somali young women and allowing them the opportunity to speak and providing them with an open environment where they could share their views about a sensitive topic in confidence. These are hard-to-reach voices and working with community organizations allows mainstream services to reach these voices. It is important the services understand their areas of strengths and weakness and realize their limitations and create partnerships to engage with groups who are better able to reach particular target groups. If the target is the youth then using peer workers or established youth centres may help.

Similarly, if the target is minority ethnic members, then working with minority ethnic community centres will be useful in aiming to target them. This will need a greater sense of a cooperative spirit.

In a climate of competitiveness and resentment over allocations of funds it will not be possible to work together to put the child at the heart of services, which is key to integrated working. Moreover, it is important to maintain a flexible attitude. Partnerships often mean working in ways that you do not normally work in. Different agencies and organizations have different ways of working and there needs to be a degree of pragmatism when engaging in multi-agency working. The council for example, often has sufficient levels of resources and often operates at a high level of efficiency whereas many community organizations often lack resources and are in dire need of capacity building. I think it is vital that integrated working includes some kind of capacity building element in order to help community organizations partner more effectively with larger organizations.

It is also important to bear in mind gender issues. One of the things that came out of the research was that I had worked closely with a community organization that had a reputation of working closely with young boys. For this reason many parents in the community were reluctant to allow their daughters to engage with the project as they felt they would be mixing with the boys who were known to attend the centre. It is very important that gender issues are kept in mind when working with community organizations. Often when working with community organizations the culture overrides and professionals forget to remain sensitive to gender-specific issues.

Recommendations

The young women who participated in this project highlighted a desire for better communication between themselves and their parents. Often the council and community groups work with parents and young people separately. It would seem for the Somali community they would benefit from having parents and young people brought together to discuss issues that concern them both, not only to work on the issues at hand but also to build on their communication skills in order to enable them to communicate more effectively with each other at home. This would give them the skills to negotiate, for example, house rules that everyone would agree to, or even perhaps a redefinition of gender roles within the home. The main goal would be to allow each family to find their own way of working but at the same time working together to achieve this.

Tension between school and home was also highlighted by these young women. The sentiment shared was that their parents sided with and supported the school rather than their child whenever disagreements arose. This resulted in the participants admitting to things they did not do. What this creates is a very resentful relationship between pupil and school. The school can become the object of all their negative feelings. Once school becomes a place which pupils dislike, it makes non-attendance more likely. One way to try to reduce the rate of non-attendance with this group of pupils is to create more productive channels of communication between school, parent and pupil, where all feel equally heard and valued. An early

intervention approach would also be useful here as it is much more difficult to restore lines of communication once they have broken down.

Conclusion

The voices of Somali young women were heard in this study. The issues that were raised give insight into their world. They spoke of gender roles that they did not identify with and parents they were unable to communicate with effectively. School was identified as a focal point of contention between themselves and their parents. The young women also found it difficult to relate to the expectations their parents have of them. In some ways it appeared as though these young women were caught between two worlds.

Practitioner-led research is an excellent way of giving insight into the daily work of the children's workforce. It shines a light on work that often goes unnoticed but is beneficial to many families and young people. It also provides practitioners with an opportunity to investigate their field and reflect on their work. That being said, it does add to the workload of the practitioner and can make the juggling of both work and research a challenge

Integrated working can be more successful than organizations working individually, particularly in certain situations. There is always a place for working alone but organizations should be open to the idea of collaborating with others and seeking those who have knowledge and expertise that can complement that which you already possess in order to reach the best possible outcome. Maintaining a good working relationship with your partner organization is also crucial. This provides opportunities for future partnership work on similar projects. It is also beneficial to identify the objectives of each organization in the beginning to identify if they can all be met and to clarify working arrangements so that the partnership will be a fruitful one for all concerned, otherwise it may lead to a breakdown in working relations later after a great deal of both time and money may have been put in.

The Children's Workforce Development Council leads change so that the thousands of people and volunteers working with children and young people across England are able to do the best job they possibly can.

We want England's children and young people's workforce to be respected by peers and valued for the positive difference it makes to children, young people and their families.

We advise and work in partnership with lots of different organisations and people who want the lives of all children and young people to be healthy, happy and fulfilling.