

The Manchester Transition Project: Implications for the Development of Parental Involvement in Primary Schools

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Executive summary

1. The importance of working more closely with parents in achieving successful outcomes for children is now widely recognised. With this in mind, parental involvement and support is a key strand in a number of Government initiatives, including extended schools, Surestart and the respect agenda. Schools can make a fundamental contribution to work with parents but practice in schools is clearly mixed. School staff often do not feel skilled or confident in working with parents and there has been limited work to develop whole school improvement in this area.
2. The Transition Project is a programme for training and supporting primary school staff in working with parents to build strong relationships, good two-way communication, effective support, and involvement in their children's education from the outset. The programme was developed by the Parental Involvement Team and Primary consultants from Manchester Education Partnership and has been funded by Children's Fund and Surestart. It focuses on parental involvement at two key transition points – the entry to school at the Foundation Stage, and the Transition from Foundation to Year 1. It works by training designated school staff, releasing a teaching assistant to undertake outreach work with parents, providing coaching support in school, and encouraging further whole school development by dissemination activities within the school and further networking between schools, parents and agencies at a district level.
3. The effectiveness of the Project has been demonstrated by an earlier review. The current evaluation focuses on what can be learned from the Project about supporting and developing parental involvement work in primary schools more generally. The evidence comes principally from interviews with staff and parents in six participating schools, plus two other comparator schools. This evidence is supplemented by documentary analysis and by evidence from the Project team's own evaluation activities.
4. The evidence suggests that the Project generates its effects by:
 - encouraging schools to systematise and extend their parental involvement activities;
 - acting as a catalyst for the development of staff skills and school action;
 - supporting the practical implementation of well trialled and sustainable strategies and resources;
 - building the confidence of participating staff;
 - developing staff's awareness of and contacts with other agencies; and

- short term investment which then convinced schools of the benefits of the work and often led them to find the capacity and funding to embed strategies.
5. It seems unlikely that the Project alone brings about fundamental transformations in school culture. Rather, it needs a favourable culture within which to function. However, where conditions are favourable, the Project can instigate a process of cumulative and longer term change in the expectations and practice both of staff and parents.
 6. All the participating schools could identify new practices stimulated by the Project which had become embedded in the school. Where this was most evident, a number of facilitators seem to be at work. These include head teacher commitment, the identification of a staff member responsible for parental involvement and with appropriate qualities, skills and commitment to make contact with disengaged families, opportunities for supportive interaction between staff in school, training followed by coaching for the staff in school, networking between schools, the involvement of teaching assistants, experimentation with new practices in the early stages of participation, and the eventual formalisation of practices. In general terms, inhibiting factors were the obverse of these. In addition, failures to find ways of sustaining some practices without funding, distractions because of other initiatives and imperatives, a sense of being unable to cope with the extent of parents' problems, and problems in linking with other agencies might act as inhibitors.
 7. The experience of the Project suggests that there are a number of implications for other initiatives in terms of developing the communication with and involvement of parents in schools:
 - Parental involvement initiatives cannot rest on the assumption that school staff feel comfortable or confident in working with parents, and also have to take into account the barriers to involvement – particularly in deprived communities- which need to be actively overcome. Parental involvement is likely to be promoted best by releasing and supporting practically the energies and ideas latent in school staff rather than through directives requiring particular forms of practice.
 - Training and coaching for teachers can have a considerable impact on school practice. There is some scope for strengthening initial teacher training standards in this respect, though school-focused continuing professional development is perhaps a more powerful route and this project offers a cost effective model of how this can be done.

- The role of teaching assistants has proved very powerful in the Project, though they need adequate training to play a significant role in working with parents. This could be better reflected in national guidelines.
 - Alongside individual development, the Project suggests that school improvement strategies in respect of parental involvement are important. There are implications for strengthening the place of parental involvement in both head teacher standards and the Ofsted framework.
 - The Project suggests that the local authority may have a key role to play in promoting parental involvement work, perhaps within a broader parenting strategy.
 - Training existing school staff both to embed basic opportunities for parents in school practice and signpost parents to further help can make an important contribution to the Extended School and Surestart agendas on parenting support, family learning and transition – complementing the employment of external providers or additional staff.
8. Overall, the Project suggests that parental involvement work can be developed in schools at low cost and through simple measures. These involve creating a ‘space’ within which staff can build their confidence, explore new approaches, receive support and network with other schools. This is best done in the context of whole school development. Local and national government can contribute by keeping the profile of parental involvement high and supporting the development of this work, though schools have to be free to respond to local circumstances.

Background

Schools and parental involvement

The importance of parents' and carers' involvement in the education of their children is now widely recognised. In a recent review of the research literature for DfES, Desforges concluded that parental involvement in the form of interest in the child and manifest in the home as parent-child discussions can have a significant positive effect on children's behaviour and achievement even when the influence of background factors such as social class or family size have been factored out.

(Desforges with Abouchaar, 2003: 3.13)

However, Desforges also points out that parental involvement can take many forms and draw upon many rationales. Whilst, for instance, schools often concentrate understandably on the roles of parents as formal or informal educators of their children, it is as well to remember, in the context of *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003), that it is parents who are primarily responsible for a wide range of other outcomes for children, to which schools can only make a limited – albeit important – contribution. Moreover, parents do not interact with the education system only as the educators of and carers for their children. They are also what we might call 'citizen-users', making active choices about where to send their children to school, joining governing bodies and parents' groups, helping at school social events and in classrooms, complaining and campaigning where necessary, and electing the councils and governments which run the school system. Links between parents and schools can therefore include a wide range of different kinds of activity from day to day communication, reports on children's progress and parents helping with homework, to parents' being consulted about school policies, becoming involved as volunteers or governors, or accessing information or support through parenting courses or adult education classes.

As Desforges' review points out, there is much that schools and education services can do to enhance the extent and quality of parental involvement. However, parents often report wide differences in the responses made by different schools. Moreover, many aspects of school-home relations call upon skills from school staff which it may be assumed they have, but for which they may have had little training. Situations such as running a class meeting, facilitating a workshop with adults or children, communicating effectively with parents about their children's behaviour, or enabling parents to access further support, require knowledge and skills which are somewhat different from those needed in the classroom. Some staff may feel confident in dealing with these issues and may have learned from

experience. Many, however, will have had little formal training in this and may be lacking in confidence. As a result, they may minimise their contact with parents – apart from the most routine of engagements in the most controlled of environments – in case they are faced with a situation that they feel is beyond their capacity.

Apart from the development of the individual skills of staff, support in relation to whole school development in this area has also been limited. There are, of course, programmes focusing on specific aspects of work with parents – the Webster-Stratton programme (<http://www.incredibleyears.com/>) being probably the best known – and which can be adopted by schools. There are also a limited number of school improvement programmes – such as Success for All (<http://www.successforall.net/>) or the Comer School Development Program (<http://www.med.yale.edu/comer/>) which have a parental involvement strand. In addition, there have been many local initiatives that have focused on one or other aspect of parental involvement, through, for instance Education Action Zones or Neighbourhood Renewal Fund schemes. Nonetheless, it is probably true to say that there is a lack of programmes which are designed to develop the capacity of the school as a whole to engage with parents across a broad range of activities. Whilst the Transition Project, which is the focus of this evaluation, does not claim to make good this lack entirely, it does seek to make a contribution to this area of development.

The Transition Project

The Transition Project was first developed by Manchester Education Partnership with funding from Children's Fund in April 2002. It was set up to address this need to build the confidence and skills of school staff and to see whether a programme of training and coaching key school staff on working with parents, which was then generalized out to a more whole school approach, could make a difference and have a longer term impact on school practice. The Project focuses particularly on staff developing strategies to involve parents at two key transition points – as the children join the school at the Foundation Stage (in Manchester for over 95% parents this is at the nursery) and on the transition from the Foundation Stage to Year 1. As children start at the school, there is a particular opportunity as parents are open to a new partnership, the parameters of which are then being laid. As children begin Year 1, parents are often concerned about their role and involvement in the child's more formal schooling and learning to read and write. The work at the point of entry to school also involves training

a teaching assistant, released for half a day per week, to reach out to and support parents who might need additional help.

The Project usually works over a two year period where two nursery and then two Year 1 staff are trained. Nursery staff receive three and a half days training over a year and Year 1 staff two and a half days, interspersed with coaching sessions. Schools receive a contribution towards supply cover to enable staff to be released for training and to implement some of the more time consuming strategies. They are also encouraged to organize a staff meeting, with input from school staff who have implemented strategies, to help to disseminate successful work across the school. A whole school approach is further enabled through structured meetings of Project staff with head teachers and governors at key points in the Project.

The training and coaching provided by the Project facilitates the implementation of a package of strategies which build upon one another. In the first year, the work within the Foundation Stage includes: a home visit or one-to-one interview to build relationships between school staff and parents; a class meeting where parents meet other staff and parents and get more information about the school and other local agencies; booklets and improved strategies for day-to-day communication; a 'stay and play' session where parents can find out more about how children are taught in school and how to support them at home; a parenting workshop; and a focus group to consult with parents. Apart from these universal strategies there is also additional parenting support available through the teaching assistant who helps to follow up on early problems and signpost parents to other support, including that from other appropriate agencies. In the second year of the Project, the work in the Foundation Stage is embedded and new strategies implemented by Year 1 staff include a class meeting to find out more about Year 1, a pack of activities for parents to do with children at home in the summer holidays, a celebratory assembly and literacy and numeracy workshops. Throughout, the focus is on building trust and strong two-way communication between school staff and parents and amongst parents themselves in order to create a culture where parents expect to be involved, where problems can be prevented and where when problems arise, they can be addressed more easily.

The cost of the programme is around £5000 per school in the first year, of which £1800 goes directly to the schools for supply cover. In the second year, the cost falls to £1200 per school, of which £600 provides supply cover in the second year. The Project was initially developed through funding from Children's Fund but has mainly received funding through Sure Start. It has been running for nearly

five years and has involved involving over 60 schools. The training and strategies have been developed and adapted over this period.

Building on the schools' involvement with the Transition Project, further on-going support and opportunities for development have been provided at an area (known in Manchester as 'district') level in some cases, and area work has also been developed by the North-East Excellence in Cities Education Action Zone (EiC EAZ). Networks of key staff have encouraged schools to develop and sustain whole-school developments, share good practice in involving parents, create better links with local agencies, and in some cases further involve parents in developing this work.

The evaluation

The Transition Project was reviewed at an earlier stage of its development by Professor John Bastiani (Bastiani, 2004). This review concluded that the Project was successfully:

- providing a more holistic focus on the needs, welfare and development of young children;
- increasing the active involvement of parents in their children's school experience;
- helping to improve behaviour and achievement
- giving greater interest to the role of the encouragement and support of families; and
- reinforcing the importance of positive early years experience in the development of longer term attitudes and motivation.

Bastiani attributed this success to three features of the Project:

- the practical nature of the approach;
- the particular blend of resources and materials, training and support; and
- the emphasis on schools finding ways of tailoring the approach to their own needs and circumstances.

A further evaluation is now (2006-7) being carried out by the Centre for Equity in Education in the University of Manchester. The current report presents findings from the first phase of this evaluation. Its particular focus is not simply to repeat the earlier review, but to focus on identifying what might be learned from the Project about how schools and teachers can be supported to enhance their work with parents. It focuses on three key questions:

1. What does the Project tell us about how specific ways in which primary schools can be supported in enhancing relations with parents?

2. What can we learn from the Project about the extent to which interventions of this kind can be instrumental in shifting school cultures with regard to relations with parents?
3. What evidence is there in the Project about whether and how changes in practice and culture can become embedded in schools?

The first phase of the evaluation took the form of visits to eight primary schools, six of these had participated in the Transition Project, and two had had no involvement in the Project. One of these schools and three of the Project schools had however also been involved in a district based network. All of the schools were located in areas that were described to us as characterised by high levels of social disadvantage. These areas were predominantly White British in ethnicity, though with growing numbers of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants whose children had limited English. School staff tended to characterise parents in these areas as lacking in confidence and mistrustful of professionals.

In the eight participating schools, interviews were generally undertaken with the head teacher, the TA and any other staff member who had received training, the parent involvement co-ordinator (if not one of the trained staff), the Year 1 teacher, and sometimes a sample of parents nominated by the school. Interviews focused on the nature of parental involvement before participation in the Project, the changes brought about by participation, and factors tending to facilitate or inhibit those changes. An interview topic guide is presented in the appendix. Parents were asked an equivalent set of questions, focusing on how the practices promoted by the Project had impacted on them and the changes they had noticed in school culture and practice. The non-participating school was visited as a point of contrast, and here an interview was undertaken with the head teacher, who was asked about the nature of school practice in parental involvement. In addition, the researcher observed a Project training session and held informal discussions with participants. Evidence has also been taken from documented feedback from other participating schools about the Project. Moreover, since the Project team has been assiduous in collecting feedback during the course of their involvement with schools, this information has also been drawn upon and the team has collaborated in the production of this report.

The remainder of the report summarises findings from this phase of the evaluation.

Findings

Impact of the Transition Project

All schools participating in the Project were, of course, already undertaking some forms of parental engagement. In many cases, these were quite extensive and included some of the activities promoted by the Project. However all participating schools undertook some new strategies as a result of the Project and there were some significant changes in the way they worked with parents. These changes are outlined in the following sections:

1. Systematising parental involvement

The Project seems to have encouraged schools to systematise and extend their parental involvement activities. Without the Project there was a tendency for schools to develop parental involvement very much within their own comfort zone. The non-participating school is a case in point. There, parents were invited to an induction meeting, but there was no systematic interviewing or home visiting. Parents sometimes worked in classrooms, but they had to take the initiative of approaching the school in order to do this. There was no system for organising and developing parental involvement and consequently some variation in practice across the school. Indeed, parental involvement was seen as a relatively low priority amongst the many competing initiatives in which the school might participate. Another school described how, before involvement in district work, there was a small group of parents involved in groups with an additional externally funded worker, but when they left the work folded because it was not embedded in the school.

This contrasts with some of the Project schools which were characterised by a much more systematic engagement of all parents through a range of strategies from initial interviews, class meetings, workshops, assemblies, to regular communications through noticeboards, newsletters and opportunities to take part in lessons, to additional activities such as parenting workshops, family learning events and courses. As one head put it:

...the practice [of parental involvement] has been firmly embedded in our annual routines.

There was also greater emphasis on reaching out to and involving all parents from an early stage, as well as offering additional support to the harder to reach as an important prevention strategy. In the words of another head:

...our open door policy became much more open.

2. *Stimulating action*

Given the relative simplicity of the Project's strategies, its impact seems not to have arisen from equipping schools with a high level of technical expertise. Instead, what seems to have happened is that the Project acted as a catalyst which developed new and existing skills in staff and stimulated schools into action with the help of some tried and tested strategies.

Staff involved in the Project paid tribute to the 'brilliant' and 'fantastic' training and coaching which they received. However, what they seemed to value was the encouragement to "try this, try that" (TA), the opportunity to exchange ideas with other practitioners, and the stimulus to develop latent ideas for themselves:

In some ways, they're ideas I've already had but have never had the time to do. The Transition Project gave me an incentive to start doing things I wanted to do anyway.

(Teacher)

The Project has said to us 'look at the different ways of doing things' and that you can actually do this... finding a more effective way of doing things... Even though we were doing a lot of it, we may not have been doing it as we should be.

(TA)

In this context, it seems to be important that the Project provides some additional funding for, and attaches some priority to, parental involvement. This creates what one head teacher called "a space to try something", where ideas can be developed and trialled. It may be important in this context that the Project promoted and supported the implementation of well trialled strategies and resources which were likely to be successful. This seems to have countered the frustration of many staff members in these inner city schools, who have found it dispiriting to put time and energy into organising events which often fail to attract their parents.

Building on this success, in participating schools where the Project had a significant impact, the initial stimulus seems to have led to a process of continuous development. Staff in these schools talked about how they had adapted the ideas they were given in training and how, in some cases, they had moved onto quite different practices.

3. Building confidence

Participating staff commonly reported that part of the stimulus they received from the Project was the confidence to try new approaches. Moving out of the 'comfort zone' by undertaking home visits or running workshops was challenging for many staff and the coaching role played by the Transition Project staff in supporting and sometimes pushing them was often key. Home visiting in particular raised anxieties in terms of personal safety, the risk of seeming intrusive to parents or even the suspected irrelevance of home background to the performance of the child in school. However, participation in the Project gave some of these staff the confidence to work in ways which they might otherwise have found threatening and attitudes often changed markedly through the staffs' experience.

One teacher, describing her experience in running literacy and numeracy workshops for parents explained the impact of the Project in the following terms:

Before I was a bit, 'ooh, I don't know whether they'll want to get involved with this,' like it might be more trouble than actually doing it ourselves. And the response we'd had from homework was an indicator we were a bit on our own there and we needed to do it ourselves. The Transition Project has shown me you can build relationships with parents and get them on board to then help you deliver the curriculum to their children.

(Teacher)

However, it was not only teachers who responded in this way. The Project also saw similar developments in the confidence and capacity of teaching assistants who took on extra responsibility and gained some recognition of their abilities to reach out to parents and link with the local community of which they were often a part.

Interestingly, there were some indications in the responses of school staff and parents that the process was a reciprocal one. In other words, not only did staff become more confident in working with parents, but parents became more confident with staff – and sometimes, as a result, felt less defensive and more able to engage in an open relationship. This in turn enabled the staff to relax and relationships to develop.

4. Awareness of and closer work with other agencies

Although experience has varied, some staff – particularly the TAs trained in the outreach/parenting support role – reported that their awareness of other agencies had increased and that they had begun to develop closer links with them. In turn, this had benefits in terms of the earlier identification of

child and family difficulties and increased efficiency in signposting parents to further help. In the words of one TA:

I have gained much more knowledge about local services and provision and am now confident about directing parents and carers to the appropriate agencies.

The extent to which this process increased the range of support to which schools could now direct parents is reflected in the number of agencies and programmes to which referrals were in fact made. These included Surestart, Family Intervention Service, CAMHS, health professionals such as health visitors, GPs and school nurses, special needs services including speech therapy and parent partnership, support for parents including Women's Aid, Drug and alcohol services, bereavement services and Webster Stratton courses, local advice agencies and playschemes, and opportunities available through Manchester Adult Education Service.

5. Other changes

Schools and parents have reported a range of other changes resulting from their participation in the Project. For children these included settling into school better, increased attendance, and improvements in behaviour and achievement. One teacher talked about 'a massive improvement' in children's behaviour and another of how her class had been the best class she's ever had at bringing their homework back – 'You can just tell when kids had been doing it at home'. Others had noticed the impact of children feeling that they were more respected as they got more parental attention.

In terms of parents, there were reports of barriers being broken down, and parents being more willing to approach the school, more relaxed when in school and more willing to talk about problems. Interestingly some schools also noted that parents were less isolated and more were informally getting mutual support from each other. Parents reported understanding and becoming more involved in their child's learning. As one said:

It made me realise...that kids are learning, not just playing.

Some parents were also accessing wider opportunities such as parenting courses and adult education classes.

School staff described enthusiastically how positive it was to have 'a really good relationship with them' (parents) and how they felt they were working with parents:

It seems at last the two polar opposites are supporting each other and working together as a team to educate their child.

(Teacher)

There were also reports of a range of other benefits such as increased attendance at parents' evenings, parents becoming volunteers or governors, and an increase in the number of pupils entering the nursery.

Changing culture

The issue of how far an intervention such as the Transition Project can change school culture is a complex one. Many of the schools where the Project had significant impact reported that they were already committed to parental involvement although how far this commitment was translated into systematic practice was variable. As the head of a Roman Catholic school explained, parental involvement was:

almost innate because we're a Catholic school, many parents have been to school here, [it's] very much their school, [they] raised money in 1950s for the school [so there's a] great ownership thing.

(Head teacher)

The head of one of the most enthusiastic schools summarised the extent of the Project's impact in this way:

Now the Transition Project has refreshed us across the couple of years we've been directly involved in it. I cannot say it's brought anything new. But ...you wouldn't expect in a well established school, with a well established staff that a Project like that would bring anything new. And that's not why we wanted to be involved in it. What we wanted to do was refresh our perspectives, use the Transition Project as a vehicle with some of our parents in an innovative and creative way... a space to try something... and new things do come out of it. And you find out what works with your new generation of parents, sometimes you can't do with your new generation what worked before.

(Head teacher)

By the same token, where the Project failed to make as much impact as might have been hoped, deeply ingrained features of the school culture seemed to be implicated. For instance, in one school, which only undertook one year of the Project, the Project had gone into abeyance as the school went through turbulent times, with the loss of key staff, disruption due to rebuilding, and a new head

teacher engaging in major reorientations of policy and practice. Here, there was the sense that some staff felt threatened by parents. Home visits were viewed with suspicion, and the previous ‘open door’ policy of the school had been reversed as staff felt unsafe. In the face of these difficulties and ingrained attitudes such as these, the Project was unable to make a major change in school culture.

However, we did find evidence that, under more favourable circumstances, the Project could start a process of cumulative change in culture. So, staff working with young children began to become more comfortable with parental involvement, and these attitudes slowly began to percolate to staff working with older children. Moreover, as we saw in the previous section, the Project tends to act by stimulating staff to act on ideas they already have rather than by bringing about fundamental transformations in their thinking. As these actions produce positive outcomes, so the incentive to continue and extend them increases. Moreover, as the staff expectations change, so do those of parents, and they begin to expect all teachers to involve them in the way they have been accustomed to with early years staff. As one head put it:

We can’t go back now, parents are expecting it.

Embedding practices

The issue of cultural change is closely related to that of how far practices developed in the Project can become embedded. We have good evidence that such embedding is possible. None of the six participating schools we visited had embarked on the Project in the recent past, and three of them had begun the process some four or five years ago. Despite this, all of them were able to identify practices which they had adopted as part of the Project and which still existed, or which had been developed into some new form. Even the school where the Project had gone into abeyance could identify some practices which it had retained from its involvement, and staff expressed the intention to revisit parental involvement in the coming school year.

Facilitators

A number of factors seem to have played a part in the embedding process. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, a major factor was the commitment of the head teacher. A teacher in one school, for instance, reported that:

It’s been a [combination] of the head’s energy and new ideas, and the Transition Project that’s started all this new parental involvement.

Not only does the head have to commit the school to participate in the first place, but s/he then has to find ways to extend the new practices beyond the time when they are funded, to devise a staffing structure to support the work, and to find ways of disseminating these practices across the school as a whole.

Head teachers may be helped in this task by the range of other initiatives in which they are involved. In the words of one TA:

You can't isolate the Transition Project.

In some regeneration areas in particular, where there had been a lot of related activity, the Project was described as part of a matrix of initiatives which were all leading the school in a broadly similar direction, but to which it was making a distinctive contribution. Whilst this could create a complex and hard-to-manage situation, it also meant that heads could use the funds and resources from initiatives interchangeably. For instance, in one school, the Project funding itself was used to revive a programme of home visits which the school had initiated previously, and then funds from Sure Start were used to continue the work of the teaching assistant doing outreach/parenting support work when Project funding ran out. Here, the Project was seen as part of a wider strategy for working with families and developing multi-agency child and family support.

The Project requires schools to identify a member of staff to undertake parental involvement work in a more intensive manner than is usual in schools. The Bastiani review emphasised the importance of having someone with an appropriate personality, developing skills, and the time and energy to make contact with disengaged families and to connect up with other groups and agencies working with those families. Amongst other things, early positive contact with parents was likely to facilitate the early identification of children's difficulties. To this, we can add that structures and systems to promote interaction between staff seemed to be important if the new practices were to be disseminated across the school. The fact that two staff members from each school were trained enabled them to offer support to one another during the embedding process. Similarly, the coaching support from Project workers made it less likely that initial enthusiasm would be lost as obstacles were encountered. Reports back from training events, or staff meetings where practice could be shared facilitated dissemination, and staff also found the opportunity to train or network with other schools very useful. Such networking was, in the words of one teacher:

...very important...an opportunity to share good practice...very motivating.

Sometimes, the early stages of the Transition Project were seen as a trial period, in which new practices and resources could be developed so that they could then be disseminated across the school. It seemed to help that there was a designated member of staff who was responsible for co-ordinating parental involvement work, though schools took different views as to whether this should be a TA, a teacher, or even the head teacher. However, it was important that practices were formalised so that they were not dependent on the presence of this person. Significantly, in the one school where the Project was not sustained, the co-ordinator had left the school and was not replaced. At the same time, we were told, there were few mechanisms within the school that allowed staff to share practice.

Inhibitors

Some of the factors that inhibited the embedding of the Project's practices were relatively minor – though by no means trivial. In particular, different schools could undertake similar activities with very different results. Where things went badly, this seemed to be because they had not thought the activities through properly and had miscalculated the response of parents.

In general terms, however, inhibiting factors were the obverse of facilitating factors. So, as we have seen, a lack of head teacher commitment, or a change of head or of key staff could derail the process, as could a dearth of dissemination mechanisms. Likewise, some of the parental involvement activities were seen as time and resource intensive, particularly home visiting or the additional parenting support role. Although some schools found creative ways to sustain these practices as funding came to an end, others felt unable to do so, particularly when supply cover was no longer available. In this context, schools might also find the plethora of initiatives in which they were involved a distraction. In particular, they might find it difficult to reconcile the time and energy needed for parental involvement work with the more immediately pressing demands of teaching, learning and the standards agenda. There were also sometimes issues when key staff left and ideally an ongoing programme of top-up training would help to sustain or revitalise the work in some schools. Likewise, although the Project notionally presented an opportunity for enhanced multi-agency work, schools might not have the good links with other agencies to make this a reality. Some schools found it time consuming and difficult to build links with other agencies, including the new children's centres, with which communication was sometimes limited. It did seem that the Project was helping to build these relationships, but the process appears to be one which requires encouragement and time.

Interestingly, a number of respondents reported that the main problem they faced was:

...the baggage that the parents have themselves. It's their own problems. It can be a really huge issue.

(Head teacher)

In some cases, this view seemed to be related to a more general mistrust of parents, and led to the view that involvement should be restricted to 'those who want it', and that children should be schooled, to some extent, independently of their families. In such schools, there was a danger that parental involvement, rather than being the norm across the school, came to be seen as the preserve of a small number of staff who were willing to invest their time and energy in its development, and/or of a minority of parents who were willing to engage with the school. However, we also heard similar views about 'problematic' parents in schools where there was a high level of commitment to parental involvement. The difference was that such schools were prepared to work with all parents, and understood that this work could not start from the assumption of willing co-operation, at least in the first instance. In these cases, schools had to be prepared constantly to modify their approaches to find ones that worked. Parental involvement was the result of hard, resource-intensive work on the part of the school, rather than the straightforward outcome of parents' interest in their children's education. As the head of one school put it:

The bottom line is, it's not a flowing partnership, and we have to put a lot of work in.

Some implications

In many ways, the findings of this first phase of the Transition Project evaluation fall in line with many other evaluations of educational initiatives. As is already well known, such initiatives create opportunities that can be seized by schools and their staff and put to productive use. However, these initiatives tend to be mediated by the culture of the school and by the circumstances in which the school finds itself. The head teacher in particular is a key factor in the creation of that culture and in managing those circumstances, so that initiatives which do not enjoy her/his wholehearted and effective support are likely to make little progress.

However, the findings to date also raise some important issues for policy at school, local and national level, and it is to these that we now turn:

The nature and extent of parental involvement

It is sometimes tempting to think that relations between parents and professionals in primary schools – especially, in the early years – are universally close and productive. Our evidence suggests a more complex picture. Certainly, it reveals a high level of commitment to parental involvement in some schools, and a willingness to commit time and resource to making that commitment productive. However, it suggests that there are other schools where there is no such commitment, or, perhaps more accurately, that the commitment is not sufficiently powerful to overcome any obstacles that are placed in its way. As a TA in one of the Project schools put it:

Compared to a lot of schools, we're very good at parental relationships. A lot of schools don't let parents past the door.

Moreover, our evidence suggests that in many communities – particularly in areas of deprivation where this study focused – there are barriers to parents engaging with schools that need to be actively overcome. Parents may have had negative experiences of schools and be unconfident, anxious, distrustful, and even aggressive. Teachers may also be uncertain about relating to parents and reluctant to engage more closely with them. This may be because they see themselves as overwhelmed by other imperatives, or because they see local parents as threatening. It also seems to be, in many cases, because they lack the confidence to further this engagement. This is particularly important given that many current policy initiatives – notably extended schools – rely on good

relationships between schools and parents to be successful. If disaffected parents are to access parenting support or begin to engage with their child's learning to break cycles of illiteracy the relationship with staff at the school is critical.

The implication is that any strategy for developing parental involvement further at school, local or national level cannot rest on the assumption that all staff in all schools feel totally comfortable with the parental involvement agenda. We should add to this that some schools seem to face genuine difficulties engaging with at least some parents, and that all schools in this Project felt the need to develop its approaches to meet their particular circumstances. The implication is that any local or national initiatives to enhance parental involvement will need to take into account the existing relationships, barriers, and communication needed which will affect how different schools are likely to approach such initiatives.

Imperatives and invitations

This leads to the question of what sort of initiatives are most likely to lead to enhanced parental involvement activities in schools. In this respect, it is useful to contrast a current national initiative with the approach of the Transition Project reported here. The 1998 School Standards and Framework Act introduced a requirement for schools to develop a home-school agreement (HSA) explaining their aims, values and responsibilities, and setting out in turn their expectations of pupils and parents. The latter are then invited to sign the agreement.

In principle, such agreements arise out of meaningful discussions between parents and schools, and form the basis for a productive partnership between them (DfES, no date). We therefore asked schools participating in the Transition Project how they used and viewed HSAs. The responses from heads were overwhelmingly negative:

Just a piece of paper.

Not worth the paper they're printed on.

In theory great, but how many schools actually use them? Not so many.

We've never looked at them.

The reasons behind these responses were interesting, however. Heads tended to argue that the more meaningful forms of engagement with parents were lost when they were reduced to a paper exercise that might in itself be off-putting to parents already mistrustful of the school. Although they

understood the ‘theory’ of working through the contract with parents, they did not feel that it matched the realities of their situations and the priorities they had to pursue. As one head put it:

Policy here is about strategies and procedures, i.e. practice – not bits of paper. [We have] no recourse to use them, ever.

What this seems to point to is the difficulty of systematising the complex processes of parental involvement through central directive, however desirable it may seem to ensure that all schools institute the same basic practices. Inevitably, schools will interpret (and even ignore) these directives in the light of their own circumstances and assumptions. The same, of course, is true of the Transition Project. However, as we have seen, the Project works less by directive and standardisation than by inviting schools to develop their practice and giving them the resources and guidance they need to do this. The price to be paid is that schools will inevitably move at different paces and, to some extent, in different directions. It is also more costly to provide support to schools than simply to offer directives.

The implication is that there are decisions to be made by local and national policy makers about how best to promote development in schools around these complex issues. The evidence from this evaluation to date is that there is much to be gained by releasing the energies and ideas that are latent in schools and their staff. However it is also possible to see how home-school agreements could be linked to an initiative such as the Transition Project. The kind of strategies promoted by the Project, which enable strong relationships to be built between parents and schools, could benefit from an agreement which summarised what could be expected on both sides. Similarly some of the criticisms voiced about home – school agreements that they are ‘not worth the paper they are written on’ or that they are just ‘a piece of paper’ could be put aside if agreements were discussed in the context of building a relationship, either on a one to one basis at an initial interview/home visit or possibly in a group situation at an initial meeting with parents. If home-school agreements are to be promoted this needs to be done in a context where there are opportunities for the development of trust and dialogue between schools and parents - something the Transition Project has helped school staff and parents to experience.

Training for school staff

Evidence from the Project has suggested that training and coaching can have considerable impact on the practice of individual staff. Developing the capacity of school staff could take a number of forms and clearly links to the Occupational Standards on working with parents and to the agenda for workplace reform including the common core offer. Together, these outline some of the skills and attitudes needed in relation to parents and stress the need for training in this area.

Input in relation to initial teacher training (ITT)

Currently there is no formal requirement for ITT provision to deal explicitly with parental involvement and many staff reported that they had had little or no input on working with parents within their ITT. There are, of course, good reasons why any new teacher should be aware at least of the major issues in the field and the frameworks of legislation and guidance within which s/he will practice. However, the teacher training curriculum is already crowded, and it seems likely that provision would in practice need to be delivered by the schools in which trainees spend much of their time. This is hardly likely to be effective unless those schools themselves are committed to and effective in their parental involvement work. Some of our respondents told us that, as a matter of fact, new entrants to the profession tended to be more open to parental involvement than did their more experienced colleagues, who had become enculturated, in some cases, into somewhat defensive practices. However, so long as parental involvement does not figure prominently in ITT, this must be a matter of chance. It may be, therefore, that introducing some ITT standards in relation to work with parents is desirable, and although not enough in itself would contribute to changing practice in schools. NQT training at a point when new teachers were having to tackle contact with parents at events such as parents' meetings would also be a key and timely opportunity to develop skills and confidence.

Input in relation to Continuing Professional Development

There is evidence from this Project that giving existing school staff – both teachers and teaching assistants – a specific programme of training and coaching, with regular feedback and support to enable implementation, can have significant impacts. In particular, it can be effective in changing attitudes, building confidence, and bringing about sustained changes in practice. It is important to note that the training provided by the Project is very much school-focused. Although it does not simply accept the norms of current school practice, it is delivered close to the school, involves interactions with colleagues from neighbouring schools, and includes an element of coaching and support in the school. It would seem, therefore, to be very much in line with current thinking from the TDA about the

entitlement of staff to school focused professional development (see, for instance (Agency, 2005). Interestingly, a recent newsletter reports that Tower Hamlets has identified the need to develop the capacity in schools to deliver family learning through a programme of training for school staff and are building a large programme through Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (*Parents Matter*, 4, November 2006, available online at: <http://www.lgfl.net/lgfl/leas/tower-hamlets/accounts/TH%20Grid/parentsmatter/web/Parents%20Matter%204.pdf>). This type of work could be developed by other local authorities building on lessons learnt from the Transition Project and other models.

The role of, and training for, teaching assistants

Teaching assistants involved in the Project often played a crucial role in developing parental involvement work, and were well placed to build relationships and offer support to parents – often seeing them on a daily basis. They tended to have more flexibility with their time than teachers and often were part of the community served by the school. They could, therefore, be an important bridge particularly with parents who might feel intimidated by teachers. Teaching assistants often took on considerable responsibility within the Project. They might organise and facilitate class meetings, workshops, and coffee mornings, encourage parents to undertake activities with their children, offer support to parents, and signpost them to a wide range of further help. There were also a number of examples where the Project enabled teaching assistants to go on from the initial training to develop a specialism in working with parents and other agencies, and where this role continued to be funded by the school. This brokering role has implications for multi-agency working at local level.

This role however is not reflected in recent national guidelines. Working sensitively and effectively with parents and carers is one of the standards for the higher level teaching assistant (LGNT0, 2001), but the standard suggests a fairly limited role, focused primarily on communicating with individual parents. The revised standards for teaching assistants currently in draft form (available on line at: http://www.tda.gov.uk/support/support_consultations/ta_consultation/draft_unit_and_element_titles.aspx) also have fairly limited references to the role of teaching assistants in working with parents. Likewise, the TDA's skills strategy for the wider school workforce (TDA, 2006) describes the need to develop the core and specialist skills needed in schools of the future through support staff. A range of potential specialisms for teaching assistants are mentioned but not the potential role for support staff in developing work with parents. This would seem to be an important omission. Likewise, none of these documents outlines any possible role for teaching assistants in supporting or signposting parents to further help or in enabling closer links with local agencies.

However the Project also raises issues about the need for teaching assistants to be properly trained – to understand about the need for clear boundaries, respect, and confidentiality, and to appreciate the limits of their role and to know how to signpost parents to specialist help and other agencies. The parenting support workers received training and regular group supervision with the opportunity to discuss their work with others, though questions remain about ongoing support and supervision. Developing the capacity of teaching assistants to work in this way links clearly with the requirement of the common core of skills and knowledge for the children’s workforce (available online at: <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/files/37183E5C09CCE460A81C781CC70863F0.pdf>), and this has also raised issues about the remuneration of teaching assistants as they take on more responsibility. Likewise, there may be something to learn from the Transition Project in terms of the training of Parent Support Advisors, currently being piloted by some local authorities.

Support for school improvement

Although the training of teachers and TAs is important, a key question is how far the focus of any development effort should be on individual professionals, or on the institutional context. In other words, is the enhancement of parental involvement a matter for professional development or school improvement?

The evidence from the Transition Project on this question is mixed. There is clearly work to do in terms of changing the attitudes of individual members of school staff and enhancing their skills and confidence. However, it is also clear that they are practised in an institutional context that can constrain or enhance what can be done. As we saw, the Project might falter where that context was not supportive – in a culture, say, where parents were mistrusted, or there was no strong leadership from the head teacher, or where staff had no means of sharing their practice. On the basis of this evidence, it seems that it would be a mistake to ignore the school improvement dimension and to concentrate only on professional development.

Likewise, the embedding of individual professional development within a school-focused approach is clearly important, as are the strategies which allow individuals to support one another and to disseminate their knowledge to their colleagues. In the Transition Project, as we have seen, these strategies took the form of joint training, coaching and support for implementation, staff meetings for dissemination, and the networking of schools within areas. Similarly, we have seen how the role of the

head teacher is crucial in embedding parental involvement work in school policy and culture. Again, some strengthening of the national standards in this respect may be productive, particularly as the implications of Every Child Matters and the extended schools agenda become more apparent.

There may also be something to be done in terms of the Ofsted inspection process. The new form of that process no longer requires a parents' meeting and the parents' questionnaire does not ask parents about their experience of involvement and communication with the school. Although schools need to show they have consulted with and acted on parents' views, it is not clear what prevents schools simply paying lip service to this requirement. Likewise, although involvement of parents in their child's learning is mentioned in the Inspection Framework, there is no clear requirement for the kind of systematic involvement, communication and reaching out to parents that the Transition Project seeks to establish in schools, and no overall judgement is given about communication with and involvement of parents. There is often very little mention of the quality of the work schools do with parents in the Ofsted report. Schools have many other pressing concerns and to expect them to prioritise parental involvement when it is not consistently or practically prioritised throughout national directives may be unrealistic.

Role of the local authority

It is perhaps significant that the Transition Project was organised within a local authority (LA) context and drew heavily on the relationships built up by its host LA to secure the involvement of schools and facilitate networking between them. Local authorities – themselves elected by parents, amongst others, of course – are well placed to help to challenge and support schools in relation to their involvement with parents. They could help model and ensure good consultation with parents, provide training for school staff, and enable networks of schools at a district level to share and develop good practice. In particular, they can provide on-going support and top-up training to enable the work of projects such as the Transition Project to be sustained. As the Education and Inspections Act 2006 and its associated documentation suggests, they already have a role as 'champion of parents'.

This work could also be linked into the broader multi-agency parenting strategy, as it is in Manchester. There, level 1 of the strategy includes the development of better universal work including the need for good consultation, communication, recognition of parents' skills and developing parents' involvement in their children's learning and development. Developing good relationships builds a culture where

problems can be prevented and where parents can ask for help and better access parenting courses and further support if needed.

Implications for other initiatives

The parenting strategy is, in fact just one of a number of local and national initiatives with which the Transition Project is linked, and for which, therefore, it has implications. For instance, the effective development of key elements in the extended schools agenda relies on there being strong relationships between parents and schools. In Manchester, work facilitated by the Transition Project and the district work has been identified as contributing to the delivery of family learning and parenting support as part of the recent extended schools audit – this includes stay and play sessions, literacy and numeracy workshops, parenting workshops, home visits, additional support by the teaching assistant, family learning weeks and other strategies promoted by the Project. In delivering the extended schools agenda elsewhere, the model of training school staff and embedding at least some opportunities into school practice could complement and enhance courses offered through adult education or other external providers

The work of the Project also links to the pilot work currently being undertaken on transition information sessions. Much of this pilot work involves LA personnel running these sessions, whereas lessons from the Transition Project point to the importance of enabling teachers and teaching assistants to be involved as part of a thorough transition process. There is clearly potential for school staff – if appropriately trained - to help signpost parents to further support and help them access national and local information and crucially they can provide on-going support rather than simply a one-off session.

Similarly, in Manchester, where the large majority of children of 3 year olds are in school nurseries, the Project plays an important role in enabling the Surestart targets to be met – this includes access to parenting support, increased understanding of children’s learning and development, specific support for families in need, greater involvement of fathers and links with schools. Working through schools also enables parents to be reached more easily. Lessons from the Project on the potential of training staff to better engage parents could also be applied to staff in children’s centres who have expressed interest in some of the training and resources being offered to schools.

The way forward?

It seems unlikely that, in this complex field, there is a single strategy that is likely to be effective in developing good parental involvement practices in all schools. No doubt some judicious mixture of strategies will be called for. Nonetheless, it is possible to say that the Transition Project demonstrates that a good deal might be achieved at relatively low cost and through fairly simple measures.

A useful and defensible starting assumption is that many staff members in many schools accept the importance of parental involvement and are keen to develop their practice. What they need is something that will create a 'space' in which that development can take place. This might mean a small amount of time, some training and support and some starter resources. It might also mean some encouragement to build their confidence in exploring new approaches. It seems that this is best done in the context of an overall school development, though this development may well be staged, and there is in any case much to learn from practice in other schools.

It seems likely that, with a fair wind, the practices developed in this way can become sustainable in the longer term. The 'fair wind' is not easy to guarantee, but central and, to some extent, local government might be able to help by maintaining a consistent profile for parental involvement work and by demonstrating its links with other policies and initiatives. Beyond this, practice has to be allowed and enabled to develop in response to local circumstances – though again there is a role for central and local government in giving a consistent message (for instance, through Ofsted frameworks and local parental involvement policies) about minimum standards in this field, and in helping to disseminate examples of instructive practice.

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