
Developing Relationships between Parents and Schools

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ABSTRACT It is well documented that parental involvement in their children's education is a key factor in improving outcomes for young people, and yet many schools struggle to engage parents. This article discusses the rationale for working in partnership with parents and makes the case for building parental participation in school life so that parents are able to contribute to the dialogue about the purposes of education and can be involved in school decision making. Examples from both primary and secondary sectors show how developing such a partnership can transform home-school relationships and create a shared sense of purpose.

Why Involve Parents?

There is growing recognition of the vitally important role that parents play in their children's education. Young people spend only around 15 per cent of their time at school and so the support they receive at home and the way in which parents and schools communicate with each other are crucial to their development and success. A report from the University of Warwick (Harris & Goodall, 2007) commissioned by the government found that parental engagement in their children's learning is the most significant factor in raising student achievement. Ofsted, too, acknowledges the importance of parental involvement and judges schools on how they listen and respond to parents in its appraisal of leadership and management.

There is a considerable body of research in this field going back several decades, indicating that when parents are involved in their children's education, children do better on a range of measures (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003). Their all-round attainment is higher; behaviour is better; they have higher self-esteem and improved self-confidence (Feinstein and Symons, 1999); they have more positive attitudes; there is a lower risk of exclusion from school; and they are more successful in tests and exams. This is true regardless of social

background. Children with interested and involved parents do better than their peers whatever their starting point, although it is of course well documented that parental engagement increases with social status, income and level of education.

To be able to give support, parents need to know what their child is learning, what he or she needs to do to progress and how they can help. For schools to achieve the best outcomes for each child, they need to know them as individuals, have an understanding of their home lives, and be able to collaborate with their parents. As Professor Ted Sizer (1997) said, 'I cannot teach a child who I do not know well.' Knowing a child entails knowing their context, their background, their family. It involves building relationships with their parents so that there can be meaningful dialogue about the child; not just five minutes snatched at a busy parent-teacher consultation evening, but a real conversation.

However, many schools, both primary and secondary, struggle to develop such relationships. Teachers often say that they feel ill-equipped to develop a closer partnership with parents as this is not an area covered in teacher education courses, and in any case, they do not have the time. There are certainly training implications for schools. On the other hand, there are numerous barriers which prevent parents from becoming more involved. For them time is also an issue, as well as competing demands, language skills, negative experience of their own education, to name a few. There is work to do to ensure that parents know how important their involvement is. One cluster of primary schools in Sandwell has developed an induction programme for all parents when their child starts school with a view to establishing the home/school partnership from the outset, clarifying roles and setting out the school's expectation of parental involvement.

Most research in this area relates to parental involvement in their child's learning and support for the individual child at home. The focus in schools is thus about encouraging and equipping parents to support the school's – and by extension, the government's – agenda in getting children through national tests and exams. Little research has been carried out into the broader issue of parental participation in school life and yet this is a crucial element of the home/school relationship. When parents are treated as partners and are involved in school decision making they share responsibility for the direction of the school and for their children's education in a wider sense. Such participation changes the relationship between home and school from one where the school and the teaching professionals are the experts and the parents have a lesser role to a partnership whereby parents and teachers collaborate in the best interests of the children.

Given the level of concern about the government's education policy agenda expressed in recent months by education academics and by teaching professionals, what is surely needed is more of a dialogue about the broader purposes of education. And parents should be part of this dialogue.

Dennis Shirley (1997), in his work on school reform, drew a distinction between parental involvement and parental engagement as follows:

Parental *involvement* – as practised in most schools and reflected in the research literature – avoids issues of power and assigns parents a passive role in the maintenance of school culture. Parental *engagement* designates parents as citizens in the fullest sense – change agents who can transform urban schools and neighbourhoods.

In this model of parental engagement, parents are thus assigned a much more extensive role in the life of the school than is currently the norm.

Some Examples of Partnership Working

Some schools are taking steps to enhance the role of parents and involve them in a broader dialogue – such as the three schools given below.

1. RSA Academy, West Midlands – Parent Council

The RSA Academy opened in 2008 in Tipton in the West Midlands, which is an area of high deprivation. Implicit in its mission to transform learning and transform lives has been the recognition of the need to raise aspirations in the wider community as well as in their students. Consequently, the work that the academy does to involve parents is given a high priority. A Parent Council was set up at the outset to give parents a voice in academy policy and decision making. The purpose of this body is to consult parents on issues that affect them and ensure that their views are taken account of by senior leaders, staff and governors. The Parent Council has approximately 15 members representing all year groups and meets on a termly basis. It contributes to decisions on a wide range of issues such as behaviour policy, reports, healthy eating, sex and relationships education, the PSHCE (Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education) curriculum, safety and much more. In fact, anything that parents wish to discuss can be put on the agenda. The Parent Council has reviewed all academy policies which have direct relevance to parents. If there is a specific issue on which the council wants to consult the wider parent body it organises a Parent Forum meeting to which all parents are invited.

The academy's commitment to working in partnership work with parents underpins many aspects of its work. For instance, a wide range of events is hosted for parents to help them to support their children's learning. Staff work closely with parents in instances where their child is involved in negative behaviour. And dedicated staff have been appointed to reach out to those parents who find it difficult to engage with the academy. Feedback from academy parents shows that they value the effort that the academy puts into working in partnership with them. Furthermore, senior leaders and governors at the academy are convinced that this is time well spent and is a significant factor in raising student attainment.

2. Dartington Primary School, Devon – Parent Class Meetings and Parent Representatives

Ten years ago the headteacher at Dartington Primary school in Devon wanted to re-invigorate the school and decided to revisit the school's mission statement. She invited a group of parents, governors and staff to work with her over a period of time to reflect on the school's aims and what they wanted for their children. This collaborative endeavour was felt to be extremely valuable in creating a shared vision and identifying a way forward for the school. Out of this process a Parent Council was born and this body has played a significant and ongoing role in contributing to school decision making. Each year Parent Representatives are randomly selected for each class and these representatives act as a go-between for communications between the class teacher and parents. Parent Class Meetings involving the teacher and all parents in each class take place termly. Any issues relating to the particular class can be raised and discussed. These meetings ensure that parents are well informed about what the class is working on and give ample opportunities for discussion and relationship building. Any whole-school issues raised at these meetings are referred on to the Parent Council. This structure enables a productive ongoing dialogue between staff and parents which has transformed the home/school relationship.

3. Burlington Junior School, Surrey – Change Teams

The Change Team at Burlington Junior School exists to discuss a wide range of issues to help move the school forward, taking account of the views of different stakeholders. The team currently consists of an experienced teacher, a newly qualified teacher (NQT), a teaching assistant, a member of the administrative staff, a governor and a small number of parents, including one who is a member of the PTA (Parent-Teacher Association). The agenda is wide ranging and covers practical issues as well as providing an opportunity for reflection and discussion about new and imaginative ways forward. Recent topics have included:

- How are we doing with home learning?
- What can we do to improve communication?
- Does our multicultural curriculum reflect our children's culture?

Shifting the Culture

What these schools all have in common is a desire to involve parents in ongoing dialogue about school developments. They, and others doing similar work, have reported a change in the school culture, with parents feeling able to make a valuable contribution. Their participation has transformed the relationships between parents and teachers and has led to a greater and shared understanding of what the school is working to achieve.

Surely this is as it should be. In a democracy, those in receipt of public services and who pay for those services through their taxes should be able to help shape those services – and this includes schools. Student councils and other student voice initiatives are an increasingly common feature of schools in giving young people a say in school life. By involving parents also in decisions about the direction of the school and in school policy making they too develop a sense of belonging and commitment. They are more likely to feel part of the school and able to contribute.

It is important that parents are involved in discussion because they know their own children and what they feel about school, what they like and dislike; they have an insight into what is relevant and what is irrelevant to them. They also know what the local employment situation is; what skills they would like their children to develop and what aspirations they have for their children. It is important that they have the opportunity to express these views. It is also the case that when children witness their parents being involved, this can have a positive impact on their attitude towards school. It can increase their own sense of ownership and their understanding of the value of their education.

Such partnership working also helps the school to nurture the connection to the community of which they are a part. Schools are often a focal point in their communities and they have the potential to play a significant role in community regeneration. The relationships they have with the parents of their students provide a valuable opportunity for dialogue which can help to identify and address local needs.

Conclusion

So while the focus of parental involvement hitherto has been on supporting their child's learning, there is a strong case for establishing wider participation in the life of the school so that parents can contribute to the dialogue about the purposes of education and so that schools can become more integral to their communities. By breaking down the barriers between home and school, by developing a shared sense of purpose, by developing the school as a resource for the community and the community as a resource for the school, everyone can work together towards a common vision of achieving the best outcomes for all children.

Such a development signifies a cultural shift and will take time to embed. For many decades children's education in this country has been seen largely as the responsibility of schools. Yet those countries which are most successful at educating their children – in particular the Scandinavian countries – are those where parental participation is enshrined throughout the years of schooling. From the outset parents share responsibility for their child's learning and are partners with the school.

In his conference address to headteachers last year, Russell Hobby, General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, summed up the potential benefits for schools from working more closely with parents:

School leaders need to win over parents in order to wrest back control of the education system from a government that fears the voter more than it fears the strike. If we used our trust and credibility, and started listening to parents about what they want and talking to them about what we can do, we could make a formidable team.

There is surely nothing to lose by developing this work and everything to gain.

References

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