
Levelling the Education Playing Field: involving parents to make the difference

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ABSTRACT Following the nationwide lockdown, one thing is clear: the progress that children have made in terms of their learning varies hugely, further entrenching the educational inequity that exists and which fuels the lifelong social and economic divide. Drawing on research indicating that parental involvement in their child's learning makes a difference of two to three years to that child's progress, Fiona Carnie asks whether schools in the United Kingdom, and particularly in England, could do more to build a genuine partnership with parents. Citing examples from elsewhere, she argues that it is time to take parent participation in education seriously if we are to have any chance of levelling the playing field.

The Equity Gap

As schools have emerged from the nationwide lockdown, one thing is clear: children from families that prioritise education have pulled even further ahead of their peers in terms of their learning and all-round progress. Furthermore, those children whose parents have time, space, resources, connections, skills, gardens, good computers and Internet and enough food have made significantly greater strides in their learning by comparison with children from households where many of these things are in short supply. Whether families are cooking together, reading together, talking about the news, exercising, playing games, gardening, or working through programmes and resources provided by the school, the government or the BBC, such shared experiences and the opportunities they provide for communication aid children's development.

Research carried out on parental engagement in education (Hattie, 2008) indicates that when parents are involved in their child's learning, it can make a difference of two to three years in that child's attainment. It is hardly surprising therefore that those children who have been well supported by their parents throughout the lockdown, whatever their background, have made good

progress over this period. Nobody knows a child better than their parents; no one has their interests closer to heart; no one is better able to respond to them as an individual. But many parents, for a wide variety of reasons, have struggled to support their children through this crisis, and so the attainment gap has widened.

The Role of Parents in Their Children's Education

A contributory factor in this is that educationalists and policymakers across the United Kingdom have historically failed, for the most part, to make the case about the vital role that parents play in their children's education and development. Too many parents still believe that it is the role of schools alone to educate their children. Prior to the pandemic, many dropped their children off at school in the morning, collected them at the end of the day, and considered that to be their contribution to the education process. And whilst a growing number of schools have tried over the years to engage parents in a variety of ways – through events, meetings, newsletters, apps, school websites and so on – the message has too often not got through. Whether parents are not reading to their children, not showing up at events, not returning necessary forms, not coming to parent-teacher consultations, not answering the phone when the school's number comes up, or perhaps taking their children out of school apparently without good reason – teachers often have a catalogue of complaints about families.

Searching questions need to be asked about why that might be. For starters, it is arguable that the chasm between the culture of school and the culture in many homes – in particular, those of children from working-class backgrounds – is immense. The rules, the language, the structures and the school systems are alien to many families, and children can find it hard to bridge that gap on the way in and out every day. It is especially challenging for those children who come from chaotic backgrounds marked by poverty, abuse, addiction, hunger or mental health issues. This is very different from the situation in the private sector where shared values and cultural norms already exist between home and school, making it much easier for children to navigate between the two. In other families, the long working hours and efforts to hold down more than one job in order to keep afloat financially leave many parents exhausted and with little time or energy to give to their children, over four million of whom are now growing up in poverty. It is undoubtedly the case that the arid and overly academic curriculum does not speak to many of these children's lives and interests. It is hardly surprising, then, that the high-stakes accountability framework, linked so rigidly to England's national curriculum, ensures that many fail. The SATs tests segregate children into winners and losers from an early age, and apply a label from which many never escape.

Large numbers of parents were themselves failed by the system, hated school and left with few or no qualifications, and as a consequence do not value education. This message is readily picked up by their children, too many of

whom disengage, underachieve or fail, despite the best efforts of their teachers. It is not that such families do not want the best for their children; it is just that they do not necessarily see school – or education – as part of the equation. Many families have thus not felt able, equipped or motivated to support their children’s learning through the lockdown.

It does not help that, in England’s market-driven education system, parents are seen as consumers of a service rather than partners in a common social endeavour. School sets the agenda and the rules for engagement, and families are required to fit in. In other words, the role of parents is to help schools deliver on their government-prescribed mission rather than co-construct the agenda together. Compare this with Scandinavian countries, for example, where there is an expectation from the outset that parents will work with their child’s school in partnership, to support their child’s education and development, in order to get the best for children – and for society. The discourse here is very different.

A further issue that colours the national picture is teacher education, which, over the years, has been pared back extensively in England, with teachers trained primarily to deliver lessons and administer tests, but with little professional autonomy to respond to the needs of the children in their care. In most cases, teacher education amounts to a one-year postgraduate qualification, which is scant preparation for such a complex job by comparison with the five-year Master’s-level degree that is a requirement for all teachers in Finland. Nowhere in this training programme is there provision for student teachers to learn about how they might work with parents to share responsibility for children’s education. It is little wonder, then, that many shy away from this critical work once they are on the front line, feeling wholly unprepared to carry it out. Furthermore, increasing class sizes and worsening staff–student ratios mean that teachers have inadequate time to get to know families individually.

Nothing short of a culture change is required: a genuine expectation and willingness for parents and schools to work together and build an educational experience that meets the diverse needs of children.

The Lockdown

During the lockdown, many schools provided families with timetables, resources and learning tasks to support learning at home, hoping that parents would step into the breach created by the school closures. The indications are that too few provided parents themselves with guidance about how they might best support their children. Whilst schools were doing their best to support children in different ways with online learning, in the end it might actually have been more productive to spend at least some of the time supporting and guiding parents who were struggling with this new role. This has been a wasted opportunity. The *TES* reported that children in many disadvantaged families did as little as one hour of learning each day during the lockdown (*TES Reporter*, 2020). A report from the Sutton Trust (2020) indicated that only 42% of

parents felt confident teaching their children at home. That left 58% who did not.

The intention was that children who were in any way at risk were being catered for by schools. Staying open for the children of front-line workers, school places were available for vulnerable children. The reality was that many of these children were just not turning up. Arguably, many of the children who most needed to be in school were absent.

In hindsight, it was unrealistic to imagine that parents would know how best to fulfil this new role, and many did not. At the end of the day, parental involvement in and support for children's learning will have been a major factor in determining the extent to which each child progressed during this time.

Going Forward: lessons from elsewhere

The question now is whether the negative impact of lockdown can be mitigated by building stronger home-school partnerships. Is it time for schools to step up their communication with parents on a case-by-case basis, to discuss with them how best home and school can work together to support their child(ren)? Given that even pre-lockdown children only spent 15% of their time at school, effort now put into building a genuine and positive relationship with parents would surely be a sound long-term investment.

One of the reasons why Scandinavian schools do so well for their students across a broad range of outcomes is their commitment to collaboration. Working with parents is a key part of the teacher's role, in which they receive training and support. School timetables in Finland, for example, include time for teachers to contact those parents they feel they need to speak to and to ask them to come into the school if they have concerns. The message is clear: schools cannot educate children on their own.

An inspirational project in the Netherlands encourages and supports schools to work individually with each family at every stage to agree on how they can share responsibility for their children's learning and development. *Parental Involvement 3.0* (de Vries, 2013) takes the notion of parent participation way beyond delivering information to parents and responding to their enquiries and questions. Each school makes time at the beginning of every school year for teachers to meet with each student, along with their parents or carers, to carve out together what the aspirations and goals are for the child, how they will all collaborate to achieve those goals, and how – and how often – they will meet and communicate throughout the school year to make sure that everyone stays on track. In this way, parents receive bespoke advice and support relevant to their own family situation. Where needed, teachers can help parents to access other services.

In addition to these regular individual family meetings, whole-class parent meetings are organised at the start of each year for the teacher to meet with all of the parents of the children in their class (or tutor group) together, to discuss issues that affect the class as a whole and help parents build a mutual-support

network. Parents often buddy each other as well – for example, when someone is new to the area – to ensure that all parents feel included and supported.

This comprehensive approach to parent participation helps teachers gain a fuller understanding of each child and their family background, and helps parents gain trust in the teacher and the school. Such partnership working ensures that schools and families pull in the same direction in support of the child – whether it is over learning, behaviour, bedtimes, screen use, diet or any other of the myriad issues that arise in bringing up children. Discussions about child development and well-being, either individually or as a group, help parents feel supported in this challenging role. The schools participating in this programme report improved outcomes across the board for their students.

Scotland Ahead

Closer to home, the Scottish government has invested heavily in promoting home–school partnership. Back in 2006, legislation was passed whereby school governing boards were replaced with parent councils, giving parents a key role in school decision-making. The thinking behind this radical change was to help ensure that school policies – at primary and secondary levels – took account of the views, needs and realities of families’ lives. Since then, significant resources have been invested in producing materials to support parents as partners in their children’s learning, in encouraging schools to redefine the parent–school relationship, and in funding local authorities and third-sector organisations to help drive and support this change. Education Scotland (2019), the Scottish government agency responsible for quality and improvement in Scottish education, uses an inspection framework based on school self-evaluation, in which parents’ views are a significant factor.

The National Parent Forum of Scotland, which receives funding from the Scottish government, plays a key part. It works in partnership with national and local government and other organisations involved in education and child well-being to ensure that parents have a full and equal role. By working in partnership with the Scottish government and all local education authorities, the organisation provides a parental perspective at both local and national levels with a view to ensuring that all children achieve the best educational outcomes. Its link with parents through parent councils guarantees that the voices of parents are heard in arenas where Scottish educational policy is being designed or discussed, and where decisions are likely to affect parents. Ten years on from this groundbreaking legislation, the National Parent Forum of Scotland (2017) conducted a thoroughgoing review of progress and reported back to the Scottish government on its findings, providing recommendations for further action, many of which are being followed up. It is telling that no such body exists in England, where the government’s record on consulting parents on matters that affect them is patchy, to say the least.

In its drive to improve social equity, the Scottish government is clear about the critical role that parents play in their children’s education, and the

responsibility of schools to promote and support this. It is, of course, painstaking and time-consuming work to recalibrate an education culture. Some Scottish schools have certainly been quicker than others in making the required changes, and some parents – and teachers – have been more resistant than others to this shift. But the tide is turning.

Concluding Comments

There is an opportunity, as schools emerge from the lockdown into a changed educational landscape, to ‘build back better’. The critical role that parents play in their children’s education has been exposed to both better and worse effect, and it is clear that greater attention needs to be paid to parental partnership as an indicator of and contributor to positive outcomes for children. Now is surely the time for schools to build strong home–school alliances, focusing their attention first of all on those parents who struggle to support their children’s learning. Change will not happen overnight. As indicated, it is first and foremost about the culture and ethos of the school – the need to create a sense of real belonging for all and to make the time to build these partnerships.

In the longer term, family-friendly employment practices are vital. It has to become the norm for parents to take on this shared role without fear of being penalised by their employers or ostracised by their colleagues if they are called into school to attend to the educational needs of their children. A change of policy in England, as has occurred in Scotland, to recognise the critical role of parents would help.

But we have to start somewhere, and the place to begin is in schools, which need, first, to become less authoritarian in their management structures with a more distributed approach to leadership that makes space for the views of parents alongside other key parties. Second, schools need to introduce a more open curriculum with more participatory methods in the classroom so that children’s own experiences are listened to and valued. Third, schools need to challenge the attitudes of teachers and provide them with training and support so that they can work genuinely in partnership with parents.

Perhaps a good starting point for this work would be at transition – in Reception for primary students or in Year 7 for secondary. This would renew and rebuild the school culture from the bottom up, factoring in the expectation that parents and teachers will work together. These transition points provide a critical opportunity to get parents on board and keep them there. It would help if all schools had parent councils – linked to their governing boards – to ensure that they listen and respond to the views of their parents (Carnie, 2011).

Whilst there is a mountain to climb in terms of addressing the damage to so many children caused by the pandemic, such partnership work, properly done, can help level the playing field by building schools which truly meet the needs of the children and the communities they serve. At this precarious juncture in our children’s lives, can we afford not to?

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