

# ‘I’m not clever. I listen to her read that’s all I can do’: parents supporting their children’s learning

*Emma Beresford, Sue Botcherby and Olwen McNamara*

## **Introduction**

The role of the parent as co-supporter in the educative process is vital if children are to achieve their potential. Structures are in place nationally to make schools more accountable to the community and to ensure they inform parents of curriculum matters and, to a lesser degree, enlist their support in helping their children to learn; but the gap between practice and rhetoric is wide, particularly in the secondary phase. The Link Project was a collaborative enterprise between the Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester Inspection and Advisory Service ‘partnership with parents’ and 5 Manchester schools (3 secondary and 2 primary). It was an action research and development project which: identified and evaluated communication strategies between home and school; discovered what parents currently knew and believed about their children’s schooling and how they supported their learning; developed, implemented and disseminated curriculum/ training resources to improve knowledge of the curriculum, access to resources and understanding of strategies which help parents support their children’s education. This paper briefly reviews the research process and reports on the findings and development work.

## **Process**

The five schools involved in the project were chosen, from a cohort of volunteers, to cover a range of socio-economic and ethnic populations. Two of the schools were RC Voluntary Aided schools (1 primary, 1 secondary) in a solidly white, working class, socio-economically deprived area of the city. The other 3 schools

were in a slightly more mixed socio-economic community with between 30% and 60% of pupils from ethnic minority families. The project as a whole focused upon families of children in years 1, 6, 7 and 10; chosen to be at the beginning or end of the ‘key stages’ of education where school activity with regard to involving parents in supporting their children, and parental interest in doing so, could reasonably be expected to be important. Interviews were conducted with parents/carers of 65 children, sampled with regard to variables such as social class, ethnicity, ability etc. every attempt being made to ensure the sample was representative of the school population as a whole. In addition, interviews were conducted with pupils and school staff, including Senior Management Teams and Year Heads. The research process included the distribution of a questionnaire to 500 families across the five schools. The questionnaire was designed with a substantive section common to all schools and an additional section specific to each individual school focusing on their particular concerns. Over 250 responses were received and although efforts were made to offer support to parents who might experience difficulty with written English, we nevertheless felt, that responses were skewed to higher socio-economic classes and ethnic minority families were under represented.

A significant feature of the project was the establishment of Parental Action Teams (PATs) of key stakeholders in the educative process: teachers, parents and governors. The PATs were involved in the research design, data collection, mediation of findings, development work and finally the evaluation of those developments.

PATs met both locally, managing the project at school level, and centrally in a consultative group which, in addition to its advisory remit with regard to the research and development processes, provided an arena for the sharing of good practice. There was a continuing cycle whereby the research not only identified existing good practice but also informed the development work, which was in turn evaluated.

## **Findings**

### *(i) Contact*

Primary parents contacted schools on a regular basis: 25% contacted schools once a month and 60% once a term. The ease with which parents were able to speak to teachers varied greatly: in one primary school parents found 23% of teachers always and 71% usually available; in the other school 68% of parents found staff always available. Both primary schools had apparently successfully established relationships with the parents: overall 40% of parents felt they knew the classteacher best, 30% the headteacher and 30% felt they knew both well. Only 2% of parents in one school and 7% in the other felt they knew no one well. The transition from primary to secondary school was felt to be quite 'scary' for parents and children alike. First impressions were important: one secondary school reorganised its introductory meeting into a format based upon small informal groups and parents felt them to be 'informative' and 'friendly': 'we all went it, was like a family thing'.

Secondary parents reported surprisingly few contacts with the school 60% only contacted once a term and 30% never made contact. When they did contact schools 15% of secondary respondents found the teachers always available and 70% found them usually available. Evidence from the interview data with regard to this matter was mixed. Whilst some parents felt 'the school is responsive they always seem to return your calls' over one third of those interviewed said

they had experienced difficulty, sometimes considerable, in contacting schools or individual teachers: 'I left many messages and they never got back'. A couple of parents remarked upon difficulties encountered when problems arose after school or in the holidays: 'I find it frustrating that by the time the children get home you can't contact anybody at the school so you are left frustrated 'till the next day'. One parent suggested a 'voice mail' facility would be useful. How schools dealt with incidents left a lasting impression on parents: 'My estimation went right up. You know there is going to be problems at school but if you know they are going to be dealt with professionally and promptly it makes you feel confident. I was very impressed'.

Questionnaire data regarding the building and sustaining of relationships in the secondary phase was mixed. There were significant differences between schools, perhaps as a result of structural factors, as to who parents felt they knew best. In one secondary school 16% of parents claimed to know the headteacher best whereas in another none did. Numbers claiming to know the classteacher well varied from 16% in one school to 50% in another. Between 20% and 35% of parents, however, still felt they knew no one well. The reasons for this lack of connection were undoubtedly complex. On one level many parents had to rid themselves of much 'emotional baggage' and overcome the various ways in which the school system, and in particular the secondary school system, inadvertently alienated them. Ghosts from the historical past featured large in parent memories: one mother recalled her own experiences as a child at school in the 60's, 'I left school unable to read and write, couldn't wait to get out so I bring these experiences'. For another it was those of her husband: 'My husband is very anti religion - the religion was very pushy at his school.. being humiliated.. didn't want the children to go through that'. Many parents felt intimidated by the academic ethos of the school: 'the whole system and language around the

system is very difficult, they all alienate us'; 'there were computers everywhere and it was dead hi-tech and I was thinking AHHH!' For some there were cultural barriers: one father felt his son's school was a 'forcing house for the middle classes ... hidden curriculum ... preparing kids for company life'; one mother 'speaking as a black working class woman' felt 'the PTA can appear very elitist... particularly at secondary school'. Some parents felt psychologically threatened: 'you need a lot of confidence to contact the school'; 'enormity... annexes and classrooms... new ... scary... too big... don't know anybody... get lost...those feelings stay with you throughout the whole school'. Another mother wanted to assert social boundaries between home and school: 'it's all like the boundary/demarcation .. bringing your social life into school'.

*(ii) Information - Curriculum*

Overall 70 % of parents were satisfied with the quantity of the general information they received about the school and their child, 25% felt they had too little although nobody felt they had too much. Questionnaire data indicated that, on the whole, they found the information 'easy to understand', 'well presented' and 'useful'; but they were a little more unsure that it was 'sent at the right times'. Evidence from the interviews was a little more mixed with regard to the quality and clarity of the written materials. Evidence indicated that overall nearly half the parents believed they got all of the information sent home via their child. In the secondary phase the reliability of the child as 'postman' clearly decreased with age: twice as many year 7 parents felt they got all the information as year 10 parents, 10% of the latter felt they got 'very little'. As one year 10 father complained: 'sometimes it's like getting blood out of a stone, unless you push and push him for the information you don't get it'. Overall girls were felt to be significantly more reliable than boys when it

came to delivering information from school. In the primary phase the picture was varied, 68% of parents in one school and 35% in another felt their children brought home all the information they were given. A number of the parents interviewed felt strongly that important things like SATs results and reports should either be posted home or more effective structures should be in place to ensure the collection of reply slips. Parents' knowledge about the curriculum and assessment processes was generally fairly vague across both primary and secondary phases. Questionnaire evidence indicated that between 37% and 62% of primary and secondary parents felt they had about the right amount of information on both what their child was taught and the exams they took and between 33% and 60% felt they had too little. It thus appeared that information dissemination practices and strategies across schools varied tremendously in their quality and effectiveness. As a consequence overall about 20% of secondary respondents felt they knew 'a lot' about what their child was learning, in the primary phase the variation was from 10% in one school to 50% in another. 23% of secondary respondents felt they knew 'little' or 'nothing'. In the primary schools the corresponding figures were 8% and 32%. Most parents appeared to know what subjects their children were studying but were unclear about the NC levels and grading of the SATs tests: 'I think the NC is jargonistic'; 'I start reading it and I get bored I don't understand half of it really'; 'I heard about the key stages but I don't know what they are I don't know how they are assessing them, I don't know anything about the levels and I would like to know'. A number of parents expressed a desire to know more: 'I'd like it better to understand the NC because I think R is under some pressure from the work at school. From that point of view I'd like to understand a little bit more. I think I'd also like to know how parents could help children appropriately'. One mother also acknowledged the problems: 'if

somebody said to me would you come on a day course about the national curriculum I would say no. So it depends what is being offered really'.

*(iii) Progress*

Parents on the whole felt slightly better informed about their child's progress than about the curriculum. Questionnaire data indicated that between 42% and 56% of secondary parents felt they knew a lot about how well their child was doing; between 14% and 32% felt they knew only a little or nothing. The picture was similar in the primary phase where 30% of parents in both schools felt they knew little about how well their child was doing.

Parental knowledge of their child's progress was informed in a number of ways. In the secondary phase all schools operated some form of journal or log book and most parents seemed very positive about its potential as a 3-way mode of communication; some were very positive: 'thanks to the journal I feel I have a personal relationship with all of D's teachers'. Evidence from the interviews suggested that whilst some parents 'got the journal every night' and felt it 'operated quite successfully... gives the children a focus' there was a drift in its use from year 7 to year 10. A number of parents felt the potential of the journal was not always realised. One parent felt there was a tendency for teachers to write 'negative comments, they don't seem to write positive things'. Parents were very encouraged by unsolicited positive comments: one mother, whose son was in a remedial centre, remembered that she had given her son 'a big hug' when she got a letter congratulating him on his English work. Credit systems, where in operation, were approved of by both parents and children, if it was applied consistently by teachers and across all subjects.

Parents' evenings were described as 'useful' by over 75% of secondary respondents, nearly 60% described them as 'welcoming' and 'informative',

but only 30% thought they were 'well organised'. One third of parents felt the evenings 'too rushed'. The picture was much the same in primary schools. A small number of parents remarked upon the variable quality of the information received from staff at parents' evenings. One parent recalled a very useful interview with a teacher who pinpointed that her son had problems with his concentration and suggested 'in a nice professional way' strategies to improve his memory. Another parent stressed the value of receiving detailed and focused feedback from teachers.

The picture in both primary and secondary data with regard to written reports was equally mixed. Nearly 90% of respondents felt the language used was easy to understand; although again evidence from the interviews was a little more mixed in this respect. Only 70% of secondary (and 80% of primary) parents felt that the marks and grades were equally transparent; leaving 30% unsure, or decidedly unclear: 'a bit mind-boggling' as one mother put it. Lack of understanding ran deep: there was still confusion about how to interpret marks, '40% is that good?'; about the assessment system, 'it went from 3.6 to 6.2 he was very pleased but to be honest I hadn't a clue'; and even about percentages, '38% out of what? It might be out of 40%'. Some appeared quite alienated by the whole business 'when you open these reports it's like getting the gas or electric bill with all these symbols and things'. 20% of respondents felt reports did not give enough detail and 30% were unsure that they gave a clear picture of their child. Nearly half of the respondents were unsure that reports were sent often enough. This latter message was reinforced in the interviews: as one year 7 parent observed 'November they are not established. November to June is practically a whole academic year if there is a problem time has been wasted'.

Despite feeling reasonably well informed about their child's progress there were still however significant differences in parents' expectations for

their children that did not correspond to actual examination results: in the secondary schools 58%, 62% and 26% of parents expected their children to get degrees; in the primary schools 30% and 70%. The most likely explanation for these marked differences lay in the socio-economic distribution of the schools' intakes. When collated across the sample as a whole there was significant positive correlation between social class and expectations; 85% of professional parents, 80% of managerial, 38% of skilled, and 29% of semi-skilled expected their children to get degrees.

The vast majority of secondary parents, in all schools did however feel that they could make a difference: 54% a lot, 36% some, and only 10% felt they could make little or no difference. The impact primary parents felt they could have was significantly greater: 80% in one school and 65% in another felt they could make a lot of difference, only 5% felt they could make little or no difference. Parents also felt they could make significantly more difference to how well their daughters did at school than their sons.

#### *(iv) Homework*

The amount of homework children did each night at secondary school varied considerably : 3-17 % spent 2 hours or more, about 50% overall spent one hour, 30% half an hour, and, 5%, their parents claimed, did none. Most year 7 parents felt the amount of homework given to their children was about right but over 40% of year 10 parents felt their children did not get enough. In the primary phase overall 30% spent one hour, 60% spent half an hour, and 20% of children in one school and 2% in the other did no homework. When asked to describe the strategies that they used to help their children most primary and secondary respondents replied that they 'show interest' and 'give praise'. In the secondary phase over 50% of parents 'check work is done', 'explain work' and 'suggest improvements'. There was strong evidence here again to suggest

that parents in year 10 helped children considerably less than those in year 7. In the primary phase virtually all parents claimed to 'listen to reading', and 70% 'test spellings', 'check work is done' and 'explain work'. The amount of help which children received from family members was significantly age related. In one primary school 30% of pupils had help each night and in the other 55%; by comparison only 6% of secondary children had help each night. In year 7 nearly half the children got help once or twice a week; 40% rarely got help. By year 10 one third of children got help once or twice a week and over 60% rarely got help.

There were a number of reasons for this apparent 'fall off' in parental support and, in particular, it was not necessarily for lack of willingness on the part of parents: in year 7 only 4% of parents claimed their children did not allow them to help with homework, by year 10 25% of parents felt discouraged. In the primary phase, by comparison, virtually all parents claimed to be allowed to help their children with homework. It also appeared that girls were significantly more receptive to help than boys. Parental expertise, or rather lack of it, was a second theme which emerged: 'we've been studying at college but sometimes even we don't know how to do it'. Parents felt inadequate particularly in the senior years at secondary school: 'in year 7 he brought homework and we understood what he was doing'. Maths seemed to be a recurrent problem: 'I probably struggle a bit with maths because mine was taught in inches and pounds and these are in millimeters and grams'. Homework clubs were posited as one solution: 'I would love to see a homework club because then there would be someone for helping'. In addition to the support provided by parents, grandparents and siblings were often mobilized to help: 'if she has any problems she asks her older sister; my brother helps if she has any difficult homework'. A demarcation in terms of subject expertise was also often apparent: 'I can't do maths my husband

can'; 'if its maths or equations it's his Dad... spelling or English I help. German is a no'. A third theme which emerged from the data to explain the apparent fall off in parental support was that of independence: there was a growing recognition that 'when children get older you've got to give them a bit of trust let them stand on their own feet'. Although there did seem to be a certain amount of covert surveillance going on, 'she is uncomfortable about us looking in her books so we tend to do it when she is at school or in bed'.

Finally lack of information regarding homework emerged as a significant issue. Between 6% and 36% of secondary parents responding to the questionnaire claimed never to get enough information about homework and overall only 10% were always satisfied with the information received. Overall 45% of secondary parents claimed never to get enough advice about how to help their child and over 50% never got enough information about the resources that may be available to do so. In the primary phase the picture was equally dismal: 13% of parents in one school and 28% in the other claimed never to get enough information about homework, about how to help (20% and 38%) or about resources (30% and 56%). Interview data confirmed this picture: 'I wish the school would send leaflets it would help me to help them... kids perceive things different... there is a communication problem'. Also: 'If they cannot be provided with books because it's too expensive... fair enough but you can say exactly what books we can buy'. The journal was viewed very positively as a method of communicating on the issue of homework; although the need for more systematic checks to be made by all parties involved in its use, particularly in year 10, was identified.

### **Developments**

Key to the project and of central importance to the participating schools was that as an action research project it embraced research and

development. There were some undeniably clear messages for schools in the research findings. Interviews and questionnaire data combined to illuminate the 'what' and the 'how' and 'why' of school/parent/child dynamic as they related to parents supporting their children's education. Additionally, data (not reported here) from the individual school section in the questionnaire informed schools about issues of specific importance to them. Parents identified both areas in which they were very supportive of their school's existing policy and practice and also ones in which they felt there was room for improvement. Such data was able to, and did, inform focused and practical development work which, where possible, was evaluated for impact and effectiveness. The PAT's, utilizing expertise in disseminating finding and fostering developments, were the main engine for change, in liaison with University and LEA advisers. The experience of being involved in the whole process with its attendant discussions, information sharing and closer links with parents acted as a catalyst in the school communities stimulating awareness, interest and radical shifts in thinking that informed practice and policy. Two key interventions, which inspired substantive developments, were the interim and final research reports presented to individual schools. The findings reported were such that in all cases there were clear opportunities for improvement based on sound qualitative and quantitative information from interviews and questionnaires. School managers reported how helpful these were in both stimulating and directing change.

One of the major findings indicated that parents had too little information about the curriculum and how to help their child. In response, one school changed the format of its Year 10 Parents' Evening by engaging the staff practically in producing curriculum information handouts on each subject. These were simply designed, written in parent friendly language and contained

practical advice about helping. The Parents' Evening became a vehicle for sharing this information in dialogue with parents. Both staff and parents enjoyed and valued this new resource. Later evaluations indicated that the majority of parents had used it subsequently. Another school employed a similar model for year 7 students to establish early and vital curriculum links with parents. This initiative was extremely successful with an ensuing school commitment to provide something similar for every year group.

The need for early contact with parents and how this is managed emerged in the findings of the project. One school radically changed its Year 7 induction procedure. Parents were invited in small, manageable groups to meet with key personnel, to sign home school agreements and to share information and ideas. These meetings took place over several evenings, utilizing outreach staff for parents with English as a Second Language, hard to reach parents, etc. The feedback was extremely positive from everyone involved with the quality of interaction/dialogue commented upon as really valuable within the context of a large school.

Another major finding indicated that a substantial number of parents felt they had little information about how to help with homework. An innovative 6 week interactive homework project entitled PATCH (Parents And Their Children's Homework) emerged within the Advisory Service involving one of the project schools and six other High Schools. The project is a six week project related to the English curriculum and is designed to inform and engage parents in the homework process. Parents, children and teachers were uniformly enthusiastic and positive about the potential of the project. Other outcomes emerged which were not planned for, for example, greater closeness and understanding between the child and parent. One parent remarked, 'I didn't know my child was so interesting.' Teachers widely reported delight at the outcomes of the project

and a shift in their thinking towards parents, 'I didn't realize they could make such a difference.'

The primary schools also trialled homework projects involving parents. At one school a 6 week project - HELP (Helpers Encourage Literacy Progress)- which began with a parents meeting and involved parents in working on fun spelling activities with their year 1 children resulted in some remarkable improvements in the childrens' spellings. The other primary school trialled another new authority led project - HIP (Homework Involving Parents) - with year 5 children and parents on the topic - the Ancient Egyptians - and were again very impressed by the involvement of parents.

Schools engaged in several other developments, either fine tuning and improving existing systems or introducing new ones where gaps were perceived. One school majorly improved the student log book/planner and is introducing interim reports of progress to parents. Another produced special year booklets at the beginning of each year giving basic information requested by parents. One school organised a monthly drop-in for parents to share ideas and gain the parental perspective. Primary schools also improved their half-termly curriculum information to parents.

The project and research findings have informed developments at a number of levels. At the school level the project schools are all responding to the clear finding that parents at secondary and primary level are concerned about their child's progress and want to help and that schools needed to employ a variety of strategies in order to facilitate this happening. This work is ongoing and growing with schools continuing with developments after the project has finished. The research findings also have implications for wider educational practice and policy.

At the local level the project and evaluations have informed and in some cases inspired the development of resources such as HIP, HELP and PATCH which are being published. The findings have impacted on In-Service Training with school

staff. Other Advisers and Inspectors have also been given key information to help improve practice which could lead to further development work such as on reporting to parents.

At the national level, the research findings were disseminated nationally via a very successful and well attended National Conference hosted in Manchester. The general key findings across the schools have been produced in series of visually attractive, easy to read and use papers for practitioners. The National Home/School Development Group has been kept in touch with the project findings and further papers based on the research will be published in journals.

This research project has made an immediate and lasting impact on the schools involved and has provided rich data to support the needs of parents and schools. Through dissemination, the findings, case studies and resources from the project are impacting more widely. This process will continue in order to support good working practice between parents, children and schools. As one parent said - 'I didn't know what to do before - I was worried I'd get it wrong and confuse him(her son) so I didn't get involved .....now ( after this homework project) I know what to do and I really feel I can help. I've seen the difference it's made to him.'