



National Teacher Research Panel

engaging teacher expertise

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Exchanging knowledge between home and school to raise attainment

Aim of the project

To find ways to bring together the two worlds that a child inhabits, home and school, so that both can support the child's learning.

Context

As experienced teachers, we have been seconded part-time to work for three years in 12 primary and 4 secondary schools in the cities of Bristol and Cardiff. Our research project began in 2001 and is due for completion in 2004.

Through action-based research our role is to encourage and support parents, teachers and children to develop ways to share knowledge about learning. We are working in:

- Key Stage 1- focussing on literacy [4 schools]
- Key Stage 2- focussing on numeracy [4 schools]
- Key Stages 2/3- focussing on transfer [8 schools]

Initial findings

As the project is ongoing these findings are emergent and are based on an initial mapping carried out with parents, teachers and head teachers [1-3], actions carried out in project schools [4-6], and on-going evaluation. Our evidence indicates that in these schools:

- most teachers believe in home school partnership but they appear less clear of the role home plays in the partnership;
- most home school communication seems to be narrowly focussed on the curriculum, and in one direction only from the school to the home as written briefings;
- parents appear to be concerned about the narrowness of the curriculum and the "squeezing out" of creativity;
- the framework that teachers are required to work within does not appear to encourage teachers to value out of school learning;
- the younger the child, the more interested the teachers seem to be in finding out about home learning; and
- regardless of family background, most parents seem interested in and supportive of their child's learning.

Background

Our research is part of a larger project, the Home School Knowledge Exchange Project which is funded by the Economic Social Research Council [ESRC] as part of its Teaching and Learning Research Programme [TLRP].

The project is focused on enhancing pupil attainment and learning disposition and believes that parents, teachers, and children each have knowledge and skills relevant to learning. These are poorly communicated and their significance not fully understood. We wish to foster the better exchange of knowledge between home and school contexts through three action research projects.

Fieldwork has taken place in Bristol and Cardiff in collaboration with each LEA and with the participation of families and schools from inner city and suburban settings.

Findings

Most teachers believe in home school partnership but they appear less clear of the role home plays in the partnership

- In initial interviews the majority of teachers spoke positively about the importance of home-school partnership, but our mapping of existing practices did not support this.
- Before the intervention we asked teachers to identify information they would like from parents. They had tended to ask for information that was very narrow and reflected the school curriculum e.g.: "How much reading/writing children do at home".
- As children got older there seemed to be less communication between home and school. Schools asked more that parents ensure that homework is done, uniform rules are adhered to and attendance and punctuality monitored. One Year 7 parent said that she felt she had "Turned into a number 1 nag" since her child had moved up.

Most home school communication seemed narrowly focussed on the curriculum, and in one direction only from the school to the home as written briefings.

- Many schools send a written newsletter out in one language only even though they have pupils from different community backgrounds.
- Although welcoming general information about school, parents would prefer this to be more specific and focused, e.g. on their individual child or child's class. "It would be helpful if we knew more about what they're doing-say on a monthly basis", and "Having a sheet at the end of each week, briefly noting the areas covered".
- Parents wanted communication to be more frequent and informal: "Parents to be informed of progress on a more informal basis, not just at parents' evenings".
- There was also concern that a lot of letters sent home via the children never arrive. This can lead to misunderstanding. "I don't get to hear about something and that's annoying and school thinks I haven't bothered to respond."

Parents appear to be concerned about the narrowness of the curriculum and the "squeezing out" of creativity.

- One parent, in response to the question, I am able to help my child at home with reading and writing had written, "As I work full time this is sometimes hard as I don't want to overload her and want us to have lots of free time to play etc."
- "Is this what education is reduced to? A set of targets, set by the school, for English, Maths and Science. I think it's so sad" - Year 7 parent after an Academic Review evening.
- "For me the creative arts are so important. I might be unusual but I know my son and I know he'll be totally switched off if he finds himself in a school where he's not given the chance to express himself creatively". Year 6 parent.

The framework that teachers are required to work within does not appear to encourage teachers to value out of school learning.

- Even when teachers had been involved in gathering and interpreting, information about the child's out of school learning, they found that it was difficult to change current practice. "Sheer numbers of children and the different things they are doing at home...how to manage this".
- Tightly defined lessons such as the numeracy and literacy hours meant that teachers found it more difficult to incorporate activities, which may make their teaching more relevant to the diversity of individuals' home backgrounds.
- At secondary school the timetable is often inflexible and complicated- children can be in more than one teaching group, and tutors of Year 7 may also be teachers of Year 11."I wish I could sometimes say to my group 'lets do this for 2 consecutive sessions' or even longer because sometimes it would be so nice to have a whole afternoon doing something really different"
- Parents welcomed events that allowed a dialogue to develop between them and staff. More regular contact, than the traditional open evenings, stopped issues building up and allowed information of a different kind to be exchanged.

The younger the child, the more interested the teachers were in finding out about home learning.

- As part of the project the children's out of school interests were recorded on a profile sheet as well as their attitudes towards school subjects. The teachers found this information interesting, but admitted that they could not assimilate information about thirty plus children, or use it to inform their planning to address individual interests
- In secondary schools less time was seen to be given to finding out about other aspects of a child's life. Few schools display work that shows out of school activities. One Cardiff year 9 teacher said "It helps me build a good relationship with a student when I know more about them."

Regardless of family background, most parents seem interested in and supportive of their child's learning.

- Parents from ethnic minorities appeared very interested in participating in their child's education. However they can lack the confidence to ask for the information they need about the educational system, or are unable to easily communicate with the school in English. Once an effort has been made to communicate with them in their own language, they are willing and able to play an important role in their child's education.
- Generally parents, while welcoming the growing independence of their child, regretted that the close links they had enjoyed with the primary school no longer seemed possible with the secondary school. This resulted in a degree of frustration as indicated by one Year 7 parent who was desperate for information - "anything to give me some idea of what's going on." And another whose child was about to enter secondary school "I want to stay involved but I don't know how."

Teaching processes and strategies

Reflection on this evidence led the research teams to consider which strategies might be adopted to address these concerns. A variety of interventions were used to attempt to facilitate the exchange of knowledge between home and school.

Photographs

Disposable cameras were used as a way of bringing aspects of the child's home world into school.

Year 6 children were asked to take photos during the summer holidays of themselves and of the people, places and things that were important to them. Students and their families were asked to choose favourites and consider what learning was taking place. The finished pieces were the centrepiece of a large display to which parents were invited.

A Year 1 teacher in Bristol gave her class disposable cameras to take photographs at home that linked to a science topic on plants and growth. The photographs also showed aspects of family life, e.g. pets, visits etc. The photographs were used as a basis for a writing workshop, and parents and siblings were invited to participate.

Year 4 children were asked to photograph and record mathematical activities that they took part in during the holidays.



Video

Videos were used to give parents a view of life in school. These included parents being invited into school to receive a personalised literacy video and booklet, which showed their child learning in a variety of contexts. Children in the numeracy strand produced videos for their parents, which illustrated methods they had been taught in school to aid mental calculations. A video of "A Day in the Life of a Year 7" was made and shown to year 6 children and their parents. It acted as a springboard for discussion about their imminent move from primary to secondary school.

Artefacts

In the literacy strand a Bristol teacher asked every child to fill a shoebox with items they thought would motivate their writing. Parents were asked to discuss the children's choices at home. The contents of the boxes were used in a variety of ways, including oral presentations to the class and story writing.

A Bristol secondary school is planning an event which will involve families choosing artefacts that represent some aspect of their out of school life.



Responding to diversity

We have explored issues related to the diverse needs of parents. Free government publications, written in a variety of community languages, and including videos, curriculum information and standard newsletters have been introduced to schools.

In one numeracy strand school in Cardiff, the teacher-researcher visited parents at home together with a bilingual support assistant from the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service who was working in the school. As a result mothers came into school on a regular basis to work with their children, a series of computer lessons was set up and English lessons were organised.

In one Bristol transfer school EAL parents were invited to attend activities in smaller groups and with translators. These events were planned with advice and support from staff from Bristol's Ethnic Minority Achievement Service.



Research Methods

A variety of data were collected including parent questionnaires, evidence from parent focus groups, and interviews with head teachers, senior staff and participating class teachers. The purpose was to ascertain existing practices, which went on to inform the proposed action. The action was then evaluated to test whether it had been effective.

Data from the mapping:	Data collected during the action:	Data resulting from the action:
Interviewing of head teachers and senior staff	Video	Photographs
Parents' questionnaires	Video	Video-tapes
Parents' focus groups	Photographs	Audio-tapes
Interviews with class teachers	Interviews with children	Children's work
Interviews with children	Interviews with children	Newsletters
	Interviews with teachers	Home-school booklets

Ongoing Evaluation

- After being involved in the actions, some teachers had a different perspective on the importance of parental involvement: "I'm more aware now of what I should be doing, what I could do to help them [parents]." Others found the actions had been "A reinforcement of my beliefs".
- The action-based nature of the project was valued: "This project has been good because it's given you practical ways [to involve parents]".
- A home-school book, where weekly information and suggestions were exchanged, was seen as valuable by many parents.

Conclusions

As part time teacher-researchers, and therefore part time teachers, we are very much aware of the numerous demands that teachers are facing everyday. Working more closely with parents is yet another demand. However we have found that by using a range of innovative activities aimed at exchanging knowledge between home and school parents can become valuable partners. As partners not only can they support their child's learning in school, but can also provide knowledge of and encourage the learning that takes place out of school.

We believe that there needs to be a whole school approach to involving and valuing parents, with all staff being made aware of the benefits, and being given the time and support to carry it out effectively.

Suggestions for further reading

Bastiani, J. & Wolfendale S. [Eds.] (2000), *The Contribution of Parents to School Effectiveness*, London, Fulton.

Bastiani, J. (2003) *Materials for Schools - Involving Parents: Raising achievement'* - Written by Professor John Bastiani and edited by Sheila White for the DfES. London. Department For Education and Skills.

Hallgarten, J., (2000) *Parents Exist O.K!?* London, Institute for Public Policy Research.

Websites:

Home School Knowledge Exchange Project. Website address:

www.home-school-learning.org.uk

Government publications: www.dfes.gov.uk/publications and www.parentscentre.gov.uk/otherlanguages.

www.teachernet.gov.uk

Teaching and Learning Research Programme [TLRP] (see: www.tlrp.org).

Author and Contact Details

For further details please contact:

Stephanie Burke [project secretary]: Graduate School of Education, 35 Berkeley Square, Bristol BS8 1JA.

s.burke@bristol.ac.uk

leida.salway@talk21.co.uk

Mary.scanlan@ukonline.co.uk

Vicki.Stinchcombe@eidodos.net.co.uk

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