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# **Parents as people. Problematizing parental involvement programmes.**

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**Abstract: This paper describes four case studies of parental involvement programmes and examines: the factors that enable partners to collaborate effectively; how the role of 'parent' is constructed; the contribution that education can make to combating social exclusion.**

## **Introduction**

This study investigates collaboration between schools and adult education providers in relation to some case-study examples of 'parent education' and 'family literacy' programmes. It examines how these organisations' different conceptions of their purposes and their under-pinning values can lead to different outcomes particularly in relation to their conceptualisation of the role of the 'parent'. It is also concerned to assess how far such education might contribute to the tackling of 'social exclusion' which is defined as 'the multiple and changing factors which result in people being excluded from the normal exchanges, practices and rights of modern society' (Commission of European Communities, 1993). Whilst poverty is clearly an important factor in social exclusion the paper also focuses on the ways in which learning and education can contribute to inclusion.

## **Methodology**

This paper draws on data from a larger study that surveyed, in 1997, all the state funded Primary Schools (for children aged 5-12) and Secondary Schools (for 12-18 year olds) in Scotland in terms of programmes that were conducted jointly with community - based organisations. From this survey ten case study schools were selected for in-depth study representing a range of geographical situations, policy contexts, sizes of schools and age range of students (see Tett et al, 1998). This paper concentrates on four of these case study schools which had established collaborative projects with adult educators in order to provide programmes of 'parent education' or 'family literacy' which operated in a range of policy and geographical contexts. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken, in 1998, with parents, teachers, head teachers, and adult education staff, in order to examine their differing perspectives on these programmes. These interviews were then transcribed and the paper is based on an analysis of these data. The paper concentrates on the differing conceptions that the interviewees had of the purposes of the programme and the values that underpinned it. First, then, a brief description of the case study projects.

## **The case studies**

All four case studies involved collaboration, at least between the school and adult educators and in some cases other agencies as well, in programmes for involving parents in the life of their local school.

The aim of case study 1, which is based in an area of multiple socio-economic disadvantage, was to 'encourage parental involvement in their children's education and to foster partnership between home, school and community by increasing social interaction and self confidence and improving access to jobs'. This project focuses on the 'whole parent' where a variety of courses are run in response to local need. In addition several groups have been developed by the women participants themselves. This self-help approach is encouraged by the project manager who sees her role as a facilitator. The project uses a very wide local network of organisations to deliver the courses. Much of the work of the full time adult education worker is focused on establishing and maintaining good working relationships with parents, teaching staff and the network of outside agencies.

Case study 2 is based in a similar socio-economic area and comprises several linked projects two of which, the 'shared reading scheme' and the toy library, are designed to promote parent and child interaction in order to improve the educational attainment of the children in the primary school. The other project 'the before and after school club' is run by a committee of lone parents who employ a number of part-time staff. Although the staff will assist children with their homework this is not a high priority. The aim of the club is to provide childcare to enable parents to take up educational opportunities or full-time employment. This particular project, then, has been developed in response to the needs expressed by the parents for cheap, good quality, child-care rather than educational activities.

Case study 3 is a small rural school which is developing a 'Learning Out of School Project' with three aims: to strengthen home/school links; raise awareness of what children are being taught; develop the shared experience of learning between the parent and child. Although the project aimed to be a collaborative effort involving the community, the headteacher and parents in both the development and planning, neither parents nor the community have been willing to be involved in this way. So, despite what the head-teacher describes as 'an open door policy', the involvement of parents and other members of the community in the management of the project is very limited. An important contributory factor to this is that there are no additional resources available to the school of adult education staff, time, or materials.

Case study 4 is a family literacy project based in a outer-city housing estate in a poor working class area which is a collaboration between adult education and the two local Primary School. It employs a full time adult education worker and a number of 'teaching assistants' who act as a link between parents and the schools. It seeks to include the literacy practices of everyday life in the curriculum through, for example, parent-led investigations, focused on identifying literacy practices in the home and community. This approach is coupled with an attempt to enable participants to express their own concerns and aspirations and to encourage them to think critically about their school experiences. Adults are encouraged to identify and value their own educative role with the emphasis being on the positive ways in which they already successfully educate their children so that the work with the school in relation to their children's learning becomes more of a partnership.

## **Comparison of the four case studies**

All four case study schools are focusing on involving parents, almost exclusively mothers, in the school as a means of increasing the educational attainment of their children. However, the case studies are underpinned by different values and purposes in relation to the way parents are viewed. For example, activities in cases 1 and 4 included provision for parents to develop their own education as well as that of their children. In these cases there is an emphasis on meeting the needs of parents and encouraging them to develop an awareness of their own requirements. This approach has been led by adult educators who have taken time to discuss with parents what provision they would wish to see and provided support to them in achieving their objectives. This has resulted in one project in case study 2, the 'Before and After School Club'(BASC), being led, managed and staffed by local women.

All the projects expected the parents to support the work of the school but differed in the type of involvement they encouraged. In case 3 parents were seen by the headteacher, and saw themselves, as 'helpers' who felt that they had no knowledge of their own to offer the school. As one parent put it 'the teachers know what to do about education and I would rather bake cakes for fundraising for the school because I can do that well'. On the other hand case 4 encouraged parents to see themselves as educators who had their own valuable knowledge to contribute to their children's education which might be different from that seen as important by the school. There is evidence that this was resulting in conflict between the adult education worker and the headteacher because of their differing purposes. The head-teacher wished to see more emphasis in the programme being placed on the educational development of children even when this meant paying less attention to the needs of the adults.

There were also different approaches to the management of the projects though, on the whole with the exception of BASC, responsibility for decision making was mainly confined to professionals with some consultation with parents even in those projects led by adult education staff. There was little evidence of genuine participation in decision making being shared by participants in the programmes although case studies 1, 2 and 4 all involved negotiation over the curriculum.

The cases all have different approaches to collaboration and differing levels of resources available to help them achieve this. Case study 3 would see their main task as provision of parent education and they do not collaborate to achieve this mainly because the head-teacher does not have the necessary resources of time herself nor funding to employ someone else to do so. Case studies 1 and 4 are much more focused on encouraging participation in decision making and in collaborating with parents and other groups to achieve this. The two types of projects in case study 2 have different approaches with BASC emphasising participation by the parents in the running of the project where the other projects see their main task as providing facilities and courses as a collaboration between local parents and the school staff.

The key differences in the case studies can be summarised then as, on the one hand, meeting the needs of parents as well as children by promoting parents' own education and involvement in the school on their terms, and, on the other, seeing the parents' only role as being involved in the education of their children on the school's terms.

## Collaboration

All four case studies offer examples of joint provision between schools and adult educators. Learning needs in the community are many sided and meeting them partly depends on professionals with different skills working together but there are barriers relating to professional boundaries and pedagogic approach that make true collaboration difficult to achieve.

The essential tasks of collaboration involve decisions about which organisations to work with; over what activities; and on what issues. In general there are three principal factors that contribute to effective collaboration (see Huxam, 1996). One factor is the adding of value so that all partners are able to achieve 'more' with 'less' and this can be exemplified through the case study 1 activities where resources of space, facilities and staff expertise have been used to provide opportunities for both adults and pupils. Another factor is the broadening of the scale and scope of interventions that are possible and this can be exemplified through all four case studies. The most demanding form of collaboration is where there are complex social issues such as the multitude of factors that lead to social exclusion which have ramifications for so many sections of society that their alleviation must be multi-organisational. To some extent the work in case studies 2 and 4 are examples of this kind of action where the educational needs of both parents and children have been

addressed. Overall the data show that for collaboration to be effective the organisations need to share, or have complementary, values and purposes if a satisfactory partnership is to be developed.

A major constraint to effective collaboration is limited access to resources, of both time and money since the development of partnerships requires much effort. Partners working together may have conflicting purposes and I have highlighted the tension between the conflicting views of parents as simply being classroom helpers on the one hand or alternatively as having their own educational needs. A final constraint relates to competing traditions between professionals that limit the type of collaboration that is considered feasible and this was highlighted in case study 4.

## Parents as people

Parent education and family literacy programmes are always aimed at poor and working class mothers as a kind of prophylactic against the potential failure of schools. They draw on what Luttrell(1997: 115) has described as *'the gendered organisation of school with its structural, but hidden reliance on ideal, not real, women. This gendered arrangement directs people's attention towards the qualities of the caretakers and away from the conditions under which children are (and are not) cared for and educated'*. The assumption that pervades many parent education programmes is that mothers are blamed, and they in turn blame themselves, for the institutional failure of schools to educate disadvantaged children.

The dynamics of these assumptions are insidious in two ways. First, a child's successful schooling should depend upon a great deal more than the efficacy of any individual parent. That is the promise of public education. People are quick to recognise that schools, by themselves, cannot be expected to meet the intellectual, social and emotional needs of all children, especially

those who are poor. But neither can individual parents meet all these needs. As long as the responsibility for monitoring children's schooling rests on individual parents and is not shared with school officials, and teachers, as well as social services of all sorts, then working class and poor children's school success will be compromised. Second this focus on each individual mother's responsibilities for her children's education encourages women to view their own educational goals as 'selfish'. This is where the case studies that involve working equally with parents on their own educational goals are able to challenge these negative self conceptions.

Many studies in the UK, Australia and the USA have shown that positive parental involvement with schools is one of the prerequisites of effective schooling, and that cooperation between school and home can raise educational achievement (see eg. Brighouse and Tomlinson 1991). However, Cuckle (1996:27) has suggested that parents who lack confidence in their own abilities are unwilling to help their children with school work and require considerable guidance if they are to do so. Moreover, Tizard et al (1988) showed fitting in help with reading into busy and disrupted lives was a burden that many families found difficult to sustain especially when they felt that they did not have the competence to carry out this task effectively. Cuckle (op cit ) has also suggested that a crucial element in the effective helping of children by their parents and carers is good communication between home and school. However, if parents are to be genuine partners in their childrens' education then they must be able to share power, responsibility and ownership in ways which show a high degree of mutuality (see Bastiani 1993). This becomes problematic if parental knowledge about schools and schools' knowledge about parents are characterised by a lack of understanding. For example, Tomlinson (1993:144) has argued that *'there is evidence that teachers are still not well-informed about the lives, backgrounds, expectations and desires of ethnic minority parents and are still willing to stereotype such families as "problems"'*. There is also evidence that schools have not substantively changed their way of doing things as a result of parental involvement (see eg. Adler et al 1989). It appears that parents' ability to influence school practices is not high and those who do not share the prevailing culture of the school, such as ethnic minorities, the working classes, people living in poverty, are likely to be excluded from having any 'voice'.

Crozier (1998: 132) confirms this lack of partnership between schools and parents in her study. She found that *'although teachers talked about partnership as working together with parents, it was in fact based on the teachers' concerns and definition of the situation, a commitment to bringing about parents' agreement with their view or indeed ensuring consonance. Frequently, teachers spoke of the fact that where parents were happy then they were no problem; parents were happy when their view matched that of the teachers. Where this was not the case criticisms of parents or indeed a deficit model of parents developed'*. This view of parents separates the problems presented by individuals from the social and political order which creates these problems in a way which individualises failure, and supports an approach based on the notion of social pathology. From this point of view, such parents are not seen as able to make a positive contribution to the school and there is therefore no possibility of them being seen as genuine partners in their childrens' schooling. This is where the intervention of adult educators can be crucially important in redressing the balance towards the voicing of parents' views.

Most parent education and family literacy programmes assume that the schools perspective is 'correct' and need only be supported by parents to be successful and so they have little impact on

school-community connections. Where there is a true partnership model with joint decision making between parents, adult educators, and schools and the assumption is that the schools programme is open to negotiation there is likely to be more opportunity to involve community members. This then opens up the possibility of re-creating the school's programme and mission, in challenging the school's hierarchical structure, and in developing authentic connections between schools and their communities.

### **Conclusion**

The personal and social damage inflicted by inequality, social exclusion and restricted opportunity is now widely recognised. Learning should represent a resource for people, and whole societies, to help them identify such inequalities, probe their origins and begin to challenge them, using skills, information and knowledge to achieve change. Through learning, competing values can be reviewed, their relevance for society today and tomorrow can be assessed, and newly emerging values can be transmitted.

School teachers and adult education staff come from different cultures and have different conceptions of education and learning. They have, however, distinctive and complementary roles to play in promoting learning and education and creating a better social order through a parent centred, dialogic approach that positions parents as people with an important contribution to make to the life of the school and the community. The implications of this type of approach to 'parent education' and 'family literacy' programmes are far reaching and would require a considerably different emphasis from that which is currently common even in these case study examples. As Merz and Furman (1997: 66) point out, *'while purportedly aimed at direct collaboration between the school and the parents, many parental-involvement programs remain at a shallow level, and become a mechanism to get parent support for the school-determined program'*. Clearly, whilst learning alone cannot abolish inequality and social divisions it can make a real contribution to combating them, not least by tackling the ways in which social exclusion is reinforced through the very processes and outcomes of education and training. If parents can be helped to challenge deficit views of the culture of their homes and communities then a small step has been taken in enabling their voices to be heard in the learning of their children and in their own educational development. For this to happen, however, some of the control that professionals have imposed on schooling for so long will have to be released and they will have to learn to think of themselves instead as an 'agency of the citizenry'(Merz and Furman, 1997: 98).

Margaret Davies argued in 1913, *'Even a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. It causes a smouldering discontent which may flame into active rebellion against a low level of life, and produces a demand, however stammering, for more interests and chances. Where we see ferment, there has been some of the yeast of education'*. (Quoted in Scott, G. 1998:56). If teachers and adult educators wish to see changes in the relationship between schools and parents then 'the yeast of education' will need to be applied to parent education and family literacy programmes in ways that will develop parents living in poverty, and other community members, as active citizens making demands for change. Parents would then be regarded as people with important contributions to make as collaborating partners rather than 'teachers' helpers' or the

people to be blamed for their children's 'failures'. Different ways of knowing and understanding the world then become valued rather than being dismissed as 'unofficial knowledge'.

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