

Engaging Hard-to-reach Families

How English schools create effective home-school partnerships

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from a study trip to England and the USA in 2011 to investigate how schools and education systems improve the engagement of students from marginalised or hard-to-reach families. The report describes successful strategies observed in a range of primary and secondary schools, most of which serve communities with high numbers of hard-to-reach families. Consideration is given to the reasons why some families and communities are estranged from mainstream education, including socio-economic factors, culture and religion. Special reference is made to the experience of Gypsy/Traveller students in English schools and to ways in which schools are using digital resources, particularly online learning environments, to bridge the gap between school and home.

Examples of good practice are discussed within a model of successful home-school partnerships drawn from the work of Epstein (2001) in the USA, Biddulph et al (2003) in New Zealand, and others. The experiences of English and American educators are compared to New Zealand settings and strategies, and the report seeks to give practical advice to teachers, school leaders, parents and community members who seek to improve the home-school partnership.

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Introduction

The project described in this report begins from an assumption that student achievement benefits from a strong partnership between school and home. The assumption comes from experience both as a teacher and a parent, weighing the balance between the influences of home and school upon a child's development and progress. The teacher in me tends to emphasise the role of school in shaping the child, whereas my experience as a parent reminds me that school is just one dimension of a child's life, and often not the most influential. Bringing home and school together in support of the child's learning and development seems both desirable and natural, yet it is a relationship that is often muddled through misunderstandings on both sides.

The efforts of teachers and school leaders who strive to involve parents and community in schooling are supported by evidence that parental engagement can be highly influential. Desforges, in a literature review for the English government, finds that “in the primary age range the impact caused by different levels of parental involvement is much bigger than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools” (2003, pp. 4-5). Desforges found this to be true across all sectors of the community regardless of ethnicity and socio-economic status. Harris, Andrew-Power and Goodall, in research for the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust in England, conclude that “the support of parents for learning and achievement is the single most important contributory factor to increased student achievement (2009, p.2).

In New Zealand a Best Evidence Synthesis assessing the influence of community and family on student achievement found strong evidence of “the potential of parental involvement to enhance achievement” (Biddulph, F., Biddulph, J., & Biddulph, C., 2003, p.186), while in the USA Walberg identified parental involvement as the first generic teaching practice of note in the *Handbook of Research on Improving Student Achievement*, stating; “dozens of studies in the U.S., Australia, Canada, England and elsewhere show that the home environment powerfully influences what children and youth learn within and outside school” (1999, p.11).

Getting parents involved in school is always challenging. In New Zealand there has been a tendency towards less involvement, despite Tomorrow's Schools which aimed to increase parental involvement (Wylie, 1999), and however difficult it is to engage the majority of parents there are

some families in every school that appear to have no relationship beyond their child's enrolment. These are families who don't turn up to interviews, who fail to respond to communications, whose children are often unprepared or ill-equipped, while at the margins they are families whose children barely participate in formal education, whose enrolment in school is piece-meal and who are frequently absent even when enrolled. I call these hard-to-reach families.

At a time when schools face increasing pressure to succeed with every child it is more important than ever for school and home to work together, and this means schools must find ways to draw in hard-to-reach families.

This project sets out to answer two questions:

1. How do innovative educators create successful home-school partnerships with hard-to-reach families?

The word 'successful' is challenging. How can schools measure the success of parental involvement? All that schools do must eventually be measured against the effect it has on student achievement. However, it is often difficult to directly link what happens in schools with gains in student achievement. Successful engagement with hard-to-reach families may be one area of school endeavour where it is easy to measure the effects on achievement, given that children from marginalised families are more likely to be low achievers but whose achievement may be quickly improved with the right interventions. It is an area where a school may make 'quick gains' and is therefore worth paying attention to.

2. How do innovative educators use digital technology to report student achievement and to engage students and their families in online learning partnerships?

Computers, the internet and interactive learning tools offer new ways to engage families in school and learning. Do they help schools to break down barriers with hard-to-reach families? Or does the movement towards digital technology create a new barrier to engaging the least advantaged?

The NZPF-Sitech award has allowed me to pursue these research questions in England and, to a lesser extent, the USA and Qatar. The examples of good practice and their associated challenges are therefore drawn from visits to English and American schools, from conversations with school leaders and academics at the National College of School Leadership in Nottingham and the

Graduate School of Education at Harvard University in Boston, and with staff at the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust in London. As such, the evidence for the effectiveness of the strategies described here is largely experiential rather than research-based - they are ideas that appear to work in these settings. However, in addition to the school experiences I include other examples of effective partnership strategies drawn from a range of research in America, UK and New Zealand.

This project has been conducted through the eyes of a school principal and this report is written mainly for school leaders and teachers looking for ways to work more effectively with hard-to-reach families.

Why are some families hard to reach?

This is a question whose answer is overhung by the shadow of stereotypes, value judgements and prejudice. If I consider the families at my school that are hard-to-reach I can see the traps of generalisation and blame: they may be highly transient, from minority cultures (which in New Zealand all too often means Maori or Pasifika), poorly educated, working in low paying jobs or on benefits, single parent families or struggling with addictions. But generalisations mask the complexities of family and community influences. There are some hard-to-reach families in my school where the parents are highly educated and work in well paid jobs, and there are many families from Maori, Pasifika and other cultures that are fully engaged with their children's education.

The fact is, the reasons for families being disengaged with school are often much more complex than teachers and school leaders realise. We must resist assuming we know what goes on in the home and making simplistic judgements about the willingness and ability of marginalised families to engage with school; judgements that then become self-justifying. In particular, we must not assume that they are not interested in their child succeeding at school.

Parents want their children to succeed. Biddulph et al (2003) report a recent longitudinal study of immigrant parents in the USA (Goldenburg, Gallimore, Reese and Garnier, 2001) that focused exclusively on one set of factors, parents' educational aspirations and expectations for their children. The results of their study challenge the view that parents' low aspirations and expectations lead to lowered motivation and poor performance on the part of their children. To the contrary, they found high levels of parental aspirations throughout the study:

... aspirations [...] appear almost entirely independent of student achievement.

Parents aspire to high levels of formal schooling, no matter how their children are doing academically (Goldenburg et al, 2001, p.562).

Parents are not marginalised by lack of desire for their children to succeed. This is sometimes easy to forget by frustrated teachers and school leaders as they observe dysfunctional families making choices for themselves and their children that clearly diminish the child's chances of success. In a way, our frustration only increases if we believe the behaviour of these families is accompanied by a desire within the parents for their children to do well at school - it is much more tempting to write them off as negligent. We must remind ourselves that even the least successful parents want their children to succeed and to that extent school and home are both singing from the same song sheet.

Another assumption we must avoid is that high levels of parental engagement automatically increase student achievement. Harris et al remind us that “schools are involved in a wide range of activities with parents that have little impact on learning” (2009, p.xv). Hattie (2009) goes as far as evaluating the effect of various kinds of parental engagement and finds that activities usually considered the summit of parental engagement, like membership on a school board or PTA, have no effect on student achievement. Parents “have to engage with student learning *in the home* (original emphasis) for any significant and sustained learning gains to occur” (Harris et al, 2009, p.xv). The corollary to this is that we should not assume that hard-to-reach families are not supporting their children's learning at home.

An important message for educators is that disengagement from school is not always due to family. If we ask why families are hard-to-reach we must consider what role the school plays in bringing about disengagement. In particular, we must avoid a 'one size fits all' approach and challenge the dominant discourses that guide our values and behaviour.

Transience and Gypsy/Traveller communities

High levels of transience and absence have been shown to have a negative effect on student achievement (Hattie, 2009). Hattie cites research showing that any change of school has a negative effect, even the normal changes from, say, primary to secondary school, and that this effect occurs regardless of socioeconomic status or ethnicity. The main determinant relating to mobility appears to be the disruption caused by loss of friendships and the key success factor “is whether a child makes a friend in the first month” of starting a new school (2009, p.82).

Patterns of disengagement caused by high transience have led this project into contact with the most marginalised community in the English school system – the Gypsy/Traveller community. Their experiences, and the efforts of some schools and agencies to engage these hardest-to-reach families, came to form a significant part of the data gathered for this report so it is worth giving some background.

Gypsies have lived in England for hundreds of years, always apart from mainstream culture and always suffering discrimination to some degree. Today there are several groups that are brought together under the titles Gypsy and Traveller: these include English Romani gypsies, Welsh gypsies, Irish gypsies, showmen and fairground travellers, circus people and so-called 'new travellers' – what we could 'alternative lifestylers' in New Zealand (Foster and Walker, 2009). It is not hard to understand that there is little commonality among these groups beyond their official status as Gypsy/Traveller. Census data suggests the total population of the Gypsy/Traveller community is 200,000-300,000.

Gypsy/Traveller communities share a common trait – nomadism. The image of the Gypsy tinker riding into a village with his brightly decorated caravan clanking with pots and pans still persists in popular imagery, despite the fact that over the past fifty years most Gypsies have become at least semi-permanently settled. Estimates suggest that 90,000 – 120,000 Gypsies continue to live in caravans in England but many of these are on permanent or semi-permanent sites (Levinson, 2008). Under law local government authorities are required to provide campsites – 'pitches' – for Gypsies and Travellers but the number of official sites has steadily declined, leading to conflicts where Gypsy/Traveller settlements spring up on illegal sites. Traditionally Gypsy/Traveller families had little contact with formal education. As recently as the 1960s it was estimated that only 10% of Gypsy/Traveller children regularly attended school (Levinson, 2008, p.72) and while more families now choose to send their children to school even today this group records rates of absence up to 8 times higher than average (Foster and Walker, 2009, p. 32).

While mobility and absenteeism are closely linked “it is not so much the mobility that is the issue, but the reasons behind the mobility, and school responses to mobile children” (Biddulph, et al, 2003, p.150). Disengagement among the Gypsy/Traveller population is deep-seated and lies in traditions of cultural isolation, suspicion of the demoralising influence of school, low regard for school-based learning beyond basic literacy and numeracy, and the clannish nature of Gypsy communities where children had important roles to play in childcare and employment. It also lies in the negative responses of schools and communities to Gypsy/Traveller children, which amount to deeply ingrained prejudices.

To some extent the experience of Gypsy/Traveller students in England is not unlike that of Maori and Pasifika students in New Zealand, and there are common strategies to overcome the barriers. These strategies, and their attendant challenges, are the subject of the next two sections of this report.

Strategies for Successful Engagement

The structure of this section is inspired by Epstein's (2001) framework of parental involvement. In a series of studies in the USA Epstein demonstrated that it is possible for schools to take the initiative in establishing partnership relations that have positive benefits for families, communities and students. Six types of involvement are described (see table below). The strategies are not exclusive to hard-to-reach families; in fact some of the strategies, such as volunteering and decision-making, are likely to be less successful with hard-to-reach families. Nevertheless, the framework captures the range of strategies I observed working successfully in the schools I visited, and is included here also as a useful starting point for school leaders wishing to improve parental involvement.

Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement for Comprehensive Programmes of Partnership

Type 1 - Parenting	Type 2 - Communicating	Type 3 - Volunteering	Type 4 - Learning at Home	Type 5 - Decision Making	Type 6 - Collaborating with the Community
Help all families to establish home environment to support children as students.	Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs [sic] and their children's progress.	Recruit and organize parent help and support.	Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions and planning.	Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.	Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs [sic] family practices, and student learning and development.

Source: Epstein (2001:409).

Epstein's framework is strongly affirmed in the work of Biddulph et al (2003), who share Epstein's view that “a key purpose of such partnerships is to develop family-like school and community settings, and school-like home settings” (2003, p.206). This is an incendiary idea for school leaders: while I may believe the school's positive attitudes and practices should be reflected in the home, how comfortable am I about incorporating the values and practices of my community into the school? This is a real dilemma for some of the school leaders I met in England, whose communities are a mosaic of cultures, religions and ethnicities with values that overlap but have points of real conflict. The achievement of these principals and teachers is to reach across barriers of power and perception to create meaningful partnerships with families from highly diverse communities. Some of the strategies described in this section, especially the Effective Partnerships with Parents (EPPa)

project, illustrate the creativity and resolve that schools can bring to this process.

Using Epstein's framework Biddulph et al (2003, pp.192-193) describe four categories of activities to guide home-school partnerships:

1. *Incorporating Family and Community Values, Structures and Personnel into School Activities (2,3,5,6)*
2. *Making links with, and incorporating, School Learning Practices in Family Activities (1,4,6)*
3. *Community-Initiated Links between Schools and Families (6)*
4. *Integrated Programmes.*

The numbers in brackets refer to Epstein's six types of involvement. The first category may be seen as 'outside-in' influences - the community and family shaping the school. The second reflects an 'inside-out' force as the school shapes practices in the home. In my view this second category should include the word 'values' as the school plays a positive influence on its families and community. The third category describes activities, programmes and people that emerge from the community to link families and school, while the fourth category spreads the net wider to embrace programmes that include social services and other agencies working in partnership with school and the community.

I will use Biddulph et al's four categories to describe and explain effective strategies for parental engagement that I observed or have discovered in my reading.

1. Incorporating Family and Community Values, Structures and Personnel into School Activities

Four agents of change

The most strikingly successful examples of engaging hard-to-reach families often involve a parent or community member in a key role. Research by the National College of School Leadership affirms this:

“One important strategy in tackling (the issue of disengaged parents) has been to draw on resources already deeply embedded in the community. One example is parent support workers who live within and know the community well and can gain the trust of parents who feel challenged by direct engagement with

schools." (NCSL2, p.7)

We will consider four schools that successfully use community members to bridge the home-school gap.

At Samworth Enterprise Academy in Leicester, a Year 1-13 school that has recently replaced three older schools in a very low socio-economic neighbourhood, I met Sally, community champion. Sally is a parent at Samworth and admitted that she was at first, like many parents, highly suspicious of the new school, which was built under the controversial academies programme of the previous Labour government in a private-public partnership with a prominent industrialist and the Church of England.

Sally's involvement began as a parent helper in her son's junior class. She went on to attend a couple of parent education courses and her enthusiasm for Samworth blossomed. Her appointment as part-time community champion is her first paid job for 11 years and a new position at the school. Sally works within the support services department, alongside the SENCO and special needs teachers, family workers and counsellors. Sally's role is primarily to bridge the gap between school and home, particularly for hard-to-reach families on the council estate where she lives. This includes phoning and visiting families, talking with neighbours and other parents on the street or at school, representing the views of marginalised families in school meetings, supporting families with school communications, forms, disciplinary meetings, and so on. In addition, Sally produces leaflets with information about the school at a level that is useful and useable for parents, she runs coffee mornings for parents from various language and ethnic groups and she helps design and deliver parent education courses.

Sally's title of community champion conveys her unique position as the voice of the community on the Samworth Academy staff and the voice of Samworth Academy in the community. She struck me as bright, bubbly, down-to-earth, passionate about the home-school relationship and determined to make this new position a success. Talking to her I was reminded of how important it is to have the right person in this critical role. Sally is clearly a 'connector' - a personality that Gladwell (2000) identifies as immensely powerful in effecting organisational change.

At Pool Academy in Cornwall Jacqui has worked for several years as a teaching assistant (teacher aide) with responsibility for managing relations between the school and local Gypsy/Traveller communities. Although Jacqui is not a Traveller herself she has managed to build a relationship of trust with families in this highly marginalised community. She puts this down to the years she spent working in the local bakery before she joined the staff at Pool Academy. "When I began at school I knew all the children and most of their families. I used to visit the Traveller sites and

they'd say 'you're the lady from the bakery, aren't you', which I suppose is a funny way to break down barriers but it seemed to be important.”

Like Sally at Samworth Academy, Jacqui sees herself as an advocate for the community – in this case the Gypsy/Traveller community. She works closely with itinerant staff from the Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service (EMTAS) to inform and educate staff and students at Pool Academy about the history, culture and special needs of Gypsy/Traveller students. She has produced an impressive handbook for staff that includes information about the issues Gypsy/Traveller students face at school and good practice for inclusion. She works with Gypsy/Traveller students to promote and celebrate their culture in the school and community and she drives a programme of interventions to improve attendance. She comes across as quiet and self-effacing, but I was told she is a tenacious advocate who is not shy of confronting discrimination and unfairness in the school experiences of Gypsy/Traveller students and families.

At Monteagle Primary School in East London the deputy principal, Mairead, described to me the work of Nicky, who is employed as a parent support advisor (PSA). The position of PSA grew out of a programme called Sure Start which was set up by the government about 10 years ago to improve education, health and welfare provision for early years. PSAs have been widely employed in English schools although the service is dwindling due to funding cuts.

As a PSA Nicky's role as a bridge between school and community is more formal than either Sally's or Jacqui's. Nicky's position is funded 50/50 by the school and a local charity. She is based at Monteagle School but spends much of her time working in the community alongside other health and welfare professionals and agencies. This enables the school to access services and resources they would normally not know about or be excluded from. Nicky's work focusses on the most marginalised families and students in this highly deprived neighbourhood, with a major part of her job supporting the drive to improve attendance levels among hard-to-reach students. She maintains a high profile by standing at the school gate every morning and afternoon, visiting homes and attending disciplinary meetings. She helps parents with form-filling, accesses funding for uniforms and school trips and acts as a case manager for some families – calling in and coordinating a range of supports and services. According to Mairead, Nicky has been influential in lifting the school attendance rates from 75-80% a few years ago to 96% in 2010.

Sometimes community members employed in schools can be influential not through a formal role but as messengers. At Oakhurst First School in Dorset the principal, Melanie, described how she relies upon a Gypsy/Traveller parent employed as a dinner assistant to convey information between school and the Gypsy/Traveller community. Melanie uses this person as a 'sounding board' for ideas and initiatives with which she hopes to improve the engagement of this community, and to

spread accurate information about the school among Gypsy/Traveller families to counter negative perceptions and gossip. Melanie recounted how her plan to publicly launch a parent education programme aimed at Gypsy/Traveller parents was scotched by her informant pointing out that Gypsy/Traveller parents wouldn't support a programme that singled them out. Melanie's tactic now is to begin the programme with one or two willing parents and rely on them to promote it back to the Gypsy/Traveller community.

Flying the flag – displaying community and culture in the school

It is common practice today for New Zealand schools to celebrate the cultures and communities represented by their students. We do this to enrich the learning experiences of all students, to honour our commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi, and to recognise that students and families are more likely to engage if the school enables a sense of belonging.

I observed several successful initiatives to promote the culture of marginalised communities in English schools. At Ferndown Upper, a Year 7-13 school in Dorset, Alison, a teacher with responsibility for Gypsy/Traveller students, has developed a series of learning modules to promote engagement of Gypsy/Traveller students and celebrate their culture across the school. Students can choose to join the group, which meets during class time once or twice a week. One project created several large, screen-printed banners decorated with icons of Gypsy life which now fly from a line of flagpoles near the entrance of the school. Other projects included the creation of a large sculpture and a series of posters promoting Gypsy history month, displayed prominently in the foyer. Alison sees the value of positive discrimination practices in the retention rates of Gypsy/Traveller students at Ferndown Upper School. Enabling these students to work together in an exclusive group builds confidence and breaks down feelings of isolation. It enables Alison to weave positive messages about attendance and achievement into the art-based activities, for students to relax and share their problems in a setting of high trust and affirmation.

Oakhurst First School, also in Dorset, has hosted a project to build a traditional Gypsy caravan – a vardo – with support from local EMTAS staff and members of the Gypsy/Traveller community. Students were drawn into the project through watching the vardo's construction: I visited a Year 5 class that was making models of vardo, with the students able to discuss the style of the caravan, its decoration and some ideas about its significance to Gypsy life. I understood that this was a highly unusual learning activity in a country where the Gypsy/Traveller community remains deeply misunderstood and openly maligned.

Flexibility

The work of Russell Bishop and his team through the Te Kotahitanga project in New Zealand brings home to us the importance of expanding school culture to accommodate Maori dimensions of identity and learning (Bishop, R. and O'Sullivan, D., 2005). Te Kotahitanga challenges teachers and school leaders to confront discriminatory practices that are barriers to success for Maori students and their families. Schools must become more flexible to be places where more Maori students succeed.

I get the impression a similar understanding is emerging in England with regard to the education of Gypsy/Traveller and other minority groups. The emergence of so-called 'free' schools has tended to capture the debate about how to accommodate minority aspirations by streaming them off into separate schools, as evidenced by the large number of faith (religious) schools that have been early leaders among free schools. A justification for these schools is that they enable greater parent agency through closer identification with the values and programmes of the school. Similar arguments have been made that Kura Kaupapa Maori Schools in New Zealand have changed previously indifferent parents into avid supporters and participants in their children's education (Smith, 1995).

However, some mainstream schools in England are also accepting the challenge to become more welcoming places for minorities. Wilkin, Derrington, Foster, White and Martin (2009), in a report to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) - England's Ministry of Education – promote flexibility as vital to engagement of Gypsy/Traveller communities. They describe flexible practices that include: a more varied curriculum approach, including thematic studies; work-related curricula leading to vocational qualifications; employing bi-lingual support workers to link with families; being creative about managing attendance among highly transient students; using homework clubs and allowing out-of-hours access to school facilities like computer suites (2009, p.8).

At Clyst Valley Community College in Devon I was able to see flexible attendance practices at work. Here the attendance officer follows up every daily absence of Gypsy/Traveller students with a phone call rather than the normal texting method. As with the teaching assistants discussed above, this person has slowly built trust among the Gypsy/Traveller parents so they respond to her calls. She admitted her calls only sometimes get the student back to school but it sends a message that the school values the student.

At this school (and possibly elsewhere) all students are able to 'buy back' some of their absenteeism if they can show they have completed learning while absent; for example, finishing an assignment or project. This works well with Gypsy/Traveller students who are often absent for extended

periods. The school's Online Learning Environment (OLE) is vital in this, enabling students and teachers to keep in touch during periods of absence. Buying back absences benefits both the student and the school, as schools are accountable to the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) for attendance rates.

School governance

Several school principals I spoke with mentioned their strategy of actively recruiting parents from hard-to-reach communities as school governors. In England the school board of governors is a larger body than in New Zealand, usually comprising 12-15 members, drawn from community organisations as well as parent representatives, with appointed as well as elected members. In a system less devolved than ours the board's governance role is somewhat different but having a wider range of representation allows the potential for a greater range of voices to be heard.

At Little Ilford School in East London, a multi-ethnic secondary school in a largely Muslim and Hindu neighbourhood, Yvonne, the principal, actively recruits community leaders onto her board and through them organises meetings with the many different ethnic/language groups in her catchment. She runs about 30 of these meetings each year, using interpreters, and treats them as an opportunity to listen to each community as well as send out information about the school.

2. Making links with, and incorporating, School Learning Practices in Family Activities

All parents desire their children to succeed in education (Epstein, 2001: Biddulph et al, 2003), but many parents need guidance on how to help their children's learning. "Replicating inappropriate teaching approaches which they experienced as youngsters (which are often all they know) can be unhelpful or worse" (Epstein, 2001). In order to succeed with hard-to-reach families schools must be creative in how they reach out and incorporate school learning practices into the home. This is often much more difficult than absorbing family factors into the school. For highly marginalised families the home environment is often a world away from the values, practices and aspirations of teachers and school leaders. I have described some examples of schools in England using community members to bring community values and ways of working into the school and to convey school values and practices back into the home. We will now explore other strategies for extending good learning practice to hard-to-reach families.

Attendance

Every teacher and school leader has experienced the frustration of working with families seemingly unable to grasp that to get an education the child has to actually be at school. Attendance is often the frontline with hard-to-reach families: students who appear and disappear, families that vanish without warning and pop up at another school, unanswered texts and phone calls. Mention has already been made of the flexibility allowed to schools in England for students to 'buy back' absences with work completed at home. Provision is also made for dual enrolment. At Three-Legged Cross Primary School in Dorset Justine, the principal, described how some of her Gypsy/Traveller students have their main enrolment at her school but also access subsidiary enrolment in other schools. This applies mainly to students whose families follow a regular pattern of movement around the country, with Justine's locality as their main place of habitation. The value of this arrangement is not just in keeping track of these students but in enabling them to feel connected to one school. Justine described how they keep in touch with these students during their times away; with buddies sending emails and letters, even birthday cards. Students' return to Three-Legged Cross is celebrated and efforts are made to help them feel they are equally valued; even down to small things like making sure their name tags in the cloakroom are the same as everyone else's.

Across the Atlantic the KIPP Middle School in The Bronx, New York, makes habits of attendance fundamental to its goal of getting students into College. KIPP Middle School is a Charter School, publicly funded but free to operate outside many of the regulations of the public school system. The school is one of several housed in an enormous, multi-storey, brick building in a landscape of grim apartment blocks, chain link fences and crumbling streets. The day I visited I had to enter the building through a check point staffed by the New York Police Department's Schools Division. Its students are some of the least advantaged in America and the KIPP model, widely recognised as highly successful with this cohort, makes no bones about its mission to change values and behaviours that cause failure.

To maintain habits of attendance and learning this school re-opens every July for three weeks during the three month summer vacation. When I visited on a scorching day it was business as usual, with all staff and students hard at work. The principal, Frank, described to me their system of 'pay cheques' to reward attendance and achievement. Every student is able to earn 'KIPP dollars' and cash these for rewards like school trips. Families are informed about progress towards savings goals.

KIPP is regarded as an elite school within The Bronx and, like popular schools anywhere, it has a long waiting list. This strengthens its message about attendance: if your attendance is poor you risk

losing your place. Frank said this is usually enough to change previously poor attendance habits among most students.

Transitions

Another point at which students may be lost is during transitions from one phase of education to the next. Gypsy/Traveller students are particularly vulnerable as there are strong cultural biases within Gypsy/Traveller communities against continuing education beyond the primary years, which in England means beyond Year 6. I observed this on a visit to a Gypsy/Traveller campsite in Devon with Liz from the local EMTAS team. She was concerned about a Yr 6 girl at one of the local primary schools whose family showed no interest in her continuing education. Liz's questions to the girl's mother were met with a shrug of the shoulders but more interesting to me was the apparently equal indifference of the schools. The primary school principal seemed to act as if it was no business of hers, while the local secondary school appeared to be making no effort to capture the girl. I was struck by the poor transition process for this girl and that the outcome of her abandonment of education seemed a *fait accompli*, despite the laws on school attendance. This was enormously frustrating for Liz, but I gathered it was not uncommon among Gypsy/Traveller families and the local schools.

Other schools I visited showed greater commitment to transitions. Little Ilford School in East London is part of a federation of local schools, with shared governance, support services and professional development. Children from the primary schools within the federation attend programmes at Little Ilford from as early as year four. From year five they may use the Little Ilford school library for Saturday study sessions. Staff from Little Ilford attend parent meetings at the primary schools and parents have opportunities to join evening and weekend education programmes at Little Ilford. According to Yvonne, the principal, this means that children – and parents - make the leap to secondary school with few fears or misunderstandings.

At the top end Little Ilford School employs an Aim High manager, Mandy, whose job is to open students' minds to the possibilities of post-secondary training and education. Along with the usual presentations by universities and other providers Mandy runs a programme of work placements with local businesses, who sign up to a partnership programme with Little Ilford School.

At Buckingham Primary School in Buckinghamshire all children who enrol are assigned peer-appropriate buddies. Prior to starting school the buddies make contact with enrolling children by letter or email and on the first day buddies shadow their new friends, giving them a tour of the school, staying with them in the playground at break times and supporting them into classroom

routines. The buddy role is taken seriously: the programme is managed by one of the deputy heads, buddies are trained and managed and their role is acknowledged in assemblies and newsletters. In addition, new parents are offered a buddy from among the governors or members of the school PTA.

Homework

Homework is often an area where schools seek to instil good learning practices into the home, and frequently fail with hard-to-reach families. Homework can support student learning but it can also have a neutral or even negative impact if the homework tasks reinforce errors or misconceptions (Hattie, 2009). Homework however continues to assume great importance for parents, probably because it has traditional weight and is their most regular contact with their child's learning. We are all familiar with homework battles between parents and children, especially when techniques have changed since the parent was at school. This makes many parents anxious about their ability to guide their children's learning, a reasonable fear considering that replicating inappropriate teaching approaches which they experienced as youngsters (which are often all they know) can hinder or harm the child's learning (Biddulph et al, 2003). Hard-to-reach parents are often the least confident at supporting learning at home, as many of these parents were themselves unsuccessful at school.

Some schools I visited attempt to make homework a positive influence on student achievement. They run after school homework clubs, which include access to computers for students who do not have a computer at home. At Little Ilford School students are able to use the library on Saturday mornings with library staff on hand to support them. Samworth Enterprise Academy is open from 8am to 9pm every week day for 51 weeks of the year, with students able to use many school facilities outside regular school hours.

Online Learning Environments

The use of Learning Management Systems, known in England as Online or Virtual Learning Environments (OLE/VLE), is becoming more widespread. They are seen as a powerful tool in promoting school values and practices in the home. OLEs have two main functions: to communicate with parents and to enable greater opportunities for student learning. Several of the schools I visited have well developed OLEs that serve both communication and learning functions. At Chepping View Primary School in Buckinghamshire teachers use interactive quizzes where students and parents can answer questions and post their own challenges for others to solve. Buckingham Primary School has a Pay Pal facility linked to its OLE for all school payments. As mentioned above Clyst Valley Community College enables students to work offsite by

downloading and posting assignments on its OLE. Other schools promote blogs and podcasts.

Many more examples of online communication and learning are contained in the excellent book, *Do Parents Know They Matter?* (Harris, Andrew-Power & Goodall, 2009). This resource is published by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust based in London, membership of which is available to New Zealand Schools (see Resources section below).

Some of the challenges and pitfalls of OLEs are discussed in the following part of this report.

Parent Education

Parent education programmes are a powerful tool for spreading school values and practices into the home. They can 'capture' hard-to-reach parents because they have the dual purpose of improving the parent's educational level (thereby enhancing employment prospects and social inclusion) and enabling the parent to play a greater role in supporting the child's learning (Harris, 2007). Several of the schools I visited have initiatives under way that aim to help parents become better able to support their child's learning. Many of the programmes are delivered in partnership with external agencies such as children's centres, which are described below.

Other parent education programmes managed within the schools I visited included:

- SEAL 4 Parents at Paddington Academy in London. SEAL is Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning, a programme widely used in primary and secondary schools. SEAL 4 Parents extends the programme to parents and family members of secondary school students. The programme is available for purchase (see Resources section below).
- ESOL programmes. I visited several schools serving communities with high numbers of migrants which offered a range of ESOL programmes.
- Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities (SFSC). A 13 week course (3 hours per week) at Samworth Enterprise Academy to increase parenting skills.
- Craft and Technology programmes. Several schools offered parent education programmes in computers, cooking and crafts. A couple of these were accredited courses, with students gaining credits towards national qualifications.

An innovative strategy used by one school was to allow parents to decide their own education focus. In one instance mothers from the Somali community decided they wanted to knit. A staff member facilitated a weekly opportunity for these mothers to gather and learn knitting skills from each other with further support from a willing parent from a different community. The programme was viewed by some in the school as simply a social gathering that did little to enhance either the

parents' or their children's learning, but the programme was valued for engaging a very hard-to-reach group and giving them a positive relationship with school.

It is worth mentioning a powerful New Zealand programme, Reading Together. The programme was developed by Jeanne Biddulph and is designed to help parents support their children's reading at home (and thereby also support teachers in their classroom programmes). The real strength of this and other family literacy programmes is their ability to foster autonomy and self-reliance within families, schools and communities; that is, their focus on empowerment of all those involved (Biddulph et al, 2003). Reading Together has been proven to have a positive effect on children's reading progress in early years primary (see Resources section below).

3. Community-Initiated Links between Schools and Families

The third category of activities to engage families are those that emerge from the community. Frequently the relationship between a school and its community is directed by the school rather than being a true partnership. The efforts of schools to nurture partnership with community can be stymied by community misconceptions about school (often fuelled by negative memories of school) and by barriers that teachers and school leaders, knowingly or unknowingly, maintain. The barriers can be many and varied: educational jargon in school newsletters, unwelcoming office staff, parent interviews at difficult times of the day, perceptions of clashing values between school and community.

Failures of partnership between school and community fall heaviest on students from hard-to-reach families. As educators we may be oblivious to this because the families that we find hard to reach are often the families that are also the most marginalised in the community. However, communities can offer channels of contact with hard-to-reach families, as we have already noted in the community champions at Samworth Enterprise Academy and other schools. This alone gives importance to community-initiated activities, regardless of the many other benefits such contacts have for schools.

In my visits to schools in England and USA I came across few initiatives that could truly be said to have been initiated by the community. At Little Ilford School in London a group of parents from one migrant group had approached the school to set up a support group for their community. Buckingham Primary and Chepping View Primary have small wilderness areas attached to their school grounds which are managed in part by community groups.

Samworth Enterprise Academy has an unusual status in its community, through having the local diocese of the Church of England as one of the founding partners. The school building, just three

years old, incorporates the local Anglican parish church. The day I visited with a group of international colleagues Pat, the principal, welcomed us in the church, which is next to the main office and dining room. She told us of the stir created in the community when the new church held its first funeral during school hours. It seems a shrewd move to incorporate school and church in a community with high levels of social and economic deprivation. The two institutions have a visible partnership that is able to draw upon a wider range of community resources than either could access on its own. I could see the partnership has been influential in establishing Samworth Academy's positive reputation in the community.

Effective Partnerships with Parents

Looking elsewhere, I came across a project called Effective Partnerships with Parents (EPPa). This project was set up in 1998 by the Parent Teacher Associations of Plymouth, Torbay and Devon to help define what effective and productive partnerships with parents and communities mean in practice (NCSL1). The project ran for four years in 15 primary and secondary schools. Believing that an informed and supportive parent body will do a great deal to raise standards in schools and help children realise their potential the project founders worked from the view that low levels of parental engagement are partly due to teachers setting the agendas and therefore being obliged to assume that they know what parents want.

The EPPa strategy offered a different approach:

“it is the parents who provide the leadership, working in partnership with school staff, governors and members of the local community. The advantages of this approach are greater parental support and involvement. Parents can take on much of the administration, they also have natural links with the community and are an untapped skill base. A parent-to-parent approach is seen as less daunting for some people, encouraging wider parental participation” (NCSL1, p.3).

Over a four year period the EPPa project conducted numerous community-initiated projects, including:

- fundraising to build a community resource centre in a school, which became a hub for community education programmes, school creche, breakfast and after-school clubs.
- Organising a programme of talks by ex-students to senior secondary students as part of transition programmes, and a 'Bud-wiser' buddy scheme for Year 6 students entering the local secondary school.

- Planning and managing a four week programme of family learning opportunities presented by action teams in three cluster schools in association with their city community.
- Rewriting the induction procedures for students entering a secondary school, producing a local learning community newsletter and publicising computer skills workshops for families.
- Upgrading student planners and introducing a calendar of school events in one secondary school.

This project reported high levels of success at engaging hard-to-reach families. In one activity, parents from previously hard-to-reach families who participated in a computer course became organisers of later courses. These successes are attributed to the project being initiated by parents rather than by the schools. Parents were able to draw upon a wider range of community resources through their contacts, opening up channels of communication and opportunity for schools that they previously lacked. In doing so, they widened the pool of engaged parents at each school.

The involvement of school leaders in the EPPa projects was crucial. In a few projects the tenacity of a school principal or leadership team gave vital encouragement to the parents to persevere. In others the presence of a school principal or senior manager on the project team gave it credibility among staff.

4. Integrated Programmes

The fourth and final category of engagement activities refers to those programmes that are partnerships between schools, communities and a range of other agencies, public and private. These initiatives reflect rising expectations of schools to deliver outcomes that traditionally were seen as the responsibility of family, church and community. As these structures weaken the school is frequently the strongest remaining institution in a community. No school, however, can deliver all that is asked of it without support, and the need for support becomes acute in communities of high socio-economic deprivation. These are also the communities with the hardest-to-reach families.

An example of an integrated approach to engagement is New Zealand's Strengthening Families programme, bringing families together with the numerous parties involved in their care and protection, establishing clear plans and lines of responsibility, and drawing in the wider family or whanau to shoulder responsibility for improvement. Schools are often the venues for Strengthening

Families meetings and, in my experience, tend to have an overview of the family's needs and capabilities that other agencies lack and which is valuable to the success of interventions.

Children's Centres

In England the clearest example of integrated programmes I observed was the work of children's centres. Children's centres, like PSAs, originated with the Sure Start programme, which was launched in 1999 with the aim of "giving children the best possible start in life" (Wikipedia) through improvement of childcare, early education, health and family support, with an emphasis on outreach and community development. The programme was originally intended to support families from pregnancy until children were four years old but the brand was extended to cover children up to age fourteen, or sixteen for those with disabilities. From 2005 Sure Start was diverted from local programmes to children's centres. These expanded rapidly, with the Labour government's intention to have 3,500 centres operating in the communities with high levels of need. Recent budget cuts have put a stop to expansion and led to closures of centres, to the dismay of many.

Sure Start and children's centres reflect growing evidence that “integrated or comprehensive programmes that address the real needs of parents and children, especially in children’s early years (0 – 5 years), can significantly improve children’s achievement. Such programmes may be offered through a local centre, or in the home, or both” (Biddulph et al, 2003, p.10). This 'catch-them-when-they're-young' approach prevails in programmes like Early Start in the USA and it was a significant outcome of the Taumata Whanonga hui to address issues of student disengagement held in Wellington in 2009.

The initial brief for children's centres in England was to provide:

- In centres in the 30% most disadvantaged areas: integrated early learning and childcare (early years provision) for a minimum of 10 hours a day, five days a week, 48 weeks a year; and support for a childminder network
- In centres in the 70% least disadvantaged areas, which do not elect to offer early years provision: drop-in activity sessions for children, such as stay and play sessions
- Family Support, including support and advice on parenting, information about services available in the area and access to specialist, targeted services; and Parental Outreach
- Child and Family Health Services, such as antenatal and postnatal support, information and guidance on breastfeeding, health and nutrition, smoking cessation support, and speech and language therapy and other specialist support
- Links with Jobcentre Plus to encourage and support parents and carers who wish to consider

training and employment

- Quick and easy access to wider services (DCSF).

Over time children's centres have developed in line with the needs of the local community so no one children's centre is the same. Services have grown to include:

- access to a dentist, dietician or physiotherapist
- 'stop smoking' clinics
- access to expert advice, support and short-term breaks if your child has learning difficulties or disabilities
- Citizens Advice
- parenting classes
- English language classes.

Many children's centres have located near or on school sites and have built close relationships with their host schools. At Chepping View Primary School a children's centre operates within the school grounds. Tanya, whose title is 'learning mentor', explained the centre's work to me. They try to engage parents using community networks, health system referrals and school contacts. The community has a large Muslim population and Tanya said the young mothers from this community are often difficult to engage because of restrictions on going out of the house without a male partner.

Tanya outlined one of the centre's programmes, SPARKS. This is a sixteen week parenting skills programme for parents with children who are about to enter school, based upon the Incredible Years programme originating in the work of Caroline Webster-Stratton in the USA. The programme begins with a coffee morning at the centre. The centre provides creche facilities free for participants, who are further encouraged with a five pound book voucher for attending the first session and another ten pound voucher if they complete the course. Follow up sessions are held some time after the completion of the course.

Tanya's goal for the children's centre at Chepping View is to build long term relationships with families and they have had some success with this. She recognises that marginalised families face multiple issues of deprivation which cannot be solved in a single contact or programme and that it takes years to build trust. To this end she shares the concerns of many that children's centres are being cut back just as they are really gaining ground with hard-to-reach families.

In a recent paper Hoare and Wilson (2007) advocate for the adoption of children's centres in New

Zealand as a way of combating our poor performance with our most deprived families.

Federations

Mention has already been made of schools in England being able to join together or federate. A few of the schools I visited belonged to federations. Little Ilford School has federated with its local primary schools, with two principals acting in an executive leadership role. The federation develops common programmes and expectations of student achievement, runs combined professional development programmes and employs a Family Support Worker. In addition to economies of scale the federation model is seen to benefit communities by providing a relatively seamless educational experience for students and families. With reference to hard-to-reach families a federated model should make it harder for students to slip between the cracks.

Sir Dexter Hutt, chief executive of the Hastings Federation of Schools, believes federations have a moral purpose. "I would speak passionately about every school becoming a member of a federation of schools. And groups of schools working together, pooling the expertise, pooling the resources they've got, being judged by the weakest link, so they become a genuine family of schools, and working to help each other. It has been a failure of the system that school to school competition has seen some schools succeed and others fail. It is right that school leaders, who serve the education system as a whole, should strive for the success of all schools and their students, not just their own - excellence for all. This is the moral purpose of education" (Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, 2001).

The vardo – a modern Gypsy/Traveller caravan

One final example of integrated programmes worth mentioning is an initiative of the Dorset Local Education Authority. On a fine summer morning I visited the Keithacres Gypsy/Traveller campsite in Dorset with Nikki, head of the Dorset Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service (EMTAS). This is a summer site for a group of about twelve families, in a field on the outskirts of a small town. The families normally arrive in early May and remain here for up to three months. The men are engaged with seasonal work on local farms or as contractors doing roading work, transport and gardening. The children are supposedly enrolled in the local schools but attendance for many is infrequent.

The 'vardo' is a modern campervan, fitted out as a classroom and stuffed with resources. It is the base for staff from a range of services. The morning I visited the vardo was parked on the grass in the centre of the ring of caravans. An awning stretched from one side and groundsheets spread out

over the grass. Tables, chairs, an easel, building blocks, toy cars and trains, painting materials were scattered across the ground with half a dozen young children enjoying them. Inside several older girls were receiving an art lesson.

Altogether I counted six staff working with the vardo that morning: an EMTAS teacher, EMTAS pre-school play worker, two from a local children's centre, and two from a charity – the Children's Society Project. Their approach was very low-key: apart from the art lesson all other contact with children seemed largely play-based. Children engaged as they pleased. The vardo was onsite for just an hour, long enough to connect with the children and some of the mums – who get drawn to the vardo through the enthusiasm of their children – and short enough to keep them wanting more. Nikki explained that the vardo has no regular schedule of visits: if it did the children would never go to school on the day they knew the vardo was arriving.

The vardo clearly fits within the philosophy of engagement of Gypsy/Traveller families that I heard from EMTAS staff in Dorset, Devon and Cornwall. Their approach is to build trust over a long period of time (both EMTAS staff who hosted my visits have held their jobs for twenty years or more) to gradually shift the deep aversion to mainstream culture held by most Gypsy/Traveller families. It is painstaking work, with few swift rewards and many setbacks. Furthermore, it is an approach falling out of favour in an age that demands quick returns. EMTAS services across England are experiencing severe budget cuts.

Challenges and Contingencies

This section considers the conditions in which activities described in the previous section will have the greatest chance of success. What challenges must be met, what contingencies must be established, in order to succeed in engaging hard-to-reach families?

Challenges and contingencies are considered at two levels: school-wide and system-wide.

1. School

It seems a truism to say that schools can have a powerful effect on student achievement. Good teaching, strong leadership and excellent resources are all highly influential in every child's education (Hattie, 2009). By the same token, schools can also be the cause of disengagement and failure among some students. All too often, the students of hard-to-reach families are those most at risk of failure. Lack of home support makes these students vulnerable to failure and more reliant on good teaching and effective leadership to give them a shot at success. Schools can improve the chances of at-risk students by attending to several factors.

Culture

How well do schools create a culture that truly embraces hard-to reach families? Culture, by its very nature, is difficult to change. 'The way we do things around here' is a set of deeply ingrained habits, most of which we are unaware of. Te Kotahitanga (Bishop and Berryman, 2005) has pointed out an uncomfortable truth that the failure of Maori students in New Zealand schools is, to a fair degree, due to a hostile school culture. Epstein also found deficit assumptions about families, especially single-parent families, to be a barrier to effective partnerships in America (Epstein, 2001). Successfully engaging hard-to-reach families and students (and success means improving student achievement) starts with considering how to create a school culture that embraces even those at the margins, to connect with parents "on their terms, not on the school's terms" (NCSL2, p.19).

One way to assess the inclusiveness of school culture is to ask the community. This is where community members who already have a stake in the school are invaluable. Sally at Samworth Enterprise Academy and Jacqui at Pool Academy are touchstones for their communities' perceptions of the school. Most importantly, they are confident about confronting deficits and

telling staff when things are not right. This does not happen by chance: they have been recruited because of their connections to the community and they work in a climate of high trust where they know any concerns they raise will be listened to and acted upon. The willingness of leadership to model good practice is vital in this: leaders who demonstrate the ability to listen, consider and act on problems are effective at building positive culture (Macbeath & Dempster, 2009).

Building a positive school culture means knitting the school more closely into its community. This can sometimes create tension, when the largely middle class and mainstream values of school confront the values of other classes, cultures or religions. In my view educators must be willing to see the world from another angle, not in order to shift their own values (although that may happen) but to try to grasp how life looks for the children and families in their schools. A dilemma arises when community or family values are genuinely at odds with mainstream culture, as represented by the local school. Educators need to decide when to allow their school to reflect local values and when to assert what they believe is right, even at the risk of causing offence and estrangement. Yvonne, the principal of Little Ilford School in East London, gave me a good example. When I visited the school was holding an anti-homophobia week, with posters promoting gay rights very visible throughout the school. Yvonne pointed out that this is offensive, sacrilegious even, to the Muslim community and that she would probably have families threatening to remove their children and send them to a local madrasa, a Muslim faith school. Yvonne was unrepentant: gay rights is a mainstream value in England and this was one area where she felt the school had to lead the community. She also believed the students get a much better education at Little Ilford than they do at the local madrasa – and the Muslim families know this.

A final point about school culture is to recognise that what works for one group of families will not necessarily work for others (Okagaki and Frensch, 1998). School culture must strike a balance between maintaining a foundation of firm beliefs and being flexible enough to accommodate most, if not all, points of view.

Time

While we use the term hard-to-reach with reference to parents it is true that teachers may also be hard to reach. A busy working schedule can prevent teachers from developing relationships with parents, yet these challenges are often the reasons preventing parents supporting teachers' goals (NCSL1, p.3). We often debate how we can buy more time in our overloaded curriculum and endless rounds of meetings. A consistent practice among the schools I visited is to shift the burden of managing parent partnerships from teachers to other staff. Parent support advisors and

community champions are creative ways of building stronger partnerships with hard-to-reach families that actually decrease teachers' workloads. Schools are creative in funding these extra staffing positions: sometimes sharing a position among several local schools or funding it through community trusts and charities.

Leadership

Good leadership is second only to good teaching in promoting student learning (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009). Leadership is equally vital to successfully engaging hard-to-reach families (NCSL2). Murphy, Elliott, Goldring and Porter (2007), in a study of highly effective school leaders, found considerable evidence that effective leaders are expert at linking the school to parents and community.

“Much more so than peers, these leaders weigh connections in terms of their value in enhancing the academic and social learning of students. That is, they engage families and other community members in the service of school goals, the learning agenda and student performance. Inside the school, these women and men model community collaboration for staff, establish norms regarding the importance of parent connections, and provide opportunities for staff to develop the collaborative skills needed to work effectively with parents. They also ensure that information on family and community concerns, expectations and interests inform school decisions” (2007, p.194).

Several points made above were evident among the school principals and leaders I visited in England and the USA. Pat, the principal of Samworth Enterprise Academy, embodied a leader who was passionate about the school's place as the hub of its community. In a country where schools are increasingly locked behind wire fences and security gates the entrance to Samworth Academy was wide and welcoming, with Pat standing at the door as bold as brass and ready to engage with anybody who turned up. She models her commitment to community engagement by investing heavily in parent support and education resources, by promoting the school within the community at every opportunity and by a close partnership with the school's sponsors.

An outstanding feature of the highly successful principals I observed was how little time they seem to spend in their offices. These were leaders who knew their school intimately, spent a lot of time in classrooms, dining halls and corridors, sat on community boards and local development trusts. At the extreme end of this approach to principalship was Frank, the principal of KIPP Middle School in New York, who spends his days sitting at a small student's desk at a point where two

corridors meet so he can survey the entire school at a glance, with just his laptop for company. He told me he almost never uses his office.

New Zealand's highly devolved school system burdens principals with up to twice the administrative workload of their peers in other countries (Ministry of Education, 2008). Few kiwi principals would wish to follow Frank's example but most would be happy to spend more time supporting student achievement through the practices described in this report. A research report by the National College of School Leadership, *Leadership for Parental Engagement*, throws a challenge for leaders to escape not just the office but the school. "An important cultural shift appears to have occurred as schools increasingly accept they need to go out to meet parents in the community rather than expect them only to come into school; that they need to take as their starting point the reality of parents' contexts and work to develop genuine partnerships" (NCSL2, p.7).

The report makes two further important points. The first is that school leaders do not have to do all the work themselves; they can use other staff to "go out to meet parents," especially members of the community who have been drawn into the school, either as employees or in other roles. The second point is that a greater commitment to the development of the whole child through engaging family and community inevitably leads to schools working collaboratively. *Leadership for Parental Engagement* describes schools working in some sort of collaborative arrangement with other schools and agencies. The examples are not dissimilar to collaborative projects that have been explored in New Zealand, such as the Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara (SEMO) project in Mangere and Otara in the 1990s, but they explore the potential of collaboration in much more diverse ways and they are generally driven by schools, with external agencies engaged as the schools desire.

Funding

Many of the schools I visited served very deprived communities and seemed able to access funding for community engagement projects through a range of sources directed specifically to communities in need. Children's centres, for example, operate mainly in areas of economic deprivation. Not all funding sources rely on public money. For example, half the salary of the parent support advisor at Monteaegle School in London was paid by a charitable trust whose contributors were some of the largest banks and finance houses in the country, with offices in London's central business district just a few miles away. The report *Leadership for Parental Engagement* describes the growing importance of charitable trusts and social enterprise business models in the work of school-based clusters. Some federations of schools manage significant businesses that develop and operate

shared learning facilities and other services using a mixture of public and private funding for the benefit of the schools and their communities. It is an idea worth exploring in New Zealand.

Online Learning Environments

One of the questions this project set out to answer was how innovative educators use digital technology to engage students and families in online learning environments. In New Zealand we are getting to grips with digital platforms like Knowledge Net and Ultranet that many believe have the potential to transform the home-school partnership.

The schools I observed using OLEs in England are grappling with the same challenges we face in New Zealand, principally around how to 'bolt on' a powerful new technology to a traditional school model. Barriers to uptake include: teacher resistance, costs for training and internet services, sustainability of new programmes, technical support and penetration of computers into the home.

Schools in England appear to have several advantages over New Zealand in the development and sustainability of digital technology. First, schools receive (or have received – this may be changing in the current economic climate) more technical support, usually through the Local Education Authority (LEA) – the middle-tier funding and support agencies that we lack in New Zealand. Thus, at Chepping View Primary the Buckinghamshire LEA is the school's internet service provider and also the provider of technical support. It hosts an OLE (Moodle) which schools can access at little cost, benefiting from the economies of scale of the LEA. In New Zealand, the success of consortia like the Greater Christchurch Schools Network, point to the value of schools combining to get the benefits of scale in purchasing and developing digital learning facilities.

Schools in England also appear to receive more funding than we do in New Zealand. William Harding Combined School in Buckinghamshire, a primary school with a roll of 700, employs a full time IT manager and also uses the LEA-hosted Moodle platform. A couple of schools I visited had also taken advantage of a scheme that gave free computers to low-income families. I gather the scheme has been cancelled but it was a strategy to overcome the problem of digital technology putting up another barrier for some families, as schools move away from traditional methods of communication, reporting and homework.

Communications

Digital technology is just one way in which home-school communication can be improved or impeded depending on how it is used. Educational jargon, dense and impenetrable communications,

too much or too little information, or simply the wrong information all have an effect on the relationship between school and home. Hard-to-reach families are particularly hard to reach through regular school communications like newsletters and notebooks. Yet too often we continue to use the same failing techniques and continue to be frustrated by their failure. Our response is often to blame the family: after all, we work hard to produce this newsletter, the information it contains seems clear to us, so what's the issue?

The challenge is to shape communication more cleverly to match the audience. Do not assume that all parents have identical literacy levels, or are interested in the same kinds of things or use the communication channels that we prefer to use. Again, the involvement of community-oriented staff can be crucial here. At Pool Academy in Cornwall, Jacqui, the Gypsy/Traveller coordinator, has produced a range of pamphlets specifically for these families. The language in the pamphlets is pitched at the literacy and interest levels of its intended readers, information is brief and to the point and visually the documents are designed to affirm the Gypsy/Traveller experience.

If it is not possible to employ somebody from the community who can do this work it is useful at least to consult with the community about school communications from time to time; to ask them what works and what doesn't, to allow for alternative ideas to emerge.

2. System

During this project I became aware that structures and resources at the system level can both support and hinder efforts to engage hard-to-reach families and improve their children's achievement. On the positive side I envied those schools whose local authorities shouldered much of the burden of introducing and managing digital learning resources. I admired schools involved in collaborative or federated relationships sanctioned by government policy and supported by a range of funders.

On the negative side I noticed how a climate of accountability disadvantages the most marginalised students in ways I had not previously considered. In England and the USA schools operate in a high-stakes environment of measurable outcomes. English schools are measured on a wide range of indicators, although by far the greatest weight is given to results on nationalised Standardised Achievement Tests (SATs). Principals and teachers feel enormous pressure to perform to targets, with the knowledge that any failure on their part will be reflected in their school's place in the league tables that are widely published. Test results and numerous other indicators of performance

are measured by OFSTED. OFSTED's ratings are influential in many ways: for example, schools that wish to access the government's academy status, enabling greater freedom and more funding, must have a 'good' to 'outstanding' rating.

I will consider two examples of how accountability affects students from hard-to-reach families. Both examples, in this instance, refer to Gypsy/Traveller students.

At one secondary school the principal talked to me about their commitment to succeed with Gypsy/Traveller students. From what I was told the school was an outstanding example of good practice with this group. However, they hold back from doing more even though they know they could, because they are wary of getting a reputation within the community of being a 'gypsy school' and because attracting more Gypsy/Traveller students will negatively affect their attendance results. The principal explained that every school is required to adopt an attendance target, which is closely monitored by OFSTED and the local authority. Failure to meet the target can have serious consequences for the school and unfortunately Gypsy/Traveller students have by far the worst attendance records of any group. His story explained to me why schools seem to take little responsibility for successfully transitioning Gypsy/Traveller students from primary to secondary.

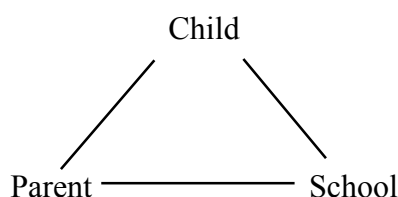
The second example is from a small primary school. Here the principal described the effect that just one or two under-achieving students at any year-level can have of dragging down her SATs results. For this reason she is reluctant to take on Gypsy/Traveller students who arrive part way through the year (which they often do), particularly in the period leading up to the SATs tests in May, her assumption being that these students are below average (which apparently they often are). Another principal told me that although consideration is given to the progress shown by students in SATs tests – the value added by the school to their learning - judgment ultimately lies on their achievement level.

Summary

“There are various forms of partnership, but not all are effective. Those which are poorly designed, based on deficit views, and not responsive to the needs of families can be ineffective, and even counterproductive. Programmes which are effective respect parents and children, are socially responsible, and are responsive to families and the social conditions that shape their lives. Constructive partnerships empower those involved by (a) fostering autonomy and self-reliance within families, schools and communities, (b) building on the strong aspirations and motivation that most parents have for their children’s development, and (c) adding to (rather than undermining) the values, experiences and competencies of parents and children. The evidence is that teachers can do much to initiate such constructive partnerships.”

(Biddulph et al, 2003, p.219)

Education is most successful when it is a fully functioning partnership between child, school and parent.



If any part of this learning triangle is disabled the entire structure collapses. The message for schools is that it is not sufficient to strive for success with a child if not striving also for success with the parent.

With hard-to-reach families the challenge for schools is how to fashion a partnership when one or other party is less willing or able to contribute. Do we accept that there are some families whose values and behaviours are so antithetical to school that we turn our back on the home-school partnership? Is it idealistic to think school can positively influence the values of such families? On the other hand, do we sometimes write-off families and students too quickly because they are different?

If we are serious about placing the child at the centre of schooling this will only truly happen when schools accept that we cannot educate the child in isolation from the home environment and we must engage with the family however difficult and discouraging that may be. Schools exist, in part, to train children in a society's dominant values but if in doing so we fail to connect with some families then we have failed in a more fundamental purpose – to provide an education for every child.

During my visits to schools in England and the USA I have observed that schools under pressure to perform within a narrow range of approved outcomes, usually measured through high-stakes testing, tend to do less well for the most marginalised students. For example, we have considered how accountability to OFSTED for attendance rates in English schools discriminates against inclusive education initiatives for Gypsy/Traveller students. We know that one size does not fit all. Our challenge is to help every child succeed, which means using the broadest possible approach to success within the limits of our resources and imaginations. How many of us can genuinely say we are doing this in our schools?

When working with hard-to-reach families it is crucial to always believe that every parent wants the best for his or her child. We must continue to believe this even when their actions seem contradictory. Equally crucial is the extent to which schools assume a role in educating families. Sometimes the education of the child can continue to move forward only if the family is also educated. The work of parent support advisors and children's centres in England is a creative step forward, taking advantage of schooling as the primary - and sometimes only - effective relationship between marginalised families and society, but not abandoning schools to do this difficult work alone. A few schools in New Zealand have succeeded in creating structures comparable to children's centres – Victory Primary School in Nelson is a stunning example – but I agree with Hoare and Wilson (2007) that investment in early years resources like children's centres should be made in New Zealand.

A few big ideas

How, then, can schools take action to create stronger partnerships? From this project the following ideas have emerged as vital to any attempts at improving engagement with hard-to-reach families:

1. Address school culture: how does our school culture promote or discourage parental engagement?
2. Use key people: staff and community
3. Engage with community resources; formal and informal, including social agencies
4. Initiate parent education

5. Set high expectations for attendance and achievement and manage these closely
6. Use technology. Online Learning Environments may be particularly powerful with hard-to-reach families. Be clever in finding ways to overcome barriers for disadvantaged students, such as computer clubs and homework centres.

School leaders are vital in all these processes. Key messages for school leadership of parental engagement are:

1. Leadership must be outward looking
2. Leaders must be directly engaged in modelling, monitoring and dialogue
3. Leadership must be distributed. Enabling others to develop leadership skills makes a real difference. Parent support workers who work with skill and authority make a significant difference to the lives of individual children and families on a daily basis
4. Leadership must be imaginative and steadfast. Developing a clear vision for parental engagement underpinned by a core belief that parents and children matter creates a powerful motive for gaining the commitment of staff, parents and the community. (NCSL4, p.8).

And finally, the words of Nikki from the Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service:

“you have to build trust first then change the behaviours. Take small steps and remember that improvement can take years to quantify.”

Resources

Below are some resources that support the improvement of parental engagement in schools. I have found these helpful in writing this report and in my work at Southbridge School.

1. National College for School Leadership: www.nationalcollege.org.uk. The NCSL is a rich resource for school leaders. New Zealand school leaders may join the NCSL as associate members for a modest cost. Membership allows access to discussion groups, publications and an extensive range of online research reports, including a large section on home-school partnerships, with many examples of effective practice. Particularly useful is the Leading and Developing Parental Engagement audit tool for schools. This simple tool reviews parental engagements under five themes:

- Vision, values, culture and strategic direction
- Leadership of parental engagement
- Parental engagement in action
- Collaborative work beyond the school or cluster
- Sustainability

2. Specialist Schools and Academies Trust: www.ssatrust.org.uk. This independent organisation with headquarters in London originated as a practitioner-driven organisation for the growing number of academies and specialist schools in the UK. Today it represents all types of schools, with member schools in 36 countries, including New Zealand. SSAT's philosophy is 'by schools, for schools'. All work is designed and delivered by serving school leaders. New Zealand schools can join iNET, SSAT's international network, which allows access to resources, research and programmes for accreditation, one of which is a Parent Engagement Quality Standard, a comprehensive programme for developing parental engagement. iNET also hosts study tours and local support groups.

3. Biddulph, F., Biddulph, J., & Biddulph, C. (2003). *The Complexity of Community and Family Influences on Children's Achievement in New Zealand: Best Evidence Synthesis*. Wellington, ministry of Education. This BES is not just a theoretical discussion about parental engagement: it is packed with good ideas and practical strategies. The report can be downloaded from www.minedu.govt.nz. Flick to the final pages (p. 218 is excellent) for summaries of useful strategies for schools.

4. Reading Together: <http://www.readingtogether.net.nz/ReadingTogether.aspx> . This programme by Jeanne Biddulph is an excellent resource for parent education. The programme teaches parents how to read with their child. It can be run by teachers and has proven to be effective. Highly recommended.

5. SEAL for Parents: www.futurelinkpublishing.co.uk . SEAL is Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning. This parent education programme by Susie Davis was recommended to me by staff at Paddington Academy in London. They use it in conjunction with SEAL for students. It covers some of the same material that many New Zealand schools are familiar with through the DARE programme and others, but it is the most comprehensive parent education programme I have seen. The programme can be purchased via the above link or by contacting the publisher: sales@futurelinkpublishing.co.uk

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