
ENGAGING PARENTS IN RAISING ACHIEVEMENT - DO PARENTS KNOW THEY MATTER?

Professor Alma Harris and Dr Janet Goodall, University of Warwick

Introduction

This summary presents the findings from a research project funded by the 'Department for Education and Skills' that focused upon parental engagement and pupil achievement. The research consisted of an extensive review of the literature and in depth case studies with 30 schools over a twelve month period.

All the schools in the research project were involved in the 'Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement (EPRA) programme funded by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust'. The EPRA programme supported schools in developing a wide range of projects directly aimed at engaging parents in learning. The EPRA project funded innovative work in more than a hundred secondary schools across England. All of the projects focused on one or more of the following strands:

- Supporting parents to help their children learn
- Personalising provision for parents themselves as learners,
- Intelligent reporting ("ireporting"),
- Enhancing pastoral care.

The main aim of the EPRA project was to encourage schools to trial new ways of engaging parents in schools, particularly those parents seen as 'hard to reach'. The research project explored the impact of different forms of parental engagement upon pupil achievement and behaviour.

Key Findings

- Parental engagement is a powerful lever for raising student achievement in schools. Where parents and teachers work together to improve learning, the gains in achievement are significant.
- Parents have the greatest influence on the achievement of pupils through supporting their learning in the home rather than supporting activities in the school. It is their support of learning within the *home environment* that makes the maximum difference to achievement.
- Many schools involve parents in school-based or school related activities. This constitutes parental involvement rather than parental engagement. Parental involvement can encompass a whole range of activities with or within the school. Where these activities are not directly connected to learning they have little impact on pupil achievement.
- Parental engagement is heavily linked to socio-economic status, as well as parental experience of education. Parents of certain ethnic and social groups are less likely to engage with the school. Schools that offer bespoke forms of support to these parents (i.e. literacy classes, parenting skill support) are more likely to engage them in their children's learning.

¹More information can be found at: <http://www.schoolsnetwork.org.uk/raisingachievement/engagingparents/default.aspx>

- Parental engagement is positively influenced by the child's level of attainment: the higher the level of attainment, the more parents get involved.
- Parental engagement is viewed as a 'good thing' by teachers, parents and pupils although interpretations of the term vary. Parents view parental engagement as offering support to students while teachers tend to view it as a means to improved behaviour. Students view parental engagement as being primarily about moral support and interest in their progress.
- Schools that successfully engage parents in learning, consistently reinforce the fact that 'parents matter'. They develop a two way relationship with parents based on mutual trust, respect and a commitment to improving learning outcomes.
- Parents who are viewed as 'hard to reach' often see the school as 'hard to reach'. Where schools have made concerted efforts to engage the 'hard to reach' parents' evidence shows that the effect on pupil learning and behaviour is positive. The research shows a consistent relationship between increasing parental engagement (particularly of hard to reach parents) and improved attendance, behaviour and student achievement.
- Schools face certain barriers in engaging parents. These include practical issues such as lack of time, language barriers, child care issues and practical skills such as literacy issues and the ability to understand and negotiate the school system. Schools can offset these barriers by supporting parents to help their children learn; personalising provision for parents as learners; improving pastoral care; listening to parents and responding to real rather than perceived needs.
- The ERPA project has been an important catalyst for innovation and change in schools. It has encouraged schools to prioritise parental engagement and has provided them with the impetus to trial innovative approaches to working with parents.
- Schools in the EPRA project are now more aware of the importance of sustaining parental engagement and they recognise that linking parental engagement to learning is the key to securing improved pupil achievement.
- In EPRA schools located in more challenging areas, the engagement of parents was a central influence upon positive learning and behavioural outcomes.
- The EPRA network of schools is a powerful platform for enhancing and extending the work on parental engagement and raising achievement.

Methods

As a one year research project it was not possible to correlate student achievement to the various

activities undertaken by the EPRA schools. However the research team did have access to large scale data sets (e.g. performance, value added, attendance) all of the schools within the research sample and all schools in the wider ERPA project.

This data allowed us to identify and analyse any changes in patterns of performance, behaviour and attendance across more than 100 schools. Using this data the research team were able to plot trends and changes in performance and to connect these patterns to the qualitative case study data. This allowed differences in performance, behaviour and attendance to be identified and related to qualitative data.

In addition, there were a wide range of qualitative and quantitative measures and indicators used within the project that mapped the different type of activity against changes attitude, behaviour and orientation to learning. The research team looked particularly at the data related to those parents considered 'hard to reach' and the data from those schools located in more challenging circumstances.

The data showed that there was a positive relationship between increased parental engagement, particularly in the case of 'hard to reach parents', and positive learning outcomes.

Implications

The evidence from this research project suggests that there are effective ways in which schools can engage parents more fully in learning. It shows that engaging all parents but particularly the 'hard to reach parents' has a positive impact on achievement. The implications for schools are as follows:

- o Parental engagement must be a priority – rather than a bolt-on extra. It needs to be fully embedded and integrated in teaching and learning plans if it is to make a difference to achievement.
- o Communication with parents should be two way. Schools need to be clear about the aims of all communication with parents and to be prepared to listen to parents' needs.
- o Sustaining the engagement of parents as well as reaching those parents who are less engaged, should be built into forward planning.
- o Engaging 'hard to reach' parents has a significant impact on raising achievement and a positive affect on behaviour in schools. However engaging 'hard to reach parents' requires bespoke strategies that meet the need of the particular parent group.
- o Schools should consider the uses of new technologies in engaging parents but with caution. Schools need and be clear about what they aim to achieve as technology is not an end in itself. The main aim is to engage

parents in learning as this is the most powerful way of raising achievement even in the most challenging contexts.

Additional Information

DCSF Research Briefs and Research Reports can be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Dan Evans, DCSF, 7E, Caxton House, Tothill Street, London, SW1H 9NA

Email: daniel.evans@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.