



POLICY
DISCUSSION
PAPER

Parents' involvement in their children's learning and schools

How should their responsibilities relate to the role of the state?

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RESEARCH & POLICY FOR THE REAL WORLD

The Government's most recent White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (2005), seeks to increase parental choice, responsibility, power and involvement. In implementing these proposals it would do well to take account of the barriers to involvement identified in this paper as well as the risk that activities to promote involvement may only serve to promote the interests of the already involved and empowered.

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Introduction

A large body of evidence demonstrates a strong and positive link between parents' involvement and interest in a child's learning and a child's subsequent adjustment and achievement (see Desforges, 2003 for a review). Faced with the evidence of such a link policy-makers and practitioners have seized on the potential of parental involvement to improve achievement and raise standards in schools. However, evidence on the effectiveness of programmes designed to facilitate parental involvement is less convincing and less comprehensive. Moreover, should such initiatives be effective, they raise questions about whether they will increase the pupil attainment gap because children of involved parents will reap the benefits in contrast to those whose parents cannot or choose not to be involved.

This paper provides an overview of major policy and practice developments in parental involvement over recent decades, assesses the impact of such initiatives and discusses the contribution of the evidence to the debate on the boundaries between the respective rights and responsibilities of the state and parents towards children's learning.

Pressures of time and space mean that there is no discussion of parental choice over which school their child attends, although satisfaction with choice of school may well have a bearing on a parent's subsequent involvement. Neither does the paper address the more specialist area of parental involvement in the learning of children with special educational needs.

1. Policy and practice in the area of parental involvement

1.1 The basic legal responsibilities of the state and of parents

The 1944 Education Act (now Section 7 of the 1996 Education Act) places a duty on parents to ensure that their child receives:

Figure 1 **Epstein's conceptual framework for family-school-community involvement** (described in Desforges 2003, adapted from Kreider, 2000)

Type of involvement	Definition
Parenting	providing housing, health, nutrition, safety; parenting skills in parent-child interactions; home conditions to support study; information to help schools know child
Communicating	information to help schools know child
Volunteering	in school help in classrooms/events
Learning at home	teaching at home, help with homework, help with educational choices/options
Decision making	membership of PTA/governor
Collaborating with the community	contributions to school

'... efficient full-time education suitable to his age, ability and aptitude, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.'

In other words, the legislation makes it clear that parents are responsible in law for ensuring that their child receives an education either in school or at home. The state supports parents in meeting this obligation by entitling children to 12 years of education.

While in law parents' responsibilities begin and end at the school gates, the typology outlined in Figure 1 indicates that academics have categorised a wide range of activities involving parents in their children's education. The first category of 'parenting' describes the normative level of care expected to facilitate a child's development and learning, and includes making sure children turn up and stay at school. Beyond that, however, are many more areas for involvement. Moreover, the nature of involvement changes over the child's school life. Involvement is most intense in the early years but tails off during secondary school as children's learning becomes more independent, the nature of school life changes and subject areas become more advanced.

1.2 Policy developments

It is informative to look at policy developments within Epstein's typology of parental involvement, not least because it highlights the focus of the current Government and its predecessor on increasing communication, and in particular, the flow of information from schools to parents. The current

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Government has also initiated a number of policies to support parents in their parenting role and hence in their role as the child's 'first educator'.

Policies around parenting

A raft of policies has been instituted to increase parents' access to support and childcare in the early years. These include the expansion of nursery places and the creation of the Early Years and Childcare Development partnerships - organisations with local responsibility for the provision of early education and childcare. More recently, the five-year strategy for children and learners (July, 2004) promises a system of 'educare' designed to provide 12.5 hours per week of high quality childcare to all pre-schoolers. It also promises the development of dawn-to-dusk schools that provide breakfast childcare and after-school clubs for working parents. While the proposals increase parents' rights to parenting support and hence support in promoting their children's development and learning, some of them also reduce parents' direct input into their children's lives.

The Government has also ploughed significant sums of money into parent support initiatives largely designed and implemented by the voluntary sector and grassroots groups and targeted particularly at disadvantaged families. Initiatives include Sure Start, The Children's Fund, The Parenting Fund, and the Family Support Grant.

While Government has bolstered parents' rights to support and help with childcare, some initiatives appear to bypass parents and target children directly (Henricson, 2003). For example, there has been a substantial increase in personal, social and health education in schools, with schools taking on responsibilities that many parents would consider to be theirs e.g. talking about marriage, parenting, sex and relationship education, self-esteem. Pilots have also been conducted to provide confidential health advice and contraception directly to children. Less controversially, Connexions provides personal development advice, support and opportunities directly to young people without a requirement for parental involvement.

While the previous (Conservative) Government did not promote parenting support on the scale of the current government, it did bolster parental rights and involvement by giving parents the right to express a preference for the school of their choice (the 1980 Education Act). Indeed, the 1980s witnessed a period emphasising the role of parents as consumers, embodied in the *Parents Charter* (1994).

Initiatives to improve communication and access to information

Partly in response to parents' newly created role as consumers, the last two decades have seen a proliferation of legislation guaranteeing parents' rights to information – a prerequisite for making an informed choice. The 1988 Education Reform Act required schools to provide parents with information about the National Curriculum and their child's progress on it.

Legislation flowing out of the 1997 White Paper, *Excellence in Schools*, extended parents' right to information, to include:

- Consultation with parents as part of the inspection process;
- Information about a child's progress in the form of an annual report, access to a pupil's educational record and information about the school curriculum;
- An obligation on schools to produce:
 - an annual report outlining the steps taken by the governing body to discharge its functions
 - an annual parents meeting to discuss the report
 - a school prospectus

More recently, the Government's five-year strategy for children and learners promises to increase access to information through 'School Profiles', which will combine statistical performance data with a broader picture of the school's activities and achievements.

Access to nationally available information has been enhanced via the Government's Parents' Centre Website and through publications such as the Learning Journey booklets, containing information for parents about the curriculum. Under the most recent White Paper on education, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (2005), the Government plans to enhance access to information further. For example, there are proposals to improve the Parents' Centre Website by creating links to, for example, School Profiles, admissions arrangements, and arrangements for transport to school and there are plans to improve the quality and consistency of information provided in the School Profiles.

There are also proposals that parents who may find it difficult to make the best use of this information will have access to more personalised support through 'choice advisors'. This LEA-run network of advisors will hold open question and answer surgeries and one-on-one sessions to help parents make an informed choice about which school to send their child to.

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There are also plans to improve the flow of information between parents and schools about individual pupils. These include:

- a requirement that schools provide reports on pupil progress three times a year, and ensure opportunities for face-to-face discussion with teachers;
- increased online access so that parents can log-in to find out if their child is registered in lessons that day, reports on their behaviour, and homework provisions.

Home-school agreements

Home-school agreements encompass communication and involvement in learning. A substantial aim of policy over the last twenty years has been to increase parents' rights. Home-school agreements complement these moves by outlining parents' responsibilities. A requirement of every school, the agreements are intended to set out: the school's aims, values and responsibilities towards its pupils; the responsibilities of the pupil's parents; and what the school expects of its pupils. All parents are encouraged to sign them, although this is not compulsory and neither are agreements enforceable under law.

Learning at home

Home-school agreements are also expected to outline the school's policy on homework, which should be in keeping with the government's published homework guidelines. Although there is an expectation that parents will support their children's learning by providing the environment and help a child needs to complete their homework, there is no legal requirement for them to do so. Responsibility is intimated rather than legislated.

Volunteering

Government activity in the area of parent volunteering has been muted. However, the National Literacy Strategy encourages teachers to use parents as volunteers in the classroom and encourages parents to assist children with their reading and writing homework at Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2.

Decision-making

The previous (Conservative) government made the first move to increasing parental involvement in decision-making by introducing the right to vote to remove schools from LEA control, the requirement that two parent-governors be elected to the governing body, and through the delegation of financial and management controls to schools.

More recently, this Government's strategy for securing parental involvement in the *Excellence in Schools* White Paper (1997) included a promise to give 'parents a voice'. However, few changes have been enacted and these have been focused on parent-governors. They include increasing the number of parent-governor representatives and requiring Local Authorities to provide parent governors with full places on LEA education committees.

However, these provisions are set to change again should the current White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (2005), come into force. Under these plans, all schools will be eligible to become Trust Schools. Where the Trust has the right to appoint the majority of governors (provisions vary) then parent-governor representation may be lost. In these circumstances, Trusts will be required to establish Parent Councils, who will act in an advisory and consultative capacity to the Trust. Whatever their structure, school governing bodies will have a statutory duty to have regard for parents' views and the quality of the schools' engagement with parents will continue to be assessed through the Ofsted inspection process. It is not clear how the proposed changes to the roles and responsibilities of LEAs under the White Paper will affect parental representation and involvement at LEA level.

Community Collaboration

Education Action Zones came into effect in 1998¹. They involve partnerships between local statutory, community and business organisations with a view to raising educational standards in groups of schools in disadvantaged areas. The Forums, set up to write and manage the implementation of an EAZ's plan, are intended to involve representation from parents as well as other stakeholders.

With a view to widening partnerships in education, the Government has also given schools the power to provide community services and facilities in partnership with local providers through 'extended schools' (The Education Act 2002). These school-based initiatives cover a range of activities from: providing extra curricular activities; leisure and

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learning facilities and programmes for the community; early years provision; support for family and parenting activities; and multi-agency working. They are one step removed from programmes to involve parents directly in children's education, rather, extended or community schools act as a focus for more generic family support, with the longer-term aim of improving student achievement by tackling the broader social obstacles that inhibit it. This initiative echoes the parenting support developments noted at the beginning of this section and reinforces the Government's commitment to increase parents' ability to access support either directly or through the extra-curricular support schools provide to its pupils and their families.

Overall directions

The general thrust of policy has been to increase parents' rights to access information. Much of this information is designed to help parents make choices about schools, so empowering parents as 'consumers'. There is no way of knowing what impact the provision of information has had on parents' involvement. Some critics argue that the emphasis on parents as consumers creates distance between schools and parents (Macbeth, 1993). Others stress that most of these policies are not designed to promote genuine partnership between schools and parents. For example, Hallgarten (2000) notes that rather than promote communication, information policies have merely increased the flow of information from school to parent. Others also argue that some of the Government's rhetoric has painted parents as 'problems'; either for failing to ensure their children participate in school or for failing to provide children with the foundations they need to succeed in school. For example, Carvel (1998 cit Crozier, 1999) reports David Blunkett, the then Secretary of State for Education, as saying to a conference in 1998:

"Where there is a problem it is all too often because parents claim not to have the time, because they have disengaged from their children's education, or because ... they lack even the basics of parenting skills ... So far from being a nanny state, we must become an enabling state, which ensures that parents and families have the backing they need."
(Sheffield, 1998)

Blunkett then went on to present home-school agreements as part of a package of support offered by the Government. But are they supportive? And indeed, do they serve to involve parents as partners in their children's schools as the presentation surrounding their launch suggests? As we shall

see in Section Two, the design and implementation of home-school agreements raises questions both about their inclusiveness and effectiveness.

1.3 Developments in practice

Even a cursory examination of school-family-community links in England and Wales reveals a welter of activity in the area. Activities are taking place at school, LEA and national level and are designed to improve relationships, encourage parents in their own learning and that of their children's, and ultimately to raise standards. It is impossible to provide a full account of activities here². Rather, the section provides a brief glimpse of the type of programmes that are happening across the typology of involvement outlined earlier.

Parenting

The range of programmes currently receiving Sure Start funding encapsulate state funded but locally driven activities that are ongoing across the country to help parents provide the parenting styles and environment that will facilitate their child's pre-school learning.

One such example is PEEPs (Peers Early Educational Partnership) (Evangelou and Sylva, 2003). This programme comprises weekly group sessions led by trained staff, involving parent and child in either existing nursery and care settings or in freestanding groups. The sessions cover different aspects of home learning and play relevant to children's literacy and numeracy development. Parents also have access to learning resources and receive support through ideas for home-based activities, one-to-one conversations and home visits.

School-home communication

Government policies to promote communication have largely focused on increasing the amount of information that passes from schools to parents. However, there have been a number of local, school-based initiatives to promote two-way communication, many of which have attempted to capitalise on Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

A national initiative, Mychildatschool.com, is designed to give parents online access to information on their child's progress, attendance and behaviour via the school's administration system. There are also plans to use the system for homework assignments and email messaging between

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parents and teachers. A number of schools have already signed up to the scheme. Proposals in the recent White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (2005), aim to make this type of access commonplace for parents.

Volunteering

Parent volunteering is a well-established practice, with some analysts suggesting that the number of volunteers has increased despite increases in female workforce participation. Particularly noteworthy projects include programmes to train parents as volunteer educators. For example, some Education Action Zones are running accredited courses, and Bristol city is running a Parent Co-ordinators project which trains people to support parents in their involvement in their children's education and schools as well as encouraging parents in their own learning.

Learning at home

Government led initiatives to help parents support their children in home-learning include the 'Learning Journey' booklets which give parents guidance on the curriculum and on homework activities. But there are a plethora of local initiatives. For example, Whitley Bay High School runs workshops with parents to raise their confidence in supporting their children's learning. At the national level the Community Education Development Centre's SHARE project runs in over 68 authorities and 800 schools. The scheme helps parents of primary and secondary school age children to be involved in their children's learning through gaining knowledge about the curriculum and about school teaching styles, provision of resources and by helping parents to develop activities to do with children.

Decision-making

Involving parents in decision-making is probably the least developed area for parental participation on the ground. In theory, schools were to consult all parents on the implementation of home-school agreements. However, evaluations reveal that individual consultation was not as widespread as it should have been (Coldwell et al 2003). Despite this, there are good practice examples of involvement. Melbourn Village College in Cambridge set up a series of small group discussions to think about 'what makes a good school'. A 'Parents as Co-educators' group was then formed to take forward consultation on home-school agreements (discussed in Hallgarten, 2000).

Some schools also organise regular parent forums, such as Woodloes Junior School, Warwickshire, which holds termly forums to review communication and provide parents with an opportunity to discuss general school policies (discussed in Hallgarten, 2000).

Collaborating with the community

Government legislation on extended schools (2002) paved the way for schools to provide a broad range of activities and support to the local community, in partnership with other agencies. For example, Our Lady, Star of the Sea, Sefton, is in the process of building partnerships between business, community and voluntary groups to deliver health and midwifery services, credit unions, community policing, social work, and leisure activities from the school (DfES, Standards site).

Overview

While there is a considerable amount of activity in the area of parental involvement, current evaluations provide only a piecemeal picture of effects. There is a pressing need to have more effective, systematic evaluation of what is going on alongside mechanisms for consolidating and sharing good practice.

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2. The impact of parental involvement

There is a strong distinction in the literature between the impact of a parent's involvement that naturally occurs in the course of parenting and the impact of initiatives that are designed to promote involvement, particularly by bringing parents into the school environment. The distinction is an important one because research on the former provides a powerful case for the impact of parental engagement while the evidence on the success of the latter remains inconclusive and patchy. The next section explores the impact of parents' 'natural' interest and involvement before moving on to the impact of more formal involvement.

2.1. The benefits of 'naturally occurring' parental involvement

A significant number of studies have examined the impact of parents' involvement on different aspects of their children's education. This section draws heavily on a comprehensive review of this literature conducted by Desforges (2003) for the Department for Education and Skills.

Pre-school development and school readiness

The pre-school home environment, including the nature and quality of play activities, is critical to pre-school children's cognitive development and readiness for school. Children's home environments, including their exposure to books, letters and activities that promote learning through play, are the strongest predictor of differences between children's performance when they enter school (National Literacy Trust, 2001). In turn, children's early attainment scores are a significant predictor of later achievement (Desforges, 2003).

Attainment

Parental involvement as children get older also has significant benefits for children's achievement (Brassett-Grundy, 2002). At primary school age, the home learning environment and the nature of parental involvement has a greater influence on achievement than variations in the quality of schools (Desforges, 2003). Using data from the National Child Development Study, Feinstein and Symmons

(1999) demonstrated that parental interest has a more significant impact on achievement at age 16 than social class, family size and parents' educational achievement. Using the All Exams Index (scaled between 0–100) they showed that the combined advantage of coming from a high social class family where the parents stayed on at school after sixteen equated to 5.98 percentage points on the Index compared to a difference of 24.4 points between those in the no parental interest group and those in the highest levels of interest.

Aspirations and ongoing engagement with education

Not all researchers have found a consistent or direct relationship between parental interest during secondary school and adolescent achievement. However, there appears to be a consensus that involvement has a positive impact on young people's staying on rates, aspirations and likelihood of going on to further or higher education (Castambis, 2001; Sacker et al, 2002 cit Desforges). Parental involvement in adolescence also appears to have an indirect impact on attainment through its influence on a child's self-concept (Gonzalez-Pienda, 2002 cit Desforges).

Emotional and behavioural adjustment

One of the ways that parental involvement influences children's achievement is through helping the child develop a pro-social, pro-learning self-concept (Desforges, 2003). It is not surprising therefore that parental involvement is associated with healthy adjustment as well as academic achievement. This is evident from pre-school days, as noted above, when a positive home learning environment has been found to be associated with higher levels of co-operation, sociability and confidence, and lower levels of anti-social and worried or upset behaviour (Melhuish et al, 2001). Its impact is also evident among older children. For example, Dubois et al (1994) found that family support and the quality of the parent-child relationship predicted school adjustment in a sample of 10–12 year olds (cit Desforges, 2003).

Encouraging resilience

The positive impact of parental involvement remains even after controlling for the deleterious effects of social class, material deprivation and other forms of disadvantage. Indeed, Schoon and Parsons (2002) found that parental involvement helped to explain why some children experiencing multiple disadvantage were able to succeed despite their unpromising

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circumstances. At the other end of the spectrum, truancy is associated with low parental interest as well as poor relationships between parent, child and school (Graham and Bowling, 1995).

A note on fathers

While most of the literature refers to 'parents' as a collective item and does not distinguish between the respective impact of mothers and fathers, there is evidence that fathers have a unique and significant impact on their children's education and adjustment. For example, again using NCDS data, Flouri and Buchanan (2001) found that fathers' involvement meant children did better at school, had better mental health and were less likely to be involved in anti-social behaviour, even after controlling for fathers' socio-economic status and education. Hobcraft (1998) also found that fathers' lack of interest in schooling is a particularly strong predictor of lack of qualifications, with persistent low interest quadrupling the risk for both men and women.

A note on ethnicity

The importance of parental involvement holds across different ethnic groups (Fan and Chen, 2001; Bogenschneider, 1999; Zellman and Waterman, 1998, cit Desforges, 2003). For example, a study with Mexican American families found that neither language competence nor country of birth influenced the content and form of involvement (Keith and Lictham, 1994, cit Desforges, 2003). However, that is not to say that the nature of involvement does not vary across different cultural groups. While studies suggest that all parents are keen for their children to do well, this may be expressed and manifested in different ways.

Important features of 'naturally occurring' parental involvement

A recurring message throughout the research into 'naturally occurring' parental involvement is that it is aspects of parenting that explain its significance for pupil attainment rather than other aspects of parental engagement, including involvement in the school setting. In particular, it is parents' interest in the child, expressed through interaction with the child and discussions about school and learning that have a beneficial impact on children's behaviour and achievement (Desforges, 2003). Desforges concludes that parents' values and educational aspirations are exhibited in their enthusiasm and parenting style. In turn, he argues, they are internalised

by the pupil and impact the student's self-perceptions as a learner and their motivation, self-esteem and educational aspirations. For younger children, direct involvement with school-relevant skills is also important.

2.2. The impact of formal or school-based forms of parental involvement

Volunteering

Volunteering is an important aspect of parental involvement. Around the country, particularly in preschools and primary schools, parents are acting as classroom volunteers, helping out with extra-curricular activities, taking a lead on fundraising, running or attending school events and getting involved in other activities to support the school. Despite the prevalence of volunteering, few studies have evaluated the impact of parent volunteers. Much of the evaluative research is small-scale, based on accounts rather than impartial observation or measurement and so limited in what it can tell us about the impact of parent volunteers (Desforges, 2003; Dyson and Robson, 1999).

The other source of evidence comes from large-scale longitudinal studies in the US and the UK. Researchers have utilised these data sets to examine the relationship between different forms of involvement, including volunteering, and children's development and attainment. These studies have found few benefits of parent volunteering for children's educational attainment (Desforges, 2003; Nechyba et al, 1999). However, there are two important caveats to this conclusion. The first, as Desforges (2003) notes, is that there may be hidden benefits in parents' involvement resulting from an improved flow of information between schools and parents around, for example curriculum, courses, and school rules. This in turn may help parents to support the child better in the home.

The second caveat is that there may be benefits associated with involvement that extend beyond attainment. For example, David (1990) (cit Braatz and Putnam, 1996) notes that parents are the main beneficiaries of their involvement. Below is a summary of some of the suggested benefits of involving parents in the life of the school (for example, see Braatz and Putnam, 1996), although it should be noted that the weakness of the evaluative research in this area means that these benefits could be seen as speculative rather than proven.

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Parents benefit from:

- enhanced feelings of competence, self-worth and control
- increased community involvement
- opportunities to rekindle their own education
- increased interaction with children at home and more positive feelings about their ability to help
- better home-school relationships and the breaking down of barriers between home and professional teaching staff.

Schools benefit from

- stronger academic and social programmes because parents complement the skills of the staff
- reduced pressure on staff and on their workloads if volunteers are properly trained
- a classroom curriculum that is enriched and extended through the contribution of parents' own experiences and expertise
- improved school attendance.

Home-school partnerships

A problem with much of the literature on parental involvement is the lack of clarity over exactly what type of engagement is meant. So while there is little evidence of any direct benefits of parents' involvement in volunteering, a number of commentators talk more generally about the importance of 'home-school partnerships' to school effectiveness (Mortimore, 1988; Sammons et al, 1995). It is often unclear exactly what these cover, but they are likely to encompass general support for schools' policies; attendance at parent evenings and other events; and a clear sense of shared responsibility on behalf of parents and the school. According to Hallgarten (2000) evidence for the importance of home-school partnerships to school standards comes from both large-scale international studies and Ofsted reports and the 'parent' effect is as apparent in beacon schools as in schools that succeed in removing themselves from Special Measures (Gray, 2000, cit Hallgarten, 2000). However, Nechyba and colleagues (1999) sound a note of caution in the literature by noting that parents who become involved in their children's schools are likely to differ in important but unobserved ways from non-involved parents. So the 'parent effect' may really be the result of parents' input in the home.

Parents and homework

Most parents' main contribution to their children's learning is probably through help with and monitoring of homework. The Secretary of State's guidance on home-school agreements makes it clear that agreements should show that parents are expected to 'make every effort to support their children's learning' with regard to homework and should contain information about the school's homework policy (www.dfes.gov.uk). A review of studies on homework found no direct or clear relationship between the amount of time parents spent on homework with their children and pupil achievement at school (Sharp, 2001). However, the author did find that parents influence the homework environment, for example, by encouraging the child to complete their homework and creating appropriate conditions for learning. This in turn may be associated with achievement at school.

Homework has the potential to reduce the inequalities that could arise from different levels of parental involvement because it ensures that all pupils are engaged in home learning and not just those where parents take a keen interest. However, it is also a challenge to ensure that pupils with access to greater learning resources at home, such as computers, or more skilled or better educated parents, do not do better as a result of their 'social or material' advantages (e.g. see Hallgarten, 2000).

Initiatives to enhance parents' home-learning support

The majority of the home-learning research has focused on literacy related schemes, and more usually with pre-school or primary school children, with a more limited amount of activity around numeracy. The type of benefits associated with schemes include:

- improvements in children's reading (e.g. Cairney, 1996; Hannon, 1992, cit Dyson and Robson, 1999)
- increases in parents confidence in their ability to support their children (National Literacy Trust, 2001)
- increases in parents' understanding of how children learn to read (Hancock and Gale, 1996 cit National Literacy Trust, 2001)
- development of children's basic skills e.g. verbal comprehension, vocabulary, numeracy, and cognitive and physical competence (Evangelou and Sylva, 2003)
- improvements in children's interest in and enthusiasm for reading (Toomey, 1993)

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- improvements in the attitudes of parents, staff and children (Bastiani, 1995, cit Desforges,)
- reduced levels of bullying (Bastiani, 1995, cit Desforges, 2003).

Schemes vary considerably in their content and organisation and Dyson and Robson (1999) note, that while we can be reasonably optimistic about the general impact of literacy schemes, we cannot predict with any confidence that a particular child in a particular school on a particular programme will benefit. That is to say, the research is unclear about what works with whom. There is even less certainty about the impact of broader involvement schemes. Part of this uncertainty comes from problems in the research literature, with, for example, the small-scale nature of studies, weaknesses in evaluation designs and a lack of standardisation in programme implementation (Desforges, 2003; Dyson and Robson, 1999). Moreover, most of the evidence relates to primary school years, and there is little evidence supporting the benefits of school-level involvement during secondary school (Crozier, 1999).

Despite criticisms of the literature, there are more rigorously evaluated schemes that have recorded promising outcomes. The REAL project (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) based in Sheffield aimed to help early educators support parents in enhancing pre-school literacy development. Run in ten schools over a 12–18 month period before entry to school, the project included home visits by teachers, the provision of literacy resources, group based activities, postal communications and adult education opportunities for parents. The researchers found children made greater progress in literacy than the control group (Hannon and Nutbrown, 2001). A striking aspect of the programme is that children made those gains through support from their parents, not through help from professionals.

A more wide-ranging programme, the SPOKES project, involved addressing parenting issues alongside literacy support among families of children with behavioural problems. The trial involved a year-long intervention with parents of five to six year olds in a local primary school, comprising: a parenting course; a reading programme; and a course on communication and problem solving with a top-up literacy element (Scott and Sylva, 2004). The programme successfully improved children's reading levels and social behaviour; moving children from a high risk of social exclusion to within the normal range.

Reliable evidence also comes from American research conducted as part of the activities of the National Network of Partnership Schools (Epstein, 2001, cit Desforges, 2003).

The Network has arisen out of an extensive research and development programme involving large-scale pilot studies, ongoing learning and development, and the involvement of a range of schools. Over 2000 schools are now involved and many are drawn from the most disadvantaged areas. The network has evaluated a number of different partnership approaches.

A maths-focused project found improvements in student performance. Important aspects of the programme included: homework that involved families; lending libraries; information to parents on how to contact teachers; and workshops on maths skills and school's expectations (Sheldon and Epstein, 2001, cit Desforges, 2003).

Another project reported improvements in students' attendance and discipline. Important features of the home-school partnership were: rewarding attendance; providing parents with a contact person at school to call if needed; and communicating about school expectations (Epstein and Sheldon, 2000, cit Desforges, 2003).

Family learning initiatives

Considerable resources are being channelled into family learning programmes i.e. initiatives designed to bring together different family members to learn together. Programmes often focus on basic skills as a means of breaking the intergenerational cycle of poor literacy and numeracy. Studies of Basic Skills Agency programmes and other initiatives have observed benefits for parents and children. Including, for children: improved standards of basic or pre-literacy skills; positive changes in attitudes and behaviour; enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem; better concentration (Brassett-Grundy, 2002; Ofsted, 2000). For parents, benefits include: improved numeracy and literacy skills; the pursuit of new qualifications, training or career options; better parent-child relationships; improved understanding of child-development and learning; and increased confidence, particularly around dealing with schools and staff. Brooks et al (1997) (cit National Literacy Trust, 2001) conclude that family learning programmes are most beneficial for families from minority ethnic groups and with pre-school and primary school children.

Despite the positive reviews of these programmes Desforges (2003) questions whether the nature of the evaluations allows one to conclude that it is the intergenerational element that accounts for the programme's impact. In which case, he argues, cheaper programmes, which place fewer demands on the teachers by the nature of teaching across

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the age spectrum, may produce the same results. Others question whether programmes would have greater success and avoid stigmatising participating families if they tackled a broader curriculum, such as ICT.

Home-school agreements

Schools were obliged to introduce home-school agreements following the 1998 Schools Standards and Framework Act. A recent evaluation shows that take up has been reasonable, but by no means universal (Coldwell et al, 2003). 75 per cent of parents in around three quarters of schools in the research had signed an agreement. Moreover, parents' awareness of agreements is not strong. 35 per cent of parents in a recent survey did not recognise the term home-school agreement (Williams et al, 2002).

The literature provides two perspectives on home-school agreements. One comes from the evaluative literature and presents the findings from surveys and interviews of school staff, parents and pupils over the introduction of agreements. The other comes from the wide-ranging discussion of agreements that has been ongoing in the academic literature. Neither perspective provides a measurable account of the impact of home-school agreements.

Evaluations of the initiative have focused on perceptions of the impact rather than more rigorous data about their effects. Overall, schools and parents felt that agreements were potentially useful vehicles for communicating expectations. Over half the schools in the Coldwell (2003) research believed agreements had had a positive impact on communicating school expectations and responsibilities. Around 30 per cent commented on benefits for parent-teacher co-operation, parents supporting their children's learning at home, communicating the school role, and in pupil behaviour and homework.

In case studies of the agreements, many staff found it difficult to separate any specific impact of the agreements from other policies and initiatives in the school. Staff also felt that agreements were unnecessary where good school-family relationships were already in place (Coldwell et al, 2003). Agreements were also criticised because they are likely to be signed only by compliant parents. 'Difficult' families are less likely to sign, and the lack of enforceability of agreements means there are no measures to ensure co-operation and no consequences where parents fail to do so (e.g. see Ouston and Hood, 2000). Some schools, particularly large secondary schools, also commented on the administrative burden of managing agreements, particularly if

they are to be renewed on a yearly basis (Coldwell et al, 2003; Ouston and Hood, 2000).

An important part of the agreements is the process of consultation with individual parents that is intended to accompany them. Where it worked, this process was seen as helpful by staff (Coldwell et al, 2000). But some critics argue that, while the consultation process should be at the heart of the agreement, this is not the case in practice. For example, Blair (2001) suggests that the prescriptive model of the agreements enshrined in the act and spelled out in the DfES Guidance pre-ordains the nature and content of the agreements. This, she argues, undermines the notion of agreements being a tool to develop partnership between parents and schools. Rather, she suggests, they are a "tool of central control" (p.84) and a means of coercing parents and their children into complying with social expectations about their behaviour.

Agreements have also been criticised for failing to generate genuine partnership because they have an underlying assumption that parents are failing or will fail to meet their responsibilities with regard to the school and so must be obliged to recognise and sign-up to them in the form of an agreement (Crozier, 1999). As in other aspects of parental involvement, academics raise questions as to whether it is possible to have genuine partnership where the balance of power rests with the school (see Crozier, 1999).

Coldwell and colleagues (2003) conclude that agreements are only likely to be successful as part of a wider programme of parental involvement. Others question whether they are necessary at all and suggest the purpose of increasing parent-school cooperation would be better achieved by encouraging and enabling schools to develop home-school policies in genuine collaboration with parents and pupils. Indeed, although pupils are encouraged to sign agreements if they are deemed to understand their relevance, they are not formal partners. Neither is there any burden on schools to consult with pupils about their introduction. Rather, the onus of the relationship is between schools and parents, with the expectation that parents can ensure their children comply with the demands of the agreement – clearly an unrealistic expectation for some families.

Extended schools

A recent study of extended schools concluded that they can make a positive impact on pupil attainment, attendance and behaviour by increasing engagement and motivation (Wilkin et al, 2003). However, it is early days to tell whether these

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approaches can really make a difference. Most initiatives are individualised and school specific and, as in every other area in this paper, programmes have not been evaluated in ways that permit observers to draw clear conclusions about costs and benefits. Moreover, in their study of schools and area regeneration, Crowther et al (2003) concluded that schools can have small-scale or localised effects, but there is no evidence that schools have larger effects that transform pupils' prospects or the communities in which they live.

An important issue in the development of extended schools is the impact of extracurricular activities and support. These facilities cannot, of course, completely make up for a lack of parental interest. For example, the now well-known Haringey study found that children who had extra reading help at school did not do as well as children who received literacy support from their parents (Tizzard, 1982). However, they do have the potential to make up some of the deficit in home support by offering an alternative resource in the school environment.

Involvement in decision-making

Giving parents a 'voice' in education is a key strand of Government policy. Strategies have included increasing the number of parent-governors on governing bodies and giving parent-governors the right to sit on LEA committees. More recently, the government has unveiled plans to encourage the setting-up of Parent Councils, something that will be mandatory in Trust Schools where the majority of governors are appointed by the Trust (White Paper, October 2005). Even with these proposals, however, earlier criticisms that this area of parental involvement policy is the least developed and in many observers' views, more rhetoric than reality remain (e.g. see, Hallgarten, 2000; Ouston and Hood, 2000).

Among EU and OECD countries, with the exception of Japan, England and Wales have one of the weakest mechanisms for parental representation in local or national policy and decision-making (Hallgarten, 2000). There are no structures for collective representation of parents. Until and if Parent Councils become established, Parent Teacher Associations have been the only mechanism for parental representation and involvement (governing roles withstanding) and they have been criticised for being optional, powerless, and with teacher involvement, inhibiting opportunities for parents to speak freely. It remains to be seen whether Parent Councils become widespread and become a true mechanism for representation.

While parent-governors are intended to give parents some level of involvement, critics suggest that the role does not lend itself to representation. Parent-governors describe difficulties in communicating with parents either because they feel thwarted by heads and their concerns over confidentiality or because there are no adequate mechanisms to enable parent-governors to report back to or consult with other parents. Parent governors have also expressed frustration, at both governor and LEA level, at the antagonism, marginalisation and isolation they have experienced in their dealings with other political representatives and professional staff (e.g. see O'Connor, 1994).

Despite the failings of the current system of representation, are there any actual or potential benefits of making a space for parents' voices? As with much of this area, there is a paucity of reliable evidence about the impact of parent involvement in decision-making on pupil outcomes or school effectiveness. However, Hallgarten argues there are three justifications for developing representation:

- i) That it is a democratic right for those affected by an institution to have a say in its direction and decision-making
- ii) Encouraging parents' participation may kindle their interest and motivation in other areas of involvement and so have a knock-on effect on school success
- iii) That such initiatives will build trust and social capital and so result in stronger ties between schools and families.

Braatz and Putnam (1996) argue that trust and social capital are fundamental to a school's success. Although acknowledging the caveats of such a broad-brush piece of research, they cite their finding of an association between school achievement levels in each USA state and respective indicators of social capital as evidence that a community's social capital is fundamental to its school's outcomes.

Parent-governors tend to be drawn from white, middle-class, professional groups. As with other areas of involvement, there are concerns that increasing representation will result in under-represented groups facing further marginalisation as more articulate, confident parents, from professional classes, take on representative roles and make their views heard. Some commentators have suggested that these issues need to be tackled by developing smaller, more grass-root structures of representation, with parent-teacher forums at class level acting as the bottom tier (Macbeth, 1993).

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Diverse pressures on parents' time make it difficult for them to be heavily involved in the running of a school when they may already struggle to be involved with their child's learning in the home. As schools have become more autonomous, interviews with parent-governors reveal their struggle to manage the workload and develop the requisite knowledge and skills to contribute to the governing body (O'Connor, 1994). One study suggested that it took parent-governors two years out of a four-year election term to feel confident in their role (Diamond, 1993, cit O'Connor, 1994). These findings are based on studies conducted over ten years ago and it is possible that recent attempts to streamline parent-governor responsibilities have led to improvements.

3. Issues around initiatives to facilitate involvement

3.1. Barriers to involvement

There is compelling evidence to indicate that having interested and enthusiastic parents helps children settle and do well at school. But the research is much more equivocal about whether and how you can facilitate such interest; what form it should take; and whether the outcomes are universally positive. The next section explores some of these issues.

Most parents want to be involved in their child's school life. Seventy two per cent of parents in a recent national survey said they would like more involvement and over half believed that they had at least equal responsibility with the school for the child's education. Ironically, those most keen on getting more involved showed higher levels of current involvement (Williams et al, 2002). This points to one of the main conundrums about increasing involvement – do initiatives to increase involvement attract parents who are already involved? And as a consequence, do we see a widening of the attainment gap as 'already advantaged' young people reap the gains of their parents' involvement?

Findings based on data from the large-scale longitudinal studies such as NCDS, indicate that parents who are less involved in their children's education tend to be from poorer social classes, impoverished, and suffering from poor physical or mental health (Desforges, 2003). (That is not to say, however, that lack of engagement is confined to these

groups.) If parents are struggling to take an interest in their child's learning at home there are likely to be significant challenges to engaging them in the school environment or in targeted initiatives. Researchers have noted a number of barriers to involvement. These are by no means exclusive to disadvantaged parents, although a greater proportion of disadvantaged parents are likely to struggle with these issues:

Commitments/circumstances

Most parents have commitments beyond their child's schooling, including work, care of other children or dependants, and other ties. Many parents face juggling acts managing the multiple demands on their time and resources and are put off from being involved because of these commitments (Williams et al, 2002). Single parents are particularly disadvantaged by their time constraints and commitments (Standing, 1999; Liontos, 1992).

Skills

Some parents lack the skills or confidence to be involved with their child's learning, particularly in a school setting. A recent study found 34 per cent of parents said they had difficulties reading from a children's book and 18 per cent found it difficult to understand and recognise numbers (DfES, 2003). Concerns about their own abilities prevent parents from helping children with their homework (Welsh et al, 2004). Parents are also concerned that they might be 'doing things wrong' because teaching methods have changed since they were at school (Williams et al, 2002).

Personal, social, cultural barriers

Negative experiences of their own time at school can deter parents from being involved. Poor experiences can also create intergenerational cycles of negative attitudes. Some parents feel threatened by schools and professional staff. Staff attitudes can aggravate these anxieties, particularly where teachers appear judgemental, distant or unhelpful (Crozier, 1999).

Some minority ethnic groups are constrained by cultural expectations about home and public roles. Language and cultural issues may also create difficulties.

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Practical constraints

Parents also face practical barriers to involvement such as child-care issues, transport difficulties, and in rural areas, large distances to travel to the school.

3.2 The issues around and the consequences of developing parental involvement

Many, although not all, of the barriers to involvement unduly affect those who are already likely to be coping with disadvantage or marginalisation and whose children, therefore, are at greater risk of poorer attainment at school (Sparkes, 1999). Coupled with data on 'uninvolved parents', the barriers point to a central concern in the debate over involvement: do initiatives to promote involvement only serve to disadvantage the already disadvantaged?

This is possible both within schools and across schools. For example, Edwards and Warin, (1999) noted in their study of primary schools that schools often ask parents to undertake very skilled interactions with their children at home as a means of easing the pressure on teaching staff. They conclude that such interventions run the risk that children whose parents already have high levels of skills or access to subject knowledge benefited more from parental support than children whose parents did not have such advantages. The authors also found that schools where support was most needed, because of the poorer baseline performance levels of the children, often found it most difficult to get parents involved.

Schemes involving parents in the classroom rather than at home have also been criticized for their potentially disadvantaging impact. Following a review of studies, Necheyba et al (1999) suggest that the benefits of parental involvement in schools mainly accrue to the child of the participating parent and, more significantly, may come at a cost to other children in the class because the parent may put pressure on the teacher to devote time to their child ... "policies that encourage the involvement of some parents (but inevitably fall short of reaching every parent) might have unintended distributional consequences within the classroom or school" (p.42). There are also risks that some parents will become privileged by their involvement in terms of their access to information and staff and a risk that teachers will treat children of involved parents more favourably (Wilcox, 1985).

Other analysts have commented on the potential stigmatisation of parents who are not involved and the

judgements teachers may make about these parents. For example, Powell ((1991) cit Manitoba Dept of Education and Training, 1994) suggests that teaching staff take a negative view of single mothers because they appear less involved in school life. In her small-scale study of parental involvement, David (1998) found that mothers felt an imperative to be involved and that a lack of involvement had to be justified and explained.

The pressure parents feel to be involved is one of the themes running through discussions of involvement. In particular, there are concerns that the burden of involvement falls on mothers. Keating and Taylorson (1996) suggest that most programmes do not take account of women's involvement in public and economic life and assume that mothers are not in paid work and are free, able and willing to be involved in activities.

Involvement requires time input that few parents have and the National Literacy Trust (NLT) (2001), while supportive of initiatives, cautions against creating a situation where parents feel guilty at not meeting the unrealistic demands placed on them. The NLT reviewers go on to suggest that such a situation may result in parents adopting negative perceptions of themselves which may also have a negative impact on the child.

As the barriers to involvement explored earlier indicate, a significant number of parents lack the skills or confidence to become involved. Stoker (1996) and Bastiani (1998) found evidence that involvement had a negative effect on some parents' confidence and self-esteem. Few schools had considered differences in parents' literacy and language skills and had not taken account of these when asking parents to help their children. Moreover, Stoker found that even when schools became aware of the problem, they rarely suggested alternatives or solutions.

Stokers' research points to a broader issue around parental involvement; the failure of many schools and schemes to take account of the diversity of the 'parent' population. Some analysts warn that programmes threaten to devalue the different contributions that parents make to their children's learning and present a 'deficit' model of parents with schools as the 'remedy' (e.g. see Keating and Taylorson, 1996). Programmes have been described as promoting a form of 'cultural imperialism' that seeks to impose the school's values, beliefs and materials on parents' homes and parent-child relationships (e.g. see Dyson and Robson 1999 for a discussion).

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Most teachers are resistant to parents having more say in school management (74 per cent), curriculum decisions (56 per cent), or governance (55 per cent) (IPPR survey, 2000). Studies indicate that staff might be resistant to greater parental involvement for a number of reasons (e.g. see Keating and Taylorson, 1996), including:

- pressures on time and workload as a result of planning volunteer involvement and managing their time
- problems in managing teacher-parent boundaries, such as issues of confidentiality or classroom discipline
- parents as a perceived threat to the teacher's authority and autonomy and concerns about staff being humiliated by children's behaviour in playing up to parents
- difficulties of navigating the three-way relationship of parent-child-teacher without seeming to side with one or the other.

A quarter of parents with teenage children in a recent survey said they found it difficult to help children with their schoolwork (IPPR, 2004). One of the biggest barriers to helping was the attitude of the school; where parents felt 'shut out' and feared they would be seen as interfering. As one parent said:

"School isn't interested in us getting involved. Parents don't have much contact with teachers and they're difficult to reach. I'd like to be more involved but I think they'd think that I was interfering."

Mother with three children.

One in five parents in the survey felt that more support from their child's school would be the one thing that would most improve their life as a parent.

Studies of parent-teacher communication draw attention to the complex power dynamics in these relationships. In their review, Dyson and Robson (1999) conclude that communication is often dominated by teachers and professionals. Parents are concerned not to over-step an unwritten line (Williams et al, 2002). Teachers are perceived by working class parents as superior and distant; perceptions that are reinforced by teachers' behaviour (Crozier, 1999). Crozier's interviews with working class parents also revealed that parents felt teachers engaged with them only on the teacher's terms, leaving parents feeling fatalistic about their ability to influence their children's schooling.

On the other hand, analysis of parent evenings shows that many teachers see parents as a threat; not knowing what demands they will place on them and feeling that their role

as an expert may be challenged by the parents' knowledge of their children (Walker and MacLure, 2001).

These issues are not insurmountable. Some schemes, such as IMPACT (improving numeracy skills) have addressed accusations of the top-down imposition of the school's values and approaches by encouraging parents to get involved in activities alongside their children rather than turning parents into teachers (Dyson and Robson, 1999). Guidance on the national literacy strategy encourages teachers to find out about and build on literacy and learning practices in the home (Weinberger, 2002). The greater challenge, perhaps, is how to address issues of non-participation. Some schemes are more successful at both recruitment and retention of parents (e.g. REAL Hannon and Nutbrown, 2001), but no scheme is foolproof.

So far, there has been no discussion about the significant part children and young people play in their parents' involvement. Not surprisingly, children vary in their attitudes to involvement. While some children will initiate or accept it, others deliberately block links between home and school, for example, by failing to pass on communication or refusing help with homework (Edwards and Alldred, 2000). Some children, particularly boys from poorer homes, are keen to preserve a distinction between home and school. Initiatives that consult with and take account of children's views about involvement have a better chance of success.

4. Concluding remarks

Parents will always be involved in their children's learning and influence their children's attainment regardless of current and future policy. Most parents want to be involved and supportive of their children's education and do not require legislation or coercion to do so. But some parents struggle with getting involved and find the barriers to doing so insurmountable. The introduction of home-school agreements, a key plank of the Government's 'involvement' policy, does not appear to have addressed the challenges parents face in being involved. If anything, home-school agreements risk further alienating the very parents that they aimed to involve, and being an irrelevance to the already 'involved' parent.

The challenge for government, LEAs, and schools, in the context of parental involvement, is threefold: i) to manage an education system that helps children to achieve their full

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potential whatever their family circumstances; ii) to tackle the barriers to involvement; iii) to avoid overloading parents.

As the overview of policy and practice illustrated, much is already being done by government to tackle the structural and socio-economic circumstances associated with low involvement, and, in turn, with poor attainment. For example, initiatives such as Sure Start are supporting disadvantaged parents in the early years to help them lay the foundations for children's learning before entry to school. As the evidence on the impact of naturally occurring involvement indicates, policies that help parents in their parenting are likely to have the greatest impact on children's attainment and adjustment.

Less is being done to tackle the institutional barriers to involvement at the school level. And some would argue that measures such as home-school agreements are "flying in the face" of moves to develop genuine partnership between families and schools (Crozier, 1999). Greater parental engagement with the school, especially at secondary level, is likely to require a shift in school and staff attitudes to parents. Initial and further teacher training would go some way to helping teachers address issues of involvement. So would a government policy that resolves the tension it manifests in perceiving parents as consumers, partners and problems.

Unfortunately, proposals in the most recent White Paper (October, 2005) appear to exacerbate these tensions. For example, the network of 'choice advisors' is geared towards supporting parents as consumers. On the other hand, plans to provide parents with materials to help with children's home learning are predicated on the view of parents' as partners. At the same time, the White Paper proposes to allow schools to issue parenting contracts to parents of 'disruptive' children at an earlier point in the disciplinary process, and to enable schools to place parents who do not 'comply' with contracts under Parenting Orders. Focusing on parents as partners rather than problems or consumers in their children's education may be the most productive approach to promoting positive outcomes for children.

Drawing on the model of the US national network of schools, Desforges (2003) concludes that any comprehensive move to increase parental involvement would have to ensure:

- strategic planning that embeds parental involvement schemes in whole-school development plans
- sustained support, resourcing and training
- community involvement at all levels of management from initial needs analysis to monitoring, evaluation and review

- a commitment to a continuous system of evidence based development and review
- a supportive, networked system that promotes objectivity and shared experiences.

Local and national policy is a long way from such a coherent strategy on involvement, but the evident enthusiasm and commitment of many practitioners and funders does not make it impossible.

5. Recommendations

- Government has to work from the presumption that many parents will want to be involved in their children's learning notwithstanding education policy. There is, however, also a need to reduce the mounting burden being placed on parents and the increasing differential between parents who are able to become involved in the education of their children and those who are not. Bearing this in mind, and the aims of this administration to promote equality of opportunity for children and to narrow the achievement gap, the Government should continue to support parental involvement, but should focus its resources for enhancement predominantly, if not exclusively, on supporting parents facing demonstrable barriers to involvement in their children's learning and schools. It should also promote education policies that compensate the children of these parents directly, involving the provision of extra curricula facilities as well as core education. The most recent White Paper offers some moves in this direction, for example, in plans to roll out the Extended Schools programme to ensure more children and their parents benefit from activities and support outside of the normal school day (see most recent education White Paper (October 2005)) and to target both intensive teaching support and more holistic help to struggling children. In promoting this 'targeted approach', the government would be building on its early years' initiatives to effect change in primary and secondary schools.
- In the face of a paucity of evidence, the government should invest in research to evaluate the effectiveness of support to parents in surmounting barriers to involvement in their children's schools.
- Teachers' training should be framed to enhance teachers' potential to engage with and develop partnerships with parents who experience barriers to involvement.

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- Commentaries and assessments of perceptions of home school agreements suggest that these may be counter-productive, failing to engage parents who experience barriers to involvement in their child's school, failing to engage parents in a process of consultation and even undermining the process of partnership. This points to the need to suspend their operation. However, in the absence of comprehensive evaluation, further research into their impact and outcomes may be required prior to such a decision being taken. Options might also be considered to enhance the element of consultation with parents and to engage the child in the process at fourteen plus years of age when parental control begins to diminish.
- Democratic institutions do impose a burden of responsibility, and in relation to schools this affects both school staff and parents. However, to deny parents the opportunity to influence their children's schools would undermine the potential for parental engagement with children's learning as well as consumer accountability. While activists can lobby and promote the interests of a body of consumers, it is obviously preferable to sustain as wide a representation of consumers as possible. Current democratic procedures in relation to parents and schools are unsatisfactory in terms of both the scope of representation and the degree to which parents are able to influence school policy and practices. It is recommended that a review takes place to assess options for improvement in these spheres, possibly drawing on precedents of smaller structures with parent-teacher forums at class level acting as the bottom tier, and identifying the principal areas of school activity where parents, if engaged, could have a significant influence.
- The Government's most recent White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (2005), seeks to increase parental choice, responsibility, power and involvement. In implementing these proposals it would do well to take account of the barriers to involvement identified in this paper as well as the risk that activities to promote involvement may only serve to promote the interests of the already involved and empowered. As with previous government initiatives, the focus is on promoting consumer choice. In this area the Government has gone some way to levelling the ground with its plans to establish a network of 'choice advisors' for disadvantaged parents. However, there are no measures to tackle the barriers to involvement in decision-making and representation. For example, while the paper discusses Parent Councils, there is no compulsion or incentive for schools to establish such a council except in the case of Trusts who appoint the majority of governors. Even if they were obligatory, would all parents feel equally able to participate? Similarly, will all

parents feel able to exercise the proposed freedoms to set up their own schools where they are unhappy with existing provision? Work to review the options and identify effective areas for parental involvement remains a priority.

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Notes

1 Shortly to become Excellence in Cities Action Zones

2 The DfES Standards website summarises a number of initiatives as models of good practice if further information is required

Author biography

Jenny Reynolds is a freelance researcher and writer specialising in family issues. She previously worked as the Senior Researcher for One Plus One Marriage and Partnership Research where she headed up the research programme. She is editor and co-author of *Not in Front of the Children?* – a book about the impact of parental conflict on children. She is also author of a number of articles and reports on family issues.

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