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Getting engaged: possibilities and problems for home–school knowledge exchange

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In this paper we report some of the literacy and numeracy actions developed on the Home School Knowledge Exchange (HKSE) project and examine these in relation to the engagement of participants. The exchanges of knowledge included two-way processes where aspects of children's out-of-school worlds informed teaching and learning in the classroom as well as the more usual sharing of knowledge about school with children's families. We comment on patterns of parental engagement and on the development of actions that built not only on parental knowledge but also on the agency of the child. A key implication of this work is that 'one size does not fit all'—more successful actions include different family members at different times and in different ways. Although the positive potential of home–school knowledge exchange for engagement is discussed, the difficulties and complexities of this field are recognized and explored.

Introduction

> The involvement of the family in the learning process and the links between home and school are vital to the success we are seeking in raising standards and providing real equality of opportunity.

As this quote from a speech by David Blunkett in 1998 demonstrates, encouraging parental involvement in children's learning has been an important element in the Labour Government's attempts to raise standards in education. At the same time, the involvement of parents has also been viewed as a way of redressing inequalities. Whilst questions have been raised about the achievement of either aim through these means, particular scepticism has been expressed regarding the latter. Hallgarten (2000), for example, has suggested that in its current condition, parental involvement in children's learning acts as 'a lever to maximise the potential of the already advantaged' (p. 18). Similarly, Horvat *et al.* (2003) concluded that parents'

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interventions in their children's schooling were as likely to facilitate the intergenerational transmission of advantage as much as ameliorate its effects. Furthermore, in the context of research on Education Action Zones, Brain and Reid (2003) argued that the dimensions of raising standards and promoting inclusion through parental involvement projects were contradictory.

These concerns relate to the increasing recognition that the parent body is not homogeneous (see also Heywood-Everett, 1999; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002) and that, as things stand, some groups of parents may be less well placed to support their children's education. Research has shown differences between parent groups associated with a number of factors including ethnicity and class. Tomlinson (1993), writing in the early 1990s, suggested that the level of knowledge about education and their children's schooling amongst Bangladeshi heritage parents living in Tower Hamlets was 'inadequate' despite high levels of intent and aspiration (p. 140). Several years further on, Crozier (2004) described a broadly similar picture in the north of England—'overall the Pakistani parents have limited and in the case of the Bangladeshi parents almost no educational knowledge' (section 8, paragraph 1). In a paper based on the Bangladeshi aspect of this research, Crozier *et al.* (2003) argued that although there appeared to be a strong boundary between school and home, it was not deliberately maintained and that some parents (mainly fathers) said they would like to know how they could help their children achieve academically.

Differences in the relationships between parents and schools associated with social class or socio-economic status (SES) have been reported in a number of studies (e.g. Vincent, 1996; Grolnick *et al.*, 1997; Vincent & Martin, 2000; Horvat *et al.*, 2003). Crozier (1997) found that working-class parents were less likely than their middle-class counterparts to intervene in their children's schooling and that when they did it was in non-academic spheres. Similarly, Lareau (1989), working in the US, found differences between working-class and upper middle-class parents in the schools where she observed. She described the working class relationship as one of separation where parents turned over responsibility for education to the school. Again, any challenges made to the school were about non-academic issues. Additionally, she observed that working-class parents resisted the teacher's expectation that they should help their children at home since they doubted their competence to do so, whereas middle-class parents saw their role as supporting and reinforcing the curriculum. Reay (1998) also found that the educational support given by the working-class mothers in her study was often characterized by uncertainty and self doubt.

Differences have also been observed in the ways parents tackle school based learning tasks at home. Greenhough and Hughes (1998) observed differences across parents in the ways they supported their children when they read a school reading book together. The differences were associated with level of education, whereby parents with lower levels of education were more likely to focus on decoding the text whilst parents with higher levels of education supported decoding but also talked more with the children about the story being read.

One notion that sometimes emerges in relation to groups who have lower levels of connectedness with institutions like schools is that they are 'hard to reach'. Lareau (1989), for example, noted that teachers and principals complained that it was sometimes hard to reach parents in the working-class school. Here the reference was to the physical difficulty of getting hold of parents, especially if they did not have a phone. However, the problem also refers to the difficulty of getting parents involved. Crozier *et al.* (2003) reported that the teachers in the schools attended by the Bangladeshi students had tried 'all sorts' of strategies but that the parents still did not tend to participate in school events or attend meetings.

The notion of certain groups being 'hard to reach' is widespread across policy areas. Coined originally by research agencies such as MORI to indicate that traditional research methods were inappropriate for some groups, the phrase has come to denote groups who do not access services or engage with provision and may be used interchangeably with the 'socially excluded' (Milbourne, 2002). However, within the literature on social exclusion the use of the term 'hard to reach' is starting to be problematized. One difficulty relates to its lack of precision. The range of those described as 'hard to reach' by government and service providers is wide. It includes minority ethnic groups, the 'overlooked' (such as the learning disabled), and those who might be described as disaffected (Doherty *et al.*, 2004). This profusion underlines the fact that the so-called hard to reach are not a homogeneous group (Milbourne, 2002). It also highlights the extent to which 'hard to reach' is a socially constructed term that holds different meanings for different writers.

Another problem with this form of terminology is that it may promote deficit views about those to whom it is applied. As Broadhurst *et al.* (2005) note, 'Official discourses that centre on generalised characteristics of ''problem'' populations can … stereoptype and stigmatise' (p. 106). This links with Dyson and Robson's (1999) concern about intervention approaches that target so-called needy families and that may be insensitive to family culture. Crozier and Davies (submitted for publication) have reservations about the stigmatizing impact of the term 'hard to reach' and have turned it around by applying it to schools rather than parents, describing schools as being 'hard to reach' for some parents on account of expectations being assumed and thus hidden. They conclude that many of the schools in their study were not sufficiently welcoming to help parents overcome their own apprehensions about their lack of educational knowledge.

In a similar vein, the authors of a recent report on social exclusion among children and their families suggest that rather than viewing certain groups as 'hard to reach' a different perspective might aspire to develop services that are 'easy to use' (Buchanan *et al.*, 2004).

In this paper, we give an account of some of the activities developed on the Home School Knowledge Exchange (HSKE) project. As its title suggests, the focus of the project was the exchange of knowledge between school and home and home and school rather than parental involvement as such which can include a wide variety of parental roles (see, for example, Epstein & Dauber, 1991). The activities we describe here sought to support knowledge exchange through strategies that are somewhat

less usual for the field. We consider them in relation to their articulation with themes relating to engagement.

Procedures

Sample

There were three strands to the project:

- supporting literacy learning at Key Stage 1;
- supporting numeracy learning at Key Stage 2;
- supporting transfer from primary to secondary school.

This paper focuses on the literacy and numeracy strands. In each of these, four primary schools were actively[1] involved in the project, with one class of students being followed over a 2 year period as home–school knowledge exchange activities were developed. At the beginning of the project, the children had just started in Year 1 (age 5–6) in the literacy strand and Year 4 (age 8–9) in the numeracy strand. In each strand, two of the schools had higher proportions of students eligible for free school meals (HFSM) with the other two schools having lower proportions (LFSM). Broadly speaking, the SES range represented in the LFSM schools was generally mixed but included a majority of middle-class families whilst the HFSM schools represented fairly uniform working-class or low SES populations. The eight schools were located in Bristol and Cardiff and the school intakes reflected the ethnic diversity present in the two cities (see Hughes and Pollard, this issue, for a fuller account of the project's origin and design).

Initial mapping

A teacher[2] was seconded to each strand to work with the research team to develop and support the implementation of knowledge exchange activities. Before initiating any action, these teacher–researchers carried out mappings of the home–school landscape in each school and the preferences of participants for future action relating to the focus of the strand. They conducted interviews with the class teachers and head teachers. They also sent out questionnaires (translated into home languages in some cases) to parents and set up parent discussion groups. The discussion agenda was open but included the following areas—what information/knowledge parents wanted from the school/teacher, what information/knowledge about home/the child parents wanted to give to the school/teacher, and in what ways information/ knowledge could be exchanged.

Target data

A window on the knowledge exchange activities was provided by 'target' families. In each class, six children were selected by a process of stratified random selection (giving a higher attaining boy and girl, a middle attaining boy and girl and a lower

attaining boy and girl). These children's families became the targets. Interviews with the parents and children were used to explore thoughts and feelings about literacy and mathematics and to monitor responses to the knowledge exchange actions retrospectively. A variety of approaches was used by the researchers responsible for this aspect of the study[3] to recruit the involvement of the target parents. They included phone calls, approaching parents in the playground or at the school gate and knocking on their doors. Agreement to participate was extremely high,[4] resulting in a systematic range of views and a wide representation of groups. Some head teachers expressed surprise about the agreement to participate on the part of some of the target families. This may reflect a tendency for a low profile in school to be interpreted as representing a general lack of interest in a child's education, an inference not borne out by our experience (c.f. Lareau, 1989). However, at the same time, it is worth noting that involvement in the research as targets did not guarantee involvement with the knowledge exchange activities.

Later, we highlight some of the activities undertaken on the project.[5] The account draws on the informal evaluations of the activities by the teacher–researchers, responses from target parents and children, and interviews with teachers.

Home–school knowledge exchange activities

Promoting formats that do not rely on the written word

Using print to communicate can prove problematic for some parents.

> I didn't (learn to read) until I was 11, I have to say … [6] we used to do the Peter and Jane books and I used to take them home and my sister used to read them to me and I used to memorize them, so that's how they never picked up that I couldn't read … but there you go, I can now

Even where parents are able to read English, they may be disinclined to access information through this medium. One parent who came to reading late explained how she used the social network of parents waiting in the playground to determine the content of letters.

> Well, I do tend to.. when I go up to school there's usually a few of us and we all talk 'OK, did anybody read that letter? Can somebody translate, so I don't have to read it?'… and then they put the input, 'well I think it's about..' and I go 'okay then', and off I go. (Mother of lower attaining boy at HFSM school)

For some of the knowledge exchange activities, then, we developed strategies that did not rely solely on the written word. A prime example was the use of video.

In both strands, parents had expressed a desire to know more about the ways their children were taught in school.

> It would be helpful if we knew more about what they're doing, strategies used for teaching, so that help is relevant, it doesn't confuse. (Questionnaire response in LFSM school)

> Sometimes the way I would like to teach my daughter is not the way the school teaches it. Information would be useful. (Questionnaire response in HFSM school)

Videos were made of the literacy hour in all four literacy action classes and of mathematical strategies used in class at two of the numeracy action schools.

Of the literacy videos, two showed sessions with a focus on writing while the other two had a reading emphasis. A copy of the video was made for each family[7] in case parents were unable to attend the school based screenings that were arranged. The individual copies were accompanied by a booklet which included aspects the teacher wanted to highlight and ideas for helping children at home. The highest turnouts for the screenings (with around three quarters[8] of parents attending) were at the LFSM schools. One of these schools provided the only evening viewing. It was very well attended and included several fathers. The teacher at this school was surprised by both the high turnout and by which parents came (i.e. parents of a number of lower attaining children). At the other LFSM school, the class teacher personally invited parents to the screenings during the course of meeting them on parents' evenings (in addition to sending out invitations). Just under half the parents attended the school-based screening at one HFSM school, while less than a third of parents came to the other. These numbers point up the importance of making the video available for viewing at home. The teacher in this last school found that watching the video prompted some parents to approach her subsequently about literacy teaching.

> The video was really good for bringing people in to find out about what we were doing. (Year 1 teacher)

The parents appreciated the immediacy and familiarity of the video as a form of communication. For many it provided a welcome opportunity to observe their child's response in the classroom.

> The video was good because I got to see my son in class which I don't do, you know, and see what he gets up to in school, because I'm never in there during class time at all. I've no idea, how he gets on in class or how he answers questions. (Mother of higher attaining boy at LFSM school)

The video also presented a way of knowing how things were organized in literacy lessons and for some it seemed to answer unasked questions.

> I mean, she [the teacher] must have got everybody in the class and asked their opinions or asked things and that, so it was interesting to see how she did that, because you sometimes think in a class of 30 children, my child could easily get lost, sitting at the back, but in fact she got everybody involved. (Mother of higher attaining boy at HFSM school)

Some parents also referred to the chance to learn from the video.

> I think the video is good, because it does give people an idea of the way to do things … I personally think people looking at that and think, oh yes, I could do that, because I think sometimes people do need to be shown how to do things, don't they. (Mother of middle attaining girl at HFSM school)

(see Hughes and Greenhough, this issue, for further parental references to learning associated with watching the video).

What the parents made of the videos depended, to an extent, on what they brought to them. One mother who had already spent some time in the classroom

explained that watching the video had been more 'revolutionary' for her husband since their son's school life was much more of an unknown for him. Although the province of school is often the responsibility of women (Reay, 2005; Standing, 1999), making the video available at home did provide more opportunity for fathers to engage with this world. The mother who used the playground network for letters, for example, recounted how she watched the video with her ex-partner although they no longer lived together. The transactive[9] reading of the videos (constituted by context as well as content) means that this kind of enterprise can carry with it a degree of risk for the teachers. Where parents have very little knowledge of what to expect, the video can be compared with an idealized vision of the classroom—a comparison in which reality may be found wanting. A mother of a lower achieving boy in a LFSM school said she was surprised at how noisy it was, which she thought atypical for the school.

Whilst the literacy videos were edited versions of complete lessons, a different format was used for the numeracy videos. Children were shown working in small groups, with one child in each group playing the teacher's role (explaining procedures and asking questions) and the other children playing the role of pupils. Between them, they demonstrated different procedures for carrying out calculations relevant to their numeracy work, for example, learning to multiply by five by multiplying by 10 and then halving the answer. The focus on procedures was a response to the sense of deskilling that parents expressed in respect to supporting mathematics, resulting from the use of methods different from those used in their own education either in the UK or in other countries.

> What confuses me is that they do their calculations slightly different to how we were taught to do them … I try and show her my way and she says 'oh you don't know what you're doing' [laughs] (Mother of higher attaining girl at LFSM school, educated in the UK)

> I give her answer with my own way, and then I.. you know, we does it like a big way, difficult way, and she'll say, 'Oh mum, like this way is easier' … I wish I went to school here, but I didn't. (Mother of higher attaining girl at HFSM school, educated in India)

English was an additional language for several children in one of the numeracy video classes. In an attempt to make the video as widely accessible as possible to their families, some sequences were recorded in home languages, with Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage students working together in groups. Parents were pleased to see these efforts.

> First of all I did enjoy it, 'cos it was like a whole new different thing what they were doing. And it gave more chance for the children to speak out or have their own self-confidence in front of the video and gave them the chance to explain more things what the teacher's been saying. (Mother of lower attaining girl at HFSM school, Bangladeshi heritage)

However, the task of expressing the technicalities of school maths in an additional language was easier for some children than others. As this mother explained

> they find it more difficult when they're explaining English work in a different language, they can't explain it properly that time … with the children who are living in this

> country, they won't know their own language properly, they might be at home now just talking in English, so it's like a whole new different language and there are some words they can't say, so it was quite hard … 'cos (my daughter) lived in Bangladesh for 5 years and she'd been going to schools and all that, she's more experienced than the girl which was beside her.

Despite the difficulties, however, there was approval for the idea. This mother told how they were teaching their daughters more Bengali so that 'next time if they do a video she'll be explaining more properly'.

An issue raised by this example is whether sequences in which children are seen to be struggling or making mistakes should be included in a product which will be watched by an audience that extends beyond the family of the child. Whilst permission to record was sought from families prior to filming, parents would not have known exactly how their children would appear in the actual video when they gave it. In one of the literacy videos, a section showing a child experiencing some difficulty with reading was examined but not edited out since the teacher felt it illustrated how well children were supported by the school. It can be seen then, that while the level of vérité afforded by video is a communicative strength it can also present some cause for concern.

The numeracy video was shown at various times during a school open day.

> Please may I take it home to show the family? They will be so surprised. (Comment made by a Bangladeshi heritage mother at a school screening of the video)

A small number of copies were also made available for families to borrow and watch at home. It was argued that this reflected a more realistic financial option for schools than making copies available to everyone. However, the video reached fewer parents as a result. The parents of the lower achieving target students attended the school screenings. However, for those who were unable to attend during the day, the organization involved in borrowing the video was a step too far for some.

> Yeah I wanted to borrow it but somebody else has it and I think I just forgot about it …
> (Mother of middle attaining boy at HFSM school)

This points up the impact that financial resources can have on work in this field. Vittles has argued that no one is hard to reach, just more expensive to reach (LARIA, 2001).

Targeting

In a different numeracy school with a significant proportion of Bangladeshi heritage families, a targeted approach was adopted. Here, discussion with the teacher employed by the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) confirmed that few parents from these families attended events like parents' evenings, curriculum evenings and open days and those who did were usually fathers. Mothers rarely came into school and language seemed to play a large part in preventing participation.

> If parents like us were provided with interpreters at parents meetings we would be able to participate more in our childrens education. (Comment from mapping questionnaire)

In the course of one afternoon, the teacher–researcher and a Bengali-speaking learning support assistant (LSA) visited almost all the homes of the children supported by EMAS in the action classes.[10] They spoke with the mothers and explained that they were interested in the way the school could help parents participate more fully in their children's education. They invited them to a meeting with other mothers, the LSA and the EMAS teacher, to discuss ideas. The personal approach with an interpreter present was an extremely successful way of contacting these parents and five of the six mothers visited attended the meeting. This contrasts with only four out of a possible 30 mothers attending from other classes,[11] where the invitation came via letters translated into home languages.

It was a lively meeting, with the interpreter translating both the teacher's and the parents' comments. The parents discussed issues, before a spokesperson reported the outcomes of their discussions through the interpreter.

> They started talking … they wanted English lessons but they didn't want.. they wanted single sex English lessons and they didn't want it anywhere but in the school, they understood that they could go to other places but they wanted to do it here, so we said 'right, fine, we'll see what we can do', and then they said.. they would like to know how to use computers because their children could use computers and they didn't know what they were doing, they couldn't even turn one on and off etc., so we said 'right fine, we'll see what we can do about that' … (EMAS teacher)

These requests were subsequently taken up and implemented by the school.

The parents were invited to join maths lessons and several responded to the offer, with parents coming into school on the first Wednesday of every month.

> They sat and worked with their children, looked at what their children were doing, and then they went off and did things, they made things, and they played games, and it was really really good, and they came back. (EMAS teacher)

These lessons were ones in which the children supported by EMAS were taught separately. Withdrawing EAL students from their classrooms has not generally been viewed as best practice (Bourne, 1989) but may have created an environment here which was more comfortable for the mothers. Over time, they came to feel more at ease in the school in general.

> (At first) they met up in the yard beforehand and they came in en masse, now they come in on their own, and they just walk in and they come down [the corridor] and walk upstairs and they're not bothered if they're by themselves. (EMAS teacher)

The programmes implemented with these parents contained elements oriented towards supporting their children's learning and aspects concerned with their own. As noted earlier, Brain and Reid (2003) have suggested that there is a tension at the heart of government policy which, at one and the same time, constructs parents as a resource for schools and schools as a resource for parents; agendas which they see as non-complementary. We would certainly acknowledge the degree of plurality involved. However, these agendas do seem to reflect the needs on the ground in some situations, needs which we should recognize place great demands on schools if they are to be met responsively.

A risk associated with targeting is a potential sense of stigmatization on the part of the target group, although this seems to have been avoided in this case. This may have been due to the personal contact used initially. There was also a sense of status being raised since views were being sought rather than offered and the suggestions of the parents were taken up and acted upon by the school.

Moving away from the school location

We know that, as a result of negative experiences during their own schooling (Whalley, 2001), some parents can experience feelings of insecurity and discomfort just from being in a school. Here, we report an exploratory activity undertaken in one HFSM literacy school where we moved away from the school site and set up a knowledge exchange exhibition in a nearby supermarket. The exhibition included photographs of previous knowledge exchange activities, e.g. photos of parents and siblings helping to make books from photographs taken at home (see later), artefacts from the activities, explanations of the activities and information for parents. The class video of the literacy hour also played continuously.

The exhibition was open from 8 o'clock in the morning until about 6 o'clock in the evening, on two consecutive days. Colourful invitations to the exhibition were sent out and included a voucher for a free cup of tea or coffee at the supermarket's café. It was difficult to keep tabs on the number of class parents who visited as it was sometimes very busy with parents from other classes and other members of the community also dropping by but at least two thirds of parents came. (This was more than double the number of parents attending the original video screening at this school.) However, more interesting than the numbers was the pattern of visiting, with parents making more than a single visit and in different social groupings. For example, one mother of Indian heritage, who had not previously participated in any school based events, visited with her children twice and also on her own. The children's paternal grandfather, aunt and cousins also visited. The exhibition was a small event that we were not able to exploit to the full. (The class was being taught by a supply teacher at the time so the exhibition was staffed by the teacher–researcher.) However, we were able to detect in the parents' responses to it something of the promise that moving events away from school can offer. In particular, how much freer things can be when parents are on their own ground and expectations regarding school ways of doing things are less evident; where members of the extended family and next door neighbours can also take an interest in a child's education.

Building on home[12] knowledge

There are varied reasons why participation in activities located at school may be difficult for some parents (see Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 2002). In addition to language differences, as mentioned earlier, parents may have family responsibilities like child or elder care, working hours that coincide with the school day, illness and/

or transport difficulties. Strategies like sending video material home may help to open up the situation. However, some have argued that focusing on school learning is of itself marginalizing since it excludes children's out-of-school experiences, the learning they do at home and the involvement of parents in this (Caddell *et al.*, 2000). Edwards and Warin (1999) suggest that in the schools they studied, collaboration between school and home had been superseded by what amounted to the colonization of the home by the school (see also Dyson & Robson, 1999). As we have seen, the extension of knowledge about school practices into the home can be at the behest of parents themselves which may temper the colonization metaphor somewhat. However, we also sought to promote the exchange of knowledge between home and school as a two way process.

Photographs were used as one of the means whereby out-of-school worlds were brought into the classroom. In the literacy strand, all children were given a disposable camera to use at home over a holiday period. They were asked to take photographs relating to their class topic—making a model vehicle, living things (including people), plants and growth, and the local environment. With the exception of the first school, they were also invited to photograph any other activities they were engaged in. Most parents helped with the photography although not everyone got the chance to help.

> We were actually doing it together … we were out down the road, took some photographs of the post-office, and then we came up here to the.. a few photographs of the bridge, and the Littlewoods building, and he thought it was exciting until the end of the roll came and he said 'I can't take no more pictures', I said 'it's gone', he said 'well get the camera then', he wanted our camera, I said 'well no because this is already …', the camera that they had from the school was already paid for, the process fee was already included, so you didn't have to pay for post, and I said 'on mine you would have had £5…' But he was telling (the teacher) the next day what he took, what pictures he took, and then she was telling me all this, he took this one, he took that one, he did this and that and the other, and he was writing down what he took for his own purpose, he didn't take that to school, he kept that for himself, so that he knew what.. which.. he took. (Mother of higher attaining boy at HFSM school)

> That went quite well, I didn't expect her to use the whole film up on her cousins though, we were supposed to actually go out and take some photos but by the time I got back they were all finished, they were all used up, weren't they. (Mother of lower attaining girl at LFSM school, African-Caribbean heritage)

In the first two schools, the photographs were returned to the children after developing. Children and parents were then asked to select four favourites to stick in an album provided by the project and to write captions for them.

> (He) loved taking the pictures and that, also it was more of a.. got him to participate within the whole project … because it got him to actually be quite, you know, involved in the whole process (Father of lower attaining boy at LFSM school)

> … he really.. he wrote his neatest writing, I haven't seen such neat writing and he had these new pens which he used.. and actually he was quite proud of that work. (Mother of same boy)

The albums and spare photos[13] were then brought back into school where they were available to support further work and discussion.

In the other two schools (both HFSM), parents were invited into school to help the children as they used the photos in their work, making a book from captioned photographs. Older siblings were also invited to join these sessions. In both schools, about half the children were supported in class by parents. For the Bristol school, this represented quite an increase on the numbers attending the video screening and included more African-Caribbean heritage parents. The parents knew the provenance of the photos and were able to help the children express the meaning of the pictures, as well as helping out with the practicalities.

> She had a picture of my sister's baby as well and she made some little funny comments about the baby … I helped her cut out the lines and showed her where to stick them and what did she think the picture was about, you know, and helped her to do the spellings … that was nice to do. (Mother of lower attaining girl at HFSM school, African-Caribbean heritage)

> He [dad] helped me, he reminded me what I could write and what things were and when they were. (Middle attaining boy at HFSM school)

The teachers were very positive about the activities. One teacher who was newly appointed said it had allowed her to get to know the children, their families and the area very quickly. In this school, the camera activity and the writing workshop were added to the school's Year 1 scheme of work. In another school, it shaped the teacher's intention to give greater attention to exploring children's out of school knowledge at the start of topic work. She also observed, however, how difficult it was to transform practice in the face of such detailed and varied information from home.

In the numeracy strand also, the children in all the schools were given a disposable camera. They were asked to take photos of any maths they took part in over the summer holiday, with the focus placed on everyday activities rather than school-type maths. They were also given a diary to write down when they took each photograph, who was involved in the activity with them, and a brief comment about what was taking place. Photographs selected by the children were made either into a display or a class album. Reading the mathematics content from the images alone was not always straightforward—a photo of a pair of trainers, for example, could represent savings calculations. The children, therefore, added a couple of lines of explication to their mounted pictures after discussing their meaning.

Many children and parents enjoyed the activity.

> Oh, yes, she was very happy and we were very happy as well. It's something different. (Father of higher attaining girl at HFSM school, Bangladeshi heritage)

> (It was) fun I would say. He enjoyed doing it. And it also made him think about what we actually do in the house that involves numbers. Like the clock and telling the time, and going to the shops, and change, and money. Because that's another thing, him and (his brother) were changing their English money into euros so that was more maths trying to work out that. And also trying to work out when we were on holidays, if something was 8 euros how much was that in English money. (Mother of lower attaining boy at LFSM school)

However, they also found it challenging. The same mother observed:

> A fortnight went by and we hadn't taken any pictures and I was thinking—oh my god, what are we going to take pictures of him doing— because he wasn't getting any maths homework … And I was thinking, well what do other people do, that was the other thing, I was trying to think of what other people did in their houses that involved numbers that I didn't do, I was thinking—I must be missing something here.

In some cases, other family members got involved.

> She ran out of ideas of things to take, but then she quickly learnt that they were everywhere … she said to me I've got 12 pictures left and I don't know what to take it of, so I was helping her out, saying it's everywhere you can see ideas. (Older sister of middle attaining girl at HFSM school, Somali heritage)

The rate of camera return was lower than in the literacy strand, where it had approached 100%. The lower response may reflect the greater degree of difficulty presented by the activity. Amongst the targets, it was predominantly boys who did not return the cameras and they gave little indication as to why. One mother felt it may have been on account of her own over-involvement

> Oh I remember that one because he's still got the bleedin' camera … I did the activity, he didn't actually use the camera, I don't think he was that.. I'm not sure whether he wasn't impressed with it, or he was probably less impressed with the fact that I got involved. (Mother of higher attaining boy at HFSM school)

The sister-in-law of a rather reserved girl thought that she may have felt too shy to show her pictures but the child said she had lost the camera. The reference to shyness acts as a reminder that people may have different levels of comfort about bringing aspects of the home into school, making the private public. Some children may have felt concerned about the way their peers, wearing school identities, would respond to the images, or, that a discontinuity between their own school identity and their home-based representations would be revealed. Moss (2001), writing in the context of reading research, reported her anxieties about young children deciding what is made public when given a camera. In her case, she felt the need to shield the children's photographs from the teacher. This was due to her unease at the way they might be read, feeling that there was always potential for the resources pictured to be judged as not enough or of the wrong kind. In mathematics, there is not the same kind of expectation that homes will contain particular mathematical objects or forms, so negative evaluations of this kind were not expected to be a problem. The teachers were interested in the photographs and the insights they gave. However, only one teacher appeared to build on the information in a concerted way.[14]

> When they brought the photographs in, I think they were quite a big.. they were a big thing for me because they showed.. gave me an insight into their homes, and actually made me think of.. yes, you know, when you have a maths lesson in class say of weighing … whatever, and you talk about maths at home and children tend to sort of 'oh miss', they sit there and you're thinking, you know, you're trying to draw it out of them and then you have these pictures where they are actually using maths at home, and you can see it. (Teacher at HFSM school)

In the activities with the photos, we started to build on the agency of the child (MacLeod, 2004) in support of knowledge exchange. This was developed further in later activities when, for example, the children were given a shoe box to fill at home with meaningful artefacts which were then brought into school. The boxes were then used in various ways to support writing.[15] Again, some teachers were struck by the differences represented in the boxes and felt that all too often there was a pressure in school for such diversity to be closed down. It was felt that the curriculum constrained the capability of responding to individuality.

Discussion

In this paper, we have reported a number of activities undertaken on the project to encourage home–school knowledge exchange. In each activity, strategies were used that we hoped would support the engagement of participants. Although different in form, these activities were perhaps characterized by the attempt to see things from the parental or home point of view. This endeavour does present difficulties, however, since there may be no common parental viewpoint. Something that suits one family may not suit another. Whilst one Somali heritage mother suggested at her discussion group that she would like information in her own language so that she could read it independently without having to ask another member of the family to translate, a target parent, again of Somali heritage, told us that she preferred information to be sent home in English so that her daughter could read and translate it.[16] Similarly, the differences that were observed between the children making the maths video in home languages underline the variation to be found within particular communities and act as a reminder that it is not just the heterogeneity of the parent body as a whole which needs to be taken into account. There is also diversity within groups, especially where the categorization of groups is founded on rather general factors like class and ethnicity.

An implication of heterogeneity is that schools need to put effort into finding out from parents what kind of activities and support may be appropriate or helpful. However, here again things may not be straightforward. Apart from the demands placed on schools by consultation processes that seek to access the views of everyone, some parents may not have clear views as to what might be envisaged. In a telephone survey, Williams *et al.* (2002) found that 30% of parents said that they did not know what could be done to get parents more involved in their children's school life. Furthermore, solutions which are more unusual may not occur to parents. In an early interview, we sounded out a Bangladeshi heritage father as to what he thought of the idea of receiving a school-made video with sequences in home languages. He was very positive about the idea, especially for 'the new ladies coming from different worlds', as they would be able to learn from it and it would give parents something to talk to their children about. He added, however, that such a thing would never happen.

A further implication of heterogeneity is that in terms of activities one size does not fit all, nor can it be made to fit all. Perhaps the best that can be aimed for is to

put in place a range of actions that will include different participants at different times in different ways—a layered patchwork cover with areas of different thickness created from the diverse overlappings. Whilst such a plan aims for overall coverage, inevitably there will be variation. (Even if there is 100% participation, parents will interpret activities differently according to where they are coming from, an issue explored in more depth in Hughes and Greenhough, this issue.) We should also note that such a 'mix and match' provision, with families opting in and out on occasion, carries with it a need for these decisions to be respected and negative inferences avoided.

Ethical issues were constantly considered through the course of the project. We were aware that we were being offered access to families' lives in a way unusual in education and we were careful to respect this. We recognized that for some children, exposure of some aspects of their lives to peers and teachers would not be welcome and we did not wish to undermine children's rights to develop the relationship between these two sides of their lives—home and school—in the ways that were most empowering for them. The Leverhulme Numeracy Research Programme has noted the 'boundaries of practice' (Baker, 2001, p. 46) which exist for children between home and school and we recognized the need to be sensitive to these.

Earlier in this paper, we observed that referring to certain families as 'hard to reach' is problematic, partly because it implies that parents are somehow at fault. As we have already noted, the legitimacy of the term 'hard to reach' is increasingly being questioned, for, as the National Literacy Trust (2005) comments: 'The most disadvantaged people tend not to use services … Such groups have sometimes been called 'hard to reach'. This is a contentious term and it might be fairer for the services themselves to be called hard to reach' (p. 80). Our experience during the project was that parents from a wide range of social backgrounds were interested in knowing more about how to help their children learn, including those who could be described as disadvantaged. Furthermore, just as we found that family practices and languages were varied, so we found that using a variety of approaches to communicate with parents was important for fuller family engagement. An example of such variety was the use of video to show parents how literacy and numeracy were taught at school (rather than relying on conventional means such as school-based meetings); providing families with copies; ensuring that some video clips were recorded in children's home languages; and organizing showings at different times of the school day.

One of the most rewarding aspects of our work was the realization that where communication between homes and schools was effective, the contribution that parents made to their child's learning was often rich and extensive. This occurred when children were given disposable cameras and parents helped at home. In this activity parents with widely differing means and resources contributed to their child's learning at school and the diversity of children's home lives was recorded in images that were welcomed by teachers. Thomas and Loxley (2001) comment on the link between difference and diversity and argue powerfully that assumptions about 'differences from the norm' are very much influenced by the perspectives of

those making such judgments. These authors suggest that whether differences are interpreted negatively or positively depends on the outlook adopted:

> Difference and identity are constructed in and through social relations. Whether difference is seen positively, as diversity, or negatively as deviance or deficit depends on the mindset of the person or group of people who observe that difference. (p. 87)

With the disposable camera activity we found that schools viewed variations in children's out-of-school lives constructively. Difference was transformed into diversity and some parents who might have been viewed as 'hard to reach' engaged actively with their children's learning.

The project sought to promote knowledge exchange in the direction of home to school as well as from school to home. From this view, we can see that concerns about engagement apply to all participants not just parents and children. In terms of 'reach' there is a symmetrical dimension which asks whether teachers and schools are being reached by out of school worlds and knowledge. This is not solely concerned with creating mechanisms whereby knowledge can be conveyed into school but also with the response to it once it arrives. Some teachers were skilful in integrating such knowledge into their work, although as was noted earlier heterogeneity and diversity presented a challenge. However, if the most is to be made of knowledge exchange in this direction then there is a need for the curriculum itself to respond. In this respect, moves towards the personalization of learning (Milliband, 2004) may prove helpful.

The schools we worked with were able to undertake some of these activities with the support of the resources of the research project. While these were not lavish, they did allow us to provide, for example, class sets of disposable cameras, video cameras and quantities of video tape, and interpreters to attend meetings. We are aware that with resource constraints in schools this could be difficult to build into regular spending. Schools may be able to find alternative sources of funding, possibly from sponsorship by local companies, and there may be government funding available for the provision of interpreters. In addition, developing technology may help reduce costs. With digital cameras[17] becoming ever cheaper, these might be shared by groups of pupils over a period of time and the costs of film processing avoided since selected images can be printed in school. In addition to the equipment, there are, however, also costs in terms of time. Teachers need time to respond and take account of new knowledge. Furthermore, aspects like home visiting and flexible timings for meetings both during day and in the evening require the teacher's working day to be viewed and structured differently (see Hancock, 1998). Here again there are financial implications. For the full potential of home–school knowledge exchange to be realized, then, investment will be required.

In this paper, we have tried to avoid the 'cheery, unfailingly positive tone' (Vincent, 1996, p. 74) of project reporting. We have sought, rather, to present a measured account that indicates the promise of home–school knowledge exchange activity, whilst also recognizing the difficulties and complexities involved. We hope it may provide a platform for successful engagement in the future.

Notes

1. Matched comparison schools were also recruited to the project. These schools did not take part in activities. Assessments carried out with students in these schools provided a basis for evaluating the effects of the project on children's attainment and learning dispositions.
2. The teachers were also parents.
3. A team of three full time researchers was responsible for collecting and analysing a range of process and outcome evaluation data.
4. Reserves were recruited in the very small number of declining cases.
5. For detailed information on the range of knowledge exchange activities that were implemented, see Feiler *et al.* (in press) and Winter *et al.* (in press).
6. We use three dots (…) in transcriptions to show that text has been omitted and two dots (..) to show a slight hesitation or discontinuity.
7. At the time of the project, all families appeared to have access to a video recorder.
8. Figures relate to the proportion of children represented by at least one parent.
9. ''Transaction'' designates … an ongoing process in which the elements or factors are … aspects of a total situation, each conditioned by and conditioning the other. (Rosenblatt, 1978, p 17)
10. At this point in the project, the children from the original class had been reorganized into two new classes. Both classes became project action classes.
11. Parents of all the children in the school who received help from EMAS were invited to the meeting.
12. Our use of 'home' includes the out of school world in general.
13. Parents retained any photos they did not want to be used in school.
14. In two schools, the classes were reorganized over the summer with the result that in any one class, only a proportion of children had photographs.
15. For fuller accounts of this activity see Greenhough *et al.* (2005), and Hughes and Greenhough (this issue).
16. Somali has been scripted only recently and is heavily dialectized.
17. Using a digital camera can give participants more control over which aspects of private lives are revealed, as the set of pictures may be reviewed and edited before the camera is returned to school.

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