*f*indings

Links between school, family and the community: a review of the evidence

Mog Ball's (1998) report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *School Inclusion,* described current practice in school-family-community links in the UK. New work from Alan Dyson and Elaine Robson of the Department of Education, University of Newcastle, complements the earlier report by reviewing the literature in this field in order to identify the effects and effectiveness of different types of link. The review found that:

f **There is strong evidence to suggest that most parents wish to be actively involved in supporting their children's learning. Such involvement has positive impacts on children's attainments.**

f **Parents also welcome other forms of partnership with schools. However, such partnerships impose additional burdens on schools and they are often dominated by the professionals.**

f **Collaboration between schools and other community agencies is fraught with difficulties. However, non-education professionals can make important contributions in working with vulnerable children and in the non-academic areas of the curriculum, where they have particular credibility with children and young people.**

f **Parents and communities have a part to play in management and decision-making in schools, particularly through their roles as 'consumers' of education. However, some groups are better at playing this role than others and there is a tendency for their interests to dominate over the community interest.**

f **Much of the research evidence comes from small-scale local studies: there is a need for studies which are more substantial in terms of scale, scope and depth and which are linked into coherent programmes.**

f **In national policy terms, there is a need for more coherent funding patterns and the promotion of larger-scale projects. There are also potential tensions to be resolved between the 'crusade for standards' and the wider community role which schools are expected to play.**

Background

There is a long tradition in the UK of schools developing strong links with the families of their pupils and with the communities they serve. These links have come to seem even more important recently as means whereby schools can drive up standards of attainment and as an important contribution which schools can make to addressing the problem of social exclusion. In 1998, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation commissioned a report, *School Inclusion,* which described the current nature and extent of these links. To supplement this report, the present study reviewed the UK literature in this field since 1988. It focused particularly on evaluative literature reporting effects and the effectiveness.

The nature of the literature

There is a substantial amount of literature on school-family-community links in the UK. Although there is a good deal from which policy-makers and practitioners can learn, however, this literature is also characterised by significant limitations - unevenness in the coverage of different types of links, a reliance on local evaluations of small-scale projects and an absence of wide-ranging programmatic evaluations. These limitations may be related to the fact that school-family-community links tend to be 'bolted on' to schools' main concerns and resourced through short-term, locally determined projects, with minimal intervention from central government.

Parental involvement in learning

Much of the literature is concerned with the ways in which parents can be involved in supporting their children's learning - particularly in the 'basic skills' of literacy and numeracy. There is good evidence that involving parents in home-school reading schemes, family literacy initiatives and the like tends to enhance the attainments of children. Such involvement is even more likely to improve children's attitudes to learning and is very widely welcomed by many parents. These findings seem to hold true regardless of social class; the assumption that 'middle class' parents are more eager to be involved than their 'working class' counterparts is not borne out by the evidence.

On the other hand, the literature tells us little about 'failures' in this field. Not all schemes are equally successful for all parents and children - but we do not fully understand why. Similarly, we know very little about the schools, teachers and, in particular, parents who drop out of schemes or do not participate in the first instance. There are also ethical and political issues around this area. The model of parent-child relations and of family values embedded in the parental involvement movement may well devalue the practices and values of families who may already be somewhat marginalised. The net effect may simply be to alienate those families and disadvantage their children further.

Partnership with parents

Apart from their involvement in learning activities, schools try to develop a range of links with parents such as communication about their children's progress, home-school contracts, involvement in classroom and school activities, and participation in decision-making about their children. These can all be seen as ways of establishing a partnership with parents.

The literature suggests that these attempts at partnership often produce beneficial effects. Parents, by and large, want to be informed and involved by schools and welcome any positive approaches that are made. In the field of special needs education, particularly, the early and continuing involvement of parents has been placed on a statutory footing. There is evidence from this field that this has been effective in requiring the education service to engage fully with parents.

However, there is also evidence that the development of partnerships imposes strains on schools, which have to manage such initiatives alongside their other priorities. More fundamentally, the literature demonstrates an underlying power imbalance between education professionals and parents. Partnership takes place very much on terms dictated by the former, with the consequent marginalisation of the latter. This issue may be particularly important where parents belong to social groups (such as some minority ethnic groups, for instance) that already experience marginalisation. There is little indication in the literature as to how this issue might be addressed. There is, however,

some limited evidence of parental groups operating successfully outside the direct control of education professionals. In some cases, such groups have been able to exert a powerful influence on education policy and practice.

Collaboration between community agencies

Most schools are routinely involved in working collaboratively with community agencies, such as social services departments, health professionals, the police and voluntary organisations. There is good evidence that a great deal can be achieved through such collaborations but that they tend to be characterised by professional misunderstandings and mistrust which frequently make them problematic.

There is evidence, however, that community agencies can make an important contribution to activities in and around schools which lie at the 'periphery' of schools' work, in the sense that they are not concerned with the core business of delivering the basic curriculum. In particular, non-education professionals can contribute effectively to work with vulnerable children, where they can mediate between schools and the child's family and community, and to the 'non-academic' aspects of the curriculum. There is also evidence that mentoring is effective in changing pupils' attitudes and raising their attainment. It may be that non-teachers bring with them a 'credibility' arising from their experiences outside of school to which teachers themselves cannot readily aspire.

Community education and participation in management

All schools are required to involve parents and the wider community in management and decision-making and many additionally see themselves as providing education services and facilities not just to their pupils, but to the community as a whole. The situation with regard to these activities, however, seems to be far from positive. The education reforms of the late 1980s and early 1990s appear to have privileged individual parents acting as consumers over the community interest. The reforms have, therefore, shifted power in decision-making to parents who have the capacity to exercise their

consumer role effectively. The consequence is a further marginalisation of those parents who, for whatever reason, are less able to do this.

These developments have also raised doubts as to whether community education meets the real needs of communities and whether communities are able to exert a real influence over the schools which serve them. On the other hand, there is some evidence that, in areas experiencing multiple disadvantage, there is potential for schools to become involved in multi-strand initiatives aimed at addressing the sources of disadvantage in a coherent way.

Implications for further research

One aim of the review was to establish where further research might be needed. Since the current literature is dominated by reports of small-scale, local studies, there is a need for studies in this field which are more substantial in terms of their *scale* (the number and size of initiatives studied), their *scope* (the range of issues studied) and their *depth* (the extent to which underlying processes are studied). Different sorts of studies are needed (e.g. large-scale quasi-experiments, in-depth case-studies and multi-level studies), but they need to be related to each other in a way which is programmatic and which may call for coherent funding from the major research sponsors.

There is a particular need for research which adopts a community rather than a professional perspective, focusing on the perceptions of community members and the impacts of links on the community (rather than simply on the school). Specific gaps in our knowledge need to be filled in terms of studies of families, teachers and schools who do not participate in links. Moreover, there is a need for the critical and evaluative research traditions in this field to be brought closer together so that they can inform each other more fully.

Implications for policy and practice

At local level the further development of school-family-community links seems like a good investment for schools and local education authorities (LEAs) to make. However, given the constraints under which schools operate, these links will need leadership and resources from the LEA, from central government and from other agencies.

Given that there is no guarantee of particular approaches working in every situation, they will also need careful local monitoring.

At national level, there is a role for central government in helping to formalise and disseminate what has been learnt in this field so that local initiatives do not have to 'reinvent the wheel'. There is also a need for central government to prioritise and resource this area of schools' work appropriately in order to avoid the current patchwork of 'bolt-on' provision. In particular, central government could usefully promote large-scale, evidence-based projects with in-built evaluation.

More generally, there is a potential tension in government policy between the 'crusade for standards', which requires schools to focus on their 'core business' of curriculum delivery, and a broader social exclusion agenda which implies a more extended community role for schools. Although there are points of congruence between these agendas, they also create significant dilemmas for schools. There is a need for central government to think through the role that it envisages for schools *vis-à-vis* families and communities and to consider how links with broader social policy are to be managed in the light of that role.

About the study

The study reviewed literature on the effects and effectiveness of school-family-community links, using the typology of such links developed by Mog Ball in the *School Inclusion* report. Over 300 items were reviewed, focusing on literature produced in the UK since the Education Reform Act of 1988. A large number of other items were excluded because they contained no evaluative evidence. In addition to standard library searches, LEAs, Training and Enterprise Councils, voluntary organisations and other sponsoring bodies were invited to submit material, so that items were drawn both from the research literature and from the 'grey' literature of internal reports and unpublished papers. The interim findings from the review were presented for comment to an expert seminar of researchers and practitioners in the field whose contribution is gratefully acknowledged.