

HUMAN SCALE EDUCATION

SETTING UP PARENTS' COUNCILS PROJECT 2004-05

Report of an evaluation undertaken by Nola Turner on behalf of the Centre for Cross Curricular Initiatives, London South Bank University. This report was commissioned by Human Scale Education with funding from the Department of Education and Skills.

Copyright CCCI London South Bank University, Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences
July 2005

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	p. 1 - 5
INTRODUCTION	p. 6
METHODOLOGY	p. 6 - 7
AIMS & OUTCOMES	p. 8 - 9
THE CONTEXT OF THE SCHOOLS	p. 9 - 14
SETTING UP PARENTS' COUNCILS: Processes, outcomes and issues	p. 14 - 26
EVALUATION	p. 26 - 28
CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS	p. 28 - 29
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	p.29

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. This evaluation was part of a project managed by Human Scale Education concerned with setting up parents' councils in schools. This evaluation report was commissioned by Human Scale Education with funding from the DfES.

2. It focused on the aims of the project as stated by the sponsors and as understood by the participants; the processes by which the project was developed in school; the issues raised by the project; the targets set by the sponsors.
 - 2.1 The sponsors' aims were:
 - i. to encourage schools to create a parents' council or similar body as a means of fostering "a culture of genuine participation and collaboration".

 - ii. Schools were to have flexibility to devise strategies to suit local circumstances, but a process was suggested whereby a parent forum might grow out of meetings between class representatives and class teachers. This in turn might give rise to a more structured parent council with responsibility for conveying parents' views to staff and reporting back to parents.

 - iii. The council was to have links with the governing body and the school council

 - iv. The project was to focus on schools in "challenging circumstances" and was to attempt to reach "disengaged parents and parents from ethnic minorities".

3. The targets set were:
 - Increase in the number of parents attending parent/teacher consultations

 - Improvement in the information sent to parents

- Increase in the number and range of opportunities for parents to communicate with the school
- Development/Improvement of area for parents on the school website
- Increase in number of consultation meetings held involving parents
- Wider range of parents involved in school life
- Evaluation to show positive feedback from parents, staff and governors re improved consultation with parents.

4. The evaluation took place in July 2005 in two schools, one primary one secondary both of which met the criteria.

5. The evaluation is based on evidence gathered from documentation, small scale semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Questions were designed to elicit views and information relating to targets set by the sponsors.

6. The interviews were conducted with three separate groups in each school: the project co-ordinator and a member of the senior management team; a group of parents some of whom were parent governors; a member of staff. All the interviewees had played a direct part in the development of the project.

7. In general the key issues for the schools were:

- i. the mobility of families
- ii. cultural differences in understandings of the role of parents in schools
- iii. capacity building to change the school culture.

8. It was found that:

- i. relationships between the parents interviewed and the schools were good

- ii. parent forums were preferred to more formal parent councils because they were best fitted to mesh with other strategies for parental consultation being developed
 - iii. there were issues around the nature of links to the governing body
 - a. because parent governors, though elected, do not represent a constituency of parents as such
 - b. the work of governors in schools undergoing rapid improvement is huge and focuses on higher priorities
 - iv. the schools had a sensitive awareness of the needs of parents and were engaged in a number of initiatives to build capacity. The need for this work was understood by parents. Those interviewed were eager to be part of a more participative ethos and to work in more strategic ways
 - v. School websites were at different stages of development. The primary focus of a school website should be educational. It had a role to play in linking home and school and potential for increasing parents' understanding of the curriculum. Differences in language and literacy skills were factors that might present difficulties for some parents
 - vi. The project had been helpful in clarifying the concept of parental participation and strategies to develop it
 - vii. The optimum length of time for a project of this kind was thought to be 2-3 years
 - viii. The participants were appreciative of the support they had received from Human Scale Education.
9. The targets were met in large measure:
- i. There had been an increase in the number of parents attending parent/teacher consultations.

- ii. There had been an increase in the number of communications with parents though there was no direct evidence presented to suggest the project had an effect on improving the quality of information sent to parents. In both schools the quality of such communications was already high
- iii. There had been an increase in the range and number of opportunities for parents to communicate with the schools
- iv. The website was being developed in both schools. In one school parents had contributed suggestions of how it might meet their needs.
- v. There had been a number of consultative meetings held involving parents
- vi. The project was set to involve a wider range of parents in both schools
- vii. Feedback from all participants was positive about the new arrangements for consulting parents and about the project's potential for long term development.

10. Conclusions & Recommendations:

The HSE project was timely. Schools and parents want to move to a more consultative relationship. The project sharpened the focus of discussion of needs and capability. The flexibility to develop according to local circumstances has been beneficial. The time taken to explore concept and practice has been well spent. Schools prefer a "forum" style over the more formal structure of a "council". A longer period is required to embed the work.

Recommendation 1

The project continue for a further period of time to enable the consolidation of what has been achieved so far.

Recommendation 2

Ways be sought to develop parental capacity, possibly through local training workshops.

Recommendation 3

Funding should reflect the cost of initiatives to increase the participation of different heritage groups and “hard to reach” parents.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Cross Curricular Initiatives at London South Bank University was invited by Human Scale Education to undertake an evaluation of a project concerned with enabling schools to set up Parent Councils or similar bodies to improve the participation of parents in their children's education. The project was being funded by the DfES and was running in two primary schools and two secondary schools. Two schools were located in London, one in Luton and one in Bolton.

The evaluation was made in June/July 2005 when the project had been running for nine months. It sought to explore the understandings of the key players, to gather information on the performance targets, to discuss issues raised and to comment on the potential for long term development.

2. METHODOLOGY

This was a small scale, qualitative study of the project in one primary school in London and one secondary school in Bolton.

Five initial questions guided the evaluation. These were:

- Did the schools establish a Parent Council?
- What processes were gone through to do this?
- Were the performance targets reached?
- What issues arose for the schools?
- What is the potential for further development?

Several methods were employed to collect evidence. These were:

a) A review of the documentation

Documents included the HSE proposal papers for the Parent Council project; DfES publications on engaging parents in school decision making; research papers on parental participation; documents and website information from the schools.

b). Semi-structured interviews in the schools

These took place with

- The project co-ordinator and a member of the senior management team
- A group of parents including parent governors
- A member of staff.

All those interviewed were directly involved in the project.

c). Observation

This took the form of participant observation at a project-wide conference in November 2004.

Terminology

In this small scale qualitative evaluation great care has been taken to protect the anonymity of the interviewees. The terms “the school” and “staff” have been used to convey the views of senior managers and staff in general. As there was more than one person at the parents’ interviews it has been easier to avoid direct attributions. All quotes have been taken from transcripts of recordings of the interviews.

A further point about terminology needs to be made. There are nuances between the meanings of the terms **parent council** and **parent forum**. A parent council would suggest a body of representatives (usually elected) which meets regularly and has clear terms of reference and reporting procedures to the parents as a whole and to the school. A parent forum suggests a looser grouping of unelected representatives who meet from time to time for two-way consultation with staff. The project proposal spoke of setting up a parent council as an ultimate goal. One school had set up a parent forum while the other had established what seemed to be a parent forum but referred to it as “*the parent council*”. For the sake of clarity in this report the term **parent forum** will be used to describe the body of parents set up for this project in each of the schools visited.

3. AIMS AND OUTCOMES

The project as envisaged by HSE had the aim of enabling schools to explore new ways in which parents could be involved so as to encourage “*a culture of genuine participation and collaboration*” (HSE document “Setting Up Parents’ Councils: Report to DfES March 2005).

The outcomes were expressed as targets to be used to measure the success of the project. The targets were:

- Increase in number of parents attending parent/teacher consultations
- Improvement in information sent to parents
- Increase in number and range of opportunities for parents to communicate with schools
- Development/Improvement of area for parents on school website
- Increase in number of consultative meetings held involving parents
- Wider range of parents involved in school life
- Evaluation to show positive feedback from parents, staff and governors re improved consultation with parents.

HSE recognised the need for each school to devise a programme which would best suit their own needs and circumstances. Within this flexibility there was an expectation that structures and processes would be established to give parents a voice. The model proposed by HSE was that of regular class meetings with teachers to give rise to class representatives who would form a core of parents with whom the school could consult on a range of issues. These representatives might become a whole school parent council.

To this basic model was added a suggestion that a degree of triangulation should be attempted in which the parent council would feed back to the governing body regularly and also link to the School Council in schools where a school council had been established.

Before the project was launched the DfES had stipulated that “*grants should go to schools which are in challenging circumstances*” (HSE report op cit.). This resulted

in placing an emphasis in the project on “*working to reach disengaged parents and parents from ethnic minorities*” (HSE report op cit).

The schools selected reflect this stipulation. They each face a number of challenges which needed to be thoroughly understood before evaluative assessments were made. A short description of the two schools in the independent evaluation may serve to illuminate their particular circumstances and the issues arising from these.

4. THE CONTEXT OF THE SCHOOLS

The schools visited were Bruce Grove Primary School in Tottenham, London and Ladybridge High School in Bolton, Lancashire.

Bruce Grove Primary School

The school is located in the London borough of Haringey, one of the most deprived boroughs of greater London and, indeed, the whole country. It lies in the heart of Tottenham, a few steps away from a railway station, a bustling commercial high street and a number of small businesses such as car maintenance workshops. It is housed in Victorian buildings in a congested street of terrace houses. Similar streets make up the adjacent area. These are bounded on one side by the busy A10 trunk road.

Inside the school there is a purposeful, energetic atmosphere. Children’s work on display illustrates the core value of respect for the diverse cultures of the world. The school feels open, welcoming and a secure place to be.

Pupils come from a wide range of heritage groups, as in most other inner city schools. Around 50% of the children at Bruce Grove come from white families and families of African Caribbean, Turkish and Greek backgrounds all of whom are long established in the area. They tend to be home owners and live within walking distance of the school. The rest of the school population is made up of children from families of Kurdish and Bengali backgrounds and some who have most recently come from a wide range of African countries. Many are refugees and asylum seekers. Over 40 languages are spoken.

Diversity as such is **not** an issue at Bruce Grove. However three issues are significant for the school in its mission to improve the involvement of parents and these connect with the social, economic and political status of many families.

The first of these is the **mobility** of families. The school has a high turn over of children each year, many of whom stay for very short periods of time:

“There is a turn over of about 35% every year and that is because refugee families move and are moved around. And they can be in one place for a very short period of time. We might enrol a child one week and a week later they may be gone.”

The second is that in some cultures **the concept of parental participation** means something different to the one being developed by the school:

“Our parents are not negative, but they don’t naturally engage for lots of reasons, the main one being that they are coming from cultures where one does not go into a school. You hand your child over to the school. So it is a bizarre idea that you come in and help”

The third issue is that of **building capacity** for participation in a consultative process. At its most basic this can be a question of language skills.

“Interviewer: From where you sit, what do you see as the main challenge in trying to involve more parents?”

Parent: “The language barrier”.

“Many of our parents have had very little in the way of formal education. Some cannot read or write and have difficulty speaking English.”

There are, too, general issues of the voluntary nature of parental participation and confidence levels.

“ When you are dealing with parents you can’t actually make demands and say to them you’ve got to do such and such because that is counter productive to the ethos you are trying to create. Our parents are really not confident about coming in. They are aware of a lack of skills.”

The school works with a number of agencies to improve social inclusion. A Home School Co-ordinator with responsibility for outreach to “disengaged” families is employed. Translators and interpreters are used though they are often in short supply because they too move around.

The Headteacher has been in post for eighteen months. During this time she has introduced a wide ranging programme for school improvement which has raised both attainment and morale. High priority is being given to improving parental involvement in children’s learning. The setting up of a Parent’s Forum is one strategy among many for achieving this change. Parents report a “*transformation*” in the school. They are appreciative of the more open approach introduced by the Head: “*This school is very approachable*”

“You have an open door here. G. always makes you feel welcome. All the staff do.”

“We have great learning mentors who are fantastic both for the children and the parents as well. The time they put in is unbelievable. We are very lucky in that we have people who are willing to put in the time to help, to encourage, making you feel welcomed and valued.”

Ladybridge High School

This is a one year old 11-16 school which arose from the closure of a school on the same site. It is working in partnership with a successful school a few miles away in what is termed The Brook Learning Partnership. The Partnership has a number of innovative posts including an Executive Principal, a Community and Business Development Officer and a Community Secretary all of whom have played a major role in the setting up of a parents’ forum.

The school is housed in fairly modern buildings set in pleasant grounds. It is located in an affluent suburb of Bolton with large detached houses and well kept gardens. The reception area projects a bright, corporate image of the school. The atmosphere is friendly but business-like. One feels one is entering a high quality, purposeful organisation.

85% of the staff from the previous school have been appointed to the new school and have welcomed the challenge of being part of a partnership for change. The school opened with the student population from the old school plus an under recruited Year 7. This resulted in the students being largely from outside the immediate area, some of them travelling quite long distances as the school is one of the few in Bolton with unfilled places.

“One of the strange things about this school is that you drive up and think “Wow! What a lovely environment for a school”. But very few of our children come from the immediate area.”

The pupil population is made up of three broad groups. There are young people of Asian heritage, whose families are well established in the town, who account for about 25% and tend to live locally. Next is a group of about 50% from white low income families who tend to live outside the area. The final 25% are the children of recent immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees from several Eastern European countries and Africa. 21 languages are spoken. The school has had to make a rapid adjustment to the arrival of young people from Africa:

“The change within this year is that we have gone from four African heritage children to eighty three”.

As with Bruce Grove, the issue is not diversity but mobility.

“There is a significant proportion of about 12-15% who are here for only short periods of time”.

“The catchment area includes short term lets, renting and such so lots of people are moving around and disappearing.”

There are indications that this may change as the school is set to enrol a significantly higher number of pupils from the immediate area into Yr 7.

Traditionally there had not been a high involvement of parents at the school Ladybridge replaced. Parents’ evenings had drawn around a 25% turn out. It was thought interest would be stimulated by the opening of the new school, but this

proved not to be the case: only six parents per year group turned up to specially arranged meetings to discuss the entirely new approach the new school planned to inaugurate.

“The poor turn out at parents’ meetings came as a shock to staff because we naturally assumed that if our children were going to be affected by a major change we would want to know.”

Improving the involvement of parents became an urgent priority for the school. The HSE project was seen as an important strand in a range of strategies designed to get the school’s vision across to parents and ultimately to give them a voice in decision making. It was recognised that a major issue in achieving this would be building the capacity of parents to participate.

“We have to build capacity. The work M is doing with them (a core group of parent volunteers for the parental forum) is about developing their standing and position amongst the parents and their own self esteem to move that forward.”

The parents interviewed were supportive of the school’s innovative approach to management and curriculum. They spoke highly of the leadership of the senior management team:

“They’ve got a vision that astounds me and creative ideas that I had never heard of before. It really feels like being in on something good.”

Like the parents at Bruce Grove, they were likewise aware of the efforts being made by the body of the staff:

“I have to compliment the staff here because 85% of them are from the previous school and for them to go through the challenging time they have had, I think they have done tremendously. Morale is high. They are working under a different system and they are now looking forward to the next set of challenges. So it has been a very good year for Ladybridge”

“My children have always been happy here, but now there seems to be a better structure. More organised. It is definitely on the up”

In summary, the two schools have changed rapidly in recent months and they are still in the process of further change. Issues which concern them are:

- **The mobility of a proportion of the school population**
- **Cultural differences in understandings of the role of parents in schools.**
- **Building the capacity of parents to participate in consultation and decision.**

It was within this context that the independent evaluation was made.

5. SETTING UP PARENTS' COUNCILS: Processes, outcomes and issues

Broadly the schools were motivated by similar aims when choosing to work with HSE. From the outset there was awareness that the project would provide an opportunity to pursue the following goals:

- Persuading parents that they have a role to play in their children's education
- Helping parents to understand how schools work
- Involving parents in consultation.

The process of setting up a parent forum has been similar in both schools. A general announcement of the HSE project was made followed by meetings to enlist volunteers. Parents known to be supportive of the school were approached to form a core group. These included parent governors. A co-ordinator and members of staff were identified to work with this group. Further meetings had been called. After an initial period of uncertainty as to their role, the parents had requested greater autonomy. By the time the evaluation took place the parents were beginning to articulate what they wanted from the school.

Bruce Grove

The school joined the HSE project with the aim of “*setting up parent's class meetings in order to engage them in their children's education.*” (Bruce Grove School Proposal

Document July 2004). To launch the project parents were invited to an open meeting which was followed by class meetings with teachers to identify parent representatives to a parents' "council". The launch was a great success, attracting about 125 people.

Parent representatives then met with the PSHE/School Council co-ordinator and a learning mentor to discuss what parents wanted from the school. It is clear from the documentation of the project and the interviews that the parents struggled at first with the notion of "*a grass roots rather than a top down approach.*" (Setting up Parents Councils: Project Principles 2004). The school had made the reasonable assumption that a parents' council was to be set up.

"It was envisaged that a Parent Council would run along similar lines to a School Council."

The parents had assumed that an amount of money had come to the school via Human Scale Education to enable them to nominate improvements that could be made.

"We thought the money could go to fix the toilets. The fund was made available and the only guideline was to start a Parent Council and there was nothing else from there on."

"We were in a vacuum and it slowed us down tremendously."

After several meetings the Head took over the co-ordination of the project. The parents asked to meet away from the staff because they felt they would be able to sort out their ideas more clearly if on their own. Arising out of these changes came a fresh understanding on the part of a core group of about four to six parents, two of whom were parent governors. They came to see that their role was to stimulate other parents to become more familiar with the school and to act as a conduit for suggestions of "whole school" improvements.

"The main thing was to get something people really to want to know about and to get them in. Just getting them through the door, really. Then if they enjoyed it they would want to come again."

Around this time the Home-School Co-ordinator had organised an interactive workshop for parents in co-operation with the Science Museum. The success of this led parents to request workshops on literacy and numeracy. The core group of parents, identified as the “council” has acted to relay more suggestions for workshops and has participated in the organisation of each session. Topics covered have been further aspects of literacy and numeracy, and parenting.

“The biggest turnout was for parenting, but that could be because we are becoming more confident about getting them in. We got about 22 for that one.”

Future workshops are planned on nutrition and sex education. The parents hope to provide resources for sale so that children’s learning can be supported at home.

“We had the resources there that the teacher uses to teach the children literacy and numeracy. The parents were handling them and asking if they could have them to take home. It was so nice to see that. So if we can have a lot more of those kinds of things they can all get a set to work with.”

“We are thinking of setting up a shop where parents can buy resources.”

The core group has high aspirations for the continuation of their work. When asked how they see the parents’ forum developing the response was:

All the way! If we can get the funding to set them up the workshops can run year after year.”

One major consideration in organising the workshops has been the timing of the sessions. It has been learned that these must fit the pattern of parents’ lives. The best time has proved to be just after 9a.m. when children are brought to school.

“If they have to come back they don’t, even though they say they will. So it is best to put things on in the morning directly after they have brought their children in.”

The staff recognised that the sessions were meeting parents’ needs in other ways.

“Several of the parents raised the fact that they find it hard to set boundaries, and I think we all do, but particularly in a school like this where people are coming from many different cultural backgrounds attitudes to where boundaries can be set can be

very different according to the culture. So they wanted to know what the standard was, what the school wanted.”

The school has used a range of strategies to reach parents from different heritage groups, one of which is the provision of English as an Acquired Language (EAL) classes. An EAL class was already running before the start of the HSE project. A group of Somali mothers have requested a class of their own. This was in process of being set up using part of the project funding as a step towards better communication.

The Parent Forum group has recognised the social needs of the different heritage groups and understands their need for a place to meet.

“Many of the mums come over with a kind of hobby they once had and they miss that, getting together and sewing and such. They wanted to keep their skills going and it was a social thing as well. They like talking, meeting. So they want to start a class and we are trying to set that up.”

The school has a clear understanding of the parents’ need to relate to the school in a relaxed way.

“A consultative process where the Head stands up and gives a big spiel and then asks them what they think doesn’t work. You have to create the right atmosphere.”

The parent group has an expectation that they will continue to play a role in fostering this relaxed approach.

“I think we four are a safety net but I think it has to be an open thing. People are nervous about going into school because they think they don’t know how things work so if we do want parents to come in we have to be a lot more relaxed.”

“Parents might come with more ideas of their own if we leave them some space.”

During separate interviews with the Head and the Parent Forum group the issue of the small numbers involved was explored. The Head accepted that the numbers were small, but represented an improvement on what had gone before. She was also aware that the same people were involved with organising and supporting the school in a number of ways. (As a result of being involved in the Parent Forum these parents had

asked to do some fund raising, and so had formed themselves into a PTA; two of them were also parent governors). The group was very supportive and worked hard with parents, going into the playground to speak to them and encourage them to participate in activities organised for them. Turnout had been good given the context of the school. This was felt to be probably better than would be the case in many other schools in similar circumstances.

The parents were less concerned about their prominence and were, justly, proud of their achievements so far. They have a network of other parents who show interest in activities and they are confident numbers will grow. They see the Parent Forum as sustainable because they all have children in reception and will therefore have contact with the school for years to come.

The school is aware that the group as it exists at present is not a parent council as commonly understood.

“The parent council does not meet as we thought it would. We thought it would meet like a school council but that is not the reality. A key group of people have turned out to be the driving force. They go out into the playground to talk to parents and parents will come to them. So we are getting the views, but not by the standard route.”

The core group of parents does not meet formally now but is in regular contact with each other and staff. Class meetings with class teachers will continue as an annual event. Also, the school is planning to introduce a Family Forum next year. This is a separate development from the HSE project and is an idea the Head has brought from her previous school. The development of a Family Forum has been written into the School Improvement Plan. Parents will be invited to have *“a relaxed conversation with the Head over coffee”* during which time there will be an opportunity to raise a range of educational and school management issues.

“I don’t think parents ever really get the opportunity to have a relaxed conversation with the Head about where they are going with the school. So I want to give them that. They learn that it is not a personal thing about discussing their own children or the teachers.”

Ladybridge.

Ladybridge did not set out to build a parents' council with a similar structure to a school council. Rather they were concerned initially to lay the foundations of a new way of relating to parents in the opening stages of a new school:

“Initially we wanted to use the resource (i.e. the HSE project) to change the way we relate to parents and their access and involvement with the school.”

“It was really necessary to have parents from the old school understanding the vision of the new school if we are to move things on. Also the closing of a school is a big step for parents. We really need them onside because there has been such a big change.”

The aim was to set up *“regular meetings of parents and learning co-ordinators outside the normal parents’ evenings*” (Ladybridge High School Project Proposal, July 2004).

The school has expanded the role of form tutors to that of learning co-ordinators who, as well as carrying out the usual duties of a form tutor, gather, track and co-ordinate information on each of their pupils so as to be able to keep a complete profile of the progress of each child. When the school joined the HSE project it was envisaged that *“the learning mentors would have dedicated time to meet learners and contact parents/carers to involve them in the decision making processes affecting their child”* (Project proposal op cit).

In addition to this a Parental Forum was to be set up to *“encourage parents to get involved in whole school issues. Parental advice, support and discussion about school developments will be given where necessary.”* (Project proposal op cit). An open meeting, attended by the Human Scale Education project leader, was held to launch the project and explore the notion of a parental voice. Subsequent meetings have been attended by a small group of parents (including parent governors) and staff, between eight to twelve people in all. These meetings were structured around an agenda set by the school. The minutes of these meetings show that items such as vertical tutor groups, induction events, new building plans and ICT developments have been discussed. After a while the parents asked for time to themselves to plan and discuss

issues without the presence of staff. It has taken time to develop the parents' ability to think strategically but there are signs that this is beginning to take place.

"At first we did not foresee the task ahead of us. OK we were sorting out things we would like but we weren't talking about the right things. That's emerged as we have gone along".

"We want to raise their awareness that they can contribute to strategies, they can help inform rather than look at the little things."

The parents interviewed had struggled with the concept of a parents' forum at first, but they were clear that the focus needs to be on whole school issues.

"The hardest thing was trying to find our own ideas at first. We don't know how to put these ideas into practice by going into school and saying "We have discussed these things and we want this to happen" in a way that the school could follow".

"What worries me is that at these meetings things can get too personal, talking about our own children and not the children as a whole. I don't know how to express that to the new parents"

"It isn't a sounding board for your own personal problems and it might go that way, but it has got to be more strategic, that's my own personal view".

"There needs to be more structure. You don't get very far when people just sit down and talk."

"Yes, and there needs to be training in committee skills, on how to hold meetings."

Parents and staff see the Parent Forum as having a role to play in changing the attitudes of some parents to staff and to the school.

"We want to try to persuade parents not to bark at the staff. That's the basic aim, parents working with staff saying "How can we deliver this for our children?" not flying at them"

"No-one likes to be disturbed or rattled at work, no-one likes to be at the receiving end of a loud phone call or to be shown up in a roomful of people. The parental forum

might deflect some of that. A quiet word expressed through a third party and it becomes facilitation.”

“The higher end of the estate would not send their children to the old school. They would rather put them on buses and send them across Bolton before they would send them here. But their attitudes are changing. Now we have to find ways of engaging them”

A major conclusion to all the discussions that have taken place has been to see the establishment of a parent forum as a rolling programme starting with the incoming Yr 7. The strategy being developed is that of having parent forum members present at induction sessions for new parents so that the aims of the forum can be discussed and volunteers found. There is optimism that as the school attracts a greater number of pupils from the immediate area then the number of parents interested in consultative opportunities will rise.

The school is aware of the need to engage with parents from different heritage groups. It sees the provision of EAL classes as a helpful strategy for developing their confidence to participate, and that there is a gender aspect to this. The school was aware that some mothers were unable to benefit from such classes because of the cultural norm in some heritage groups of men taking part in public life while women stay at home. This, together with the mobility of families was relevant to EAL provision:

“We run classes for parents who don’t have English as their first language. A lot of them are asylum seekers and refugees so they come along for just one class and then disappear again. But while they are there they are learning quite a lot and obviously it creates a connection with the school”

“ Not only does it appear we are going to have difficulties of engagement but particularly with some of the heritage groups the problem is engagement with females...The culture is that the father brings the child and it is not deemed appropriate for the mother to come into the school.”

A strategy is being developed whereby the EAL tutor will make personal contact with each new family to persuade them to come to the class rather than waiting for them to enrol. In this way a greater commitment to coming in to school might be made.

The main achievement of the project has been to help the school to focus on clarifying strategies for ensuring wider parental participation. Staff were appreciative of the opportunity it had provided to progress thinking on how to mesh these strategies together.

“It has made us focus on the many, many strands we are working on and to try to bring them all together.”

“We haven’t had a conversation yet about exactly where the parent forum is going but I would ideally like it to turn into a way into the grass roots, to encourage other parents to become involved and to be there to give input into the strategic areas we need advice and help on. The kind of access that is got from a citizens’ panel.”

“We have talked ourselves out of big meetings and into capitalising on our system of learning co-ordinators. With next year’s Yr 7, accepting that parents are more likely to come into school to discuss their child’s progress, we are going to have regular meetings with small groups of parents and their child’s learning co-ordinator. The Parent Forum could feed issues to the agenda of these meetings, making suggestions, sounding out opinion on that basis.”

Before the commencement of the HSE project the Brook Partnership had decided to use a Kurt Rowell questionnaire as a quality assurance measure. This had been sent out recently to 10% of parents. It was felt that when parental perceptions are known issues will become much clearer and there might be a role for the Parent Forum in discussing these.

“In a month’s time we will know exactly what they (i.e. the parents) are saying and can sit down with some hard evidence to make sure the things we were going to do have some impact on the things parents perceive as important. We might be able to bring some of this to the Parents’ Forum.”

In summary at Ladybridge incoming parents of Yr 7 children will be invited to join the Parents' Forum. Current governors may be invited to stay on. Regular meetings of parents in small groups will take place with Learning Co-ordinators over and above parents evenings.

Other issues

1. Links to the governing body and School Council

The schools had relied on parent governors to form part of the initial parent forum group. Senior staff had made reference to the HSE project in reports to the Board of Governors. However both parents and staff expressed caution over forging more formal links with governors. There were questions about what the nature of such links should be.

“I was a bit uncomfortable with the idea that a parent forum would in some way act to inform parent governors. I don't see parent governors as being representatives in that sense. They are parents who are governors, not having a franchise elsewhere.”

“As governors we have bigger priorities that need to be done at the governor meetings such as making policies, keeping up with legislation and the like. We knew about the HSE project from the Head's report and there has been mention of the workshops, but it can't be a big item.”

A pupil voice had been established in both schools but the School Council was in the early stages of development. It was not deemed appropriate for there to be a link with the parent forum at present.

“I don't think we've got the parent group to a level yet to get the pupils on board.”

“The PHSE co-ordinator has responsibility for the School Council, so there was an intended link there, but it didn't quite work out like that.”

2. The project as a stimulus for the development of a website.

Website development programmes were in progress at both schools before the commencement of the HSE project.

At Ladybridge widespread use of ICT was fundamental to the new school. At the parents' request curriculum information was being made available to them on the website and an e-mail address for parents to contact teachers was being provided. These requests had been made through the Parents' Forum.

ICT capability among pupils was high and was improving among staff. A recent survey showed that 87% of parents have access to computers and the internet by various means. An ambitious Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) programme had been launched linking home and school in new ways through the intranet. The evaluator was given a demonstration of this facility.

“In the first instance it's going to be more like revision guides, home-school packages for children to work away from school, extra courses to provide interactive ICT content across the curriculum”.

It was thought that this could improve parental understanding of the curriculum and in that sense it would be an important strand in developing a relationship with parents though there were issues around parental expectations on how the website should be used.

“In the first instance parents can see the work is being provided, they can check that it is being done and they can see that we are providing work for able and talented pupils and indeed for under-achievers, beyond the normal curriculum boundaries.”

“The VLE does have the capability to start a two-way process on contact or e-mail or whatever, but the primary process has got to be a curriculum based one. If we are using it and hosting it in any other than from an educational point of view to begin with we would be defeating the object because it is there as that extra, supplementary arm of the curriculum. It is not primarily a communication tool.”

“In all honesty I don't know what parents might make of it. Our pupils are very capable so I know it will work with them. I am hoping that because it has never happened before, it will be met by parents with the same enthusiasm that everything else has received in the past twelve months. It won't go away because

we are developing the role of the independent learner and that is an essential part.”

The ICT Co-ordinator had attended meetings of the Parents’ Forum to explain how the home-school intranet would work.

At Bruce Grove difficulties were foreseen in attempting to develop areas of the website for parents.

“We are in the process of developing the school website, but I have to say that certain assumptions are being made that access to computers is widespread. That is not the case at this school. Our parents are among the poorest. A proportion of them lack literacy skills and lack of English would make it difficult for them”

Staff at Ladybridge recognised similar problems.

“We have a lot of parents whose first language is not English here. The internet might not be of much use to them and that in itself may be de-motivating. But the school website may be of interest. It will have images as well as text. It may even help them with their English.”

3. Length of time for the project

All participants felt that development projects such as this need to run for at least two years. Parents were aware of the time it had taken to understand what they could do. They felt the forums were just getting underway.

“A three year time scale would work well. That gives you time to build a sustainable package and then embed it”.

“It would be a great shame if it was not to continue here because we really have just got going and we want to continue.”

4. Satisfaction with Human Scale Education

The schools were satisfied that Human Scale Education had been supportive throughout the project. It had been helpful to have someone they could contact directly and there was praise for the dedication of the HSE project leader for seeing the project through

“It was good to know you had one person you could contact. She was always at the end of a phone.”

“It was so useful to have an external person at the initial meeting.”

“If we had been given clearer guidelines we would have gone “SWOOSH”- straight on to it. But it took a lot of time to understand what we were supposed to be doing.”

Opinion was divided on the usefulness of the central conferences. Some participants had found them illuminating and stimulating while others preferred local workshops.

“I think the only disappointment would be the size of the cohort. It was too small to make for much of an exchange of ideas.”

“At the first conference ideas were made available and that got us going”

6. THE EVALUATION

The participants in the HSE project report satisfaction with the way in which the project has developed so far. In both cases the appeal of a Parent Forum attracted a small number of parents with established commitment to the school. They have a determination to continue to develop a forum. The grass roots approach taken by Human Scale Education and the DfES was novel for some of the participants. As in the learning of all new concepts it has taken time for them to clarify what a parents’ forum should be about. Also, it has taken time for parents to feel confident they have the capacity to fill the new role. At first the task seemed formless, then daunting but in each school strategies are emerging which parents are comfortable with and which fit their skills. All participants have benefited from having to think through a model which best suited the circumstances of their school. It will take time to embed a Parent Forum as standard in the schools.

Benefits are already apparent. The Parent Forum has taken its place alongside other strategies to open up the schools to parents. In large measure the project reached the targets set though some issues remain.

The targets

- **Increase in the number of parents attending parent/teacher consultations**

There had been an increase in the number of parents attending some forms of parent/teacher consultation. Indications are that the development of a parent forum will have an important role to play in stimulating more widespread commitment to all forms of parent/teacher consultation

- **Improvement in information sent to parents**

There had been an increase in the number of communications to parents though there was no direct evidence presented to suggest the project had an effect on improving the quality of information sent to parents. In both schools the quality of such communications was already high.

- **Increase in the number and range of opportunities for parents to communicate with schools**

There had been an increase in the number and range of opportunities for parents to communicate with the schools.

- **Development/Improvement of the area for parents on the school website**

This was a part of a major project in one school to use an intranet resource to support learning to which parents would have access. Parents had contributed suggestions of how the website might take account of their needs. The other school was in the process of developing its website.

- **Increase in the number of consultative meetings held involving parents**

The project has generated a number of such consultative meetings.

- **Wider range of parents involved in school life**

The project has stimulated the schools to devise strategies for involving a wider range of parents in school life.

- **Evaluation to show positive feedback from parents, staff and governors re improved consultation with parents**

All participants were positive about new arrangements for consulting with parents and about the project's potential to deliver long term benefits if allowed to develop further.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The HSE project was timely. Schools and parents are eagerly developing strategies to widen the participation of parents generally. They want to move to a more consultative relationship. The project sharpened the focus of discussion of needs and capability. The flexibility to develop according to local circumstances has been beneficial. The time taken to explore concept and practice has been well spent. It is clear that the schools prefer a "forum" style over the more formal structure of a "council". A longer period is required to embed this work.

Recommendation 1

The project continues for a further period to enable the consolidation of what has been achieved so far.

Recommendation 2

Ways be sought to develop parental capacity, possibly through local training workshops.

Recommendation 3

Funding should reflect the cost of initiatives to increase the participation of different heritage groups.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Human Scale Education for inviting the Centre for Cross Curricular Initiatives at London South Bank University to undertake this evaluation. Thanks go to the Headteacher of Bruce Grove Primary School, Geraldine Waterman, and the Principal of the Brook Partnership John Baumber for organising the interviews and for their hospitality on the day. Special thanks go to Christine Dean, Michelle Howard and Gerry Morson for answering queries.

My thanks go to all those who took part in the interviews, especially the parents whose commitment to their schools was impressive. I am deeply grateful to everyone for giving so freely of their time. Thanks too go to Fiona Carnie of Human Scale Education. Her drive and management skill have seen the project through. Finally my thanks go to Alison Hatt of CCCI for arranging the publication of this report.

Nola Turner, Associate Researcher, CCCI, London South Bank University.

July 2005

