Encouraging Engagement: an emerging role for school based family workers in English secondary schools

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The establishment of positive relationships between home and school has long been recognised as a desirable state which can have a significant bearing upon the success of students both academically and socially (Henderson and Berla, 1994, Wolfendale and Bastiani, 2000). By contrast, when relationships between schools and parents or carers falter, the consequences can be detrimental to all parties and in some instances can lead to disaffection and the perpetuation of negative attitudes towards schooling (Crozier, 2000). The *Every Child Matters* agenda established by the UK government (DfES, 2003) emphasises the need for schools to consider the development of all students, not only in respect of academic attainment, but also with due regard to their social, economic and health needs. With this demand has come a recognition that this ambition requires much greater cohesion across professional and voluntary services working in partnership with schools. Government initiatives such as the establishment of full service extended schools (DfES, 2005), Excellence in Cities (DfEE, 1999) and Sure Start (DfEE, 1998) have led to innovative approaches for the support of young people who may be at risk of exclusion, disaffection or disengagement with the education system. Evaluations of the efficacy of such initiatives are only just being made and it is therefore important that researchers gather data, which may inform further developments and policy at school, local authority and national levels. This paper describes one initiative, the use of family workers in school, and considers how service users perceived this system. Research into the efficacy of two extended secondary schools afforded the author an opportunity to examine in detail how the role of family workers had been developed within those schools and

what their impact was upon students, parents and the schools themselves.

The study

Research was conducted over a period of 18 months in two English secondary schools. Both offered extended services to students and their families through extra-curricular activities and services such as breakfast clubs and homework clubs, the provision of social, health and voluntary services and the opening of the schools for community use. Each of the schools was similar in size, having approximately 900 students on role. The schools were located in an area which had experienced high levels of social upheaval and deprivation following the demise of a number of traditional industries, including coal mining. The most recently updated UK National Statistics (2004) at the time the research was conducted placed the area in the top 18% of most deprived areas in the UK, with higher than average unemployment and a high dependency upon social welfare provision. The aim of the research study was to evaluate the effectiveness of provision made by the schools to promote greater cohesion across professional services and to strengthen engagement with the local community. Semi-structured, face to face interviews were conducted with key stakeholders and providers involved in the schools including students, teachers, headteachers, parents, professionals from other agencies, other school staff and local authority representatives (interviews N = 73).

The research provided a rich data set of information pertaining to many aspects of the work of the school. In particular it became apparent that the awareness that some students' access to learning was at times impaired by social and family difficulties had led to specific actions in an attempt to address the challenges that they faced. A commitment to improved engagement with families and the local communities was seen in the number of initiatives deployed, including activities aimed at forming partnerships with both parents and professional colleagues from a range of agencies. However, of the many innovations adopted by the schools it was the deployment of family workers, charged with a responsibility for direct liaison between school and home, which was most often referred to by professionals, students and parents as making a significant contribution to addressing the needs of students at risk of failure. It quickly became apparent to all parties engaged in the research that for a small but significant number of students, the role played by family workers employed by the schools was significant in influencing the attitudes and beliefs of both students and parents about the relevance of schooling to their personal circumstances. It was also evident that these professional colleagues were perceived to be important figures in promoting the schools' agenda of increased inclusion and retaining students at risk within the education system.

The role of the family worker

Family workers appointed to the schools had responsibility for liaising between schools and homes. Whilst employed directly by the schools, their background and training was firmly founded upon a social work and care model. Their day to day line management was located within the schools through the school senior management team. However, their operational management was in part overseen by a senior social worker who was employed by the Local Authority and who maintained an autonomous position in relation to the schools. All parties saw this management structure as important as it provided an immediacy of access to social service facilities, provision and expertise when needed. Furthermore, the overseeing of the family workers by a senior social worker afforded support to these key workers from a source of expertise which would not ordinarily be available within schools. However, the day to day

management role of senior managers within the school, who had a greater familiarity with both school operations and the daily activities with which students were engaged, was seen as equally important and critical to the functioning of the family worker role.

Of course, this split management approach had the potential for conflicts of interest. Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) have emphasised the difficulties of collaboration with parents when a number of agencies are involved. Similar concerns have been expressed by parents (Norris and Closs, 2003) who sometimes perceive that representatives of different agencies have differing agendas and are not always successful in achieving a cohesive approach to supporting students or their families. Pinkus (2005, p184) has identified four principles for effective partnership.

◾ consensus about purpose

◾ clarity about who is involved and why

◾ equal distribution of power between partners

◾ implementing transparency and accountability mechanisms for monitoring the partnership

Each of these principles was apparent to the researchers as they observed the daily operation and management of the family workers. In the schools researched for this study, time had been invested in developing positive working relationships between partners and in the establishment of clear lines of communication and responsibility. Regular meetings between all partners in this process enabled operational difficulties to be dealt with quickly. However, of greater importance was the consensus achieved between partners with regards to the task in hand and the ways in which this would be tackled and monitored.

A well established model of referral enabled all staff within the schools to feel confident that they had access to the family workers and that

they would endeavour to respond to needs as they arose. Heads of year played a critical role in co-ordinating concerns and requests brought to their attention by school staff and were key figures in the decision-making processes surrounding intervention. Once a decision had been made to make contact with a family, a well defined set of procedures with desired outcomes was constructed prior to the family worker making an initial visit to the home. From this point, the family worker played a pivotal role in all dealings with parents and would co-ordinate all liaison between the home, the school and other agencies. They would always be informed of concerns expressed by a teacher or other member of the school staff, or by a professional from another agency involved with a student. Discussion with key individuals involved with the student enabled a quick decision to be made about the necessity or otherwise to engage with parents and assisted in defining a clear focus for action with intended outcomes.

Service users' comments on the family worker role

Family workers were seen as providing valuable support to parents, students and the schools as a whole, demonstrated in the positive comments provided in interviews with service users from each of these three groups. Students saw the family worker as someone in whom they could confide and trust to take affirmative action on their behalf whilst maintaining confidentiality and respecting their own opinions and life style. They were also able to rationalise the ways in which the family worker needed to maintain a balanced approach not only to supporting them as individuals, but also to working with families and the school. Students often perceived the family worker to be a critical friend, but they were also able to articulate how the family worker role could benefit not only themselves but also their parents or the family as a whole. The following comments from students were typical of those given in interview and

representative of the perception which students had of the family worker role.

She (the family worker) like helps you. She helps us do lots of things. She is my mum's friend as well.

She gave me lots of support when I needed it when my mum was in hospital – shopping, transport with taxis and all that, and she helped me really, gave me advice and stuff, she helped me.

In some cases students reflected upon their own actions in response to the intervention of a family worker. They were able to demonstrate what they had learned through conversation with the family worker and the benefits of applying the advice given.

Student: She helps you with behaviour

Researcher: Right, OK. In what ways does she do that?

Student: Just like talks to you about different ways you can help yourself and she tells you stuff like, you should not do that, but try not to, and stuff. So she talks to you.

Researcher: Just talks to you? Does it help you?

Student: Yes

Researcher: Do you feel like you have used any of the stuff she has told you and it has actually worked?

Is there an example you can tell me?

Student: Well, something she said to me, it stopped me being naughty. She was saying that there is no point in shouting back at teachers, 'cause at the end of the day you are going to go home and you are going to be right upset with thinking about it. But they are going to go home and laugh about it, sit down nice and warm and forget about it next morning. Just going to be laughing about it. It is you that is going to get into trouble for it, so that stopped me mouthing back at teachers, 'cause I don't

want teachers to feel good about having a go at me.

The expression of belief that the family worker was there not only to support the student, but could also have a positive impact upon family life, was further endorsed by those parents interviewed during the research.

(The family worker) I can speak to, I can tell (the family worker). I know that I can trust her and I feel that she is strong for me when I need it but she backs off when I need that.

(The family worker) has actually stopped me from going around the bend, you know, she has phoned me and sat and listened to me yawn on, you know about all my worries and I have felt 100% better after. Just knowing there is somebody on the other end of the phone who will give me an ear, you know? And that is brilliant.

These parents clearly saw the family worker as providing a personal service based upon trust and respect. They also recognised that they had been given time and a commitment from the family worker, which had enabled them to rationalise their own situation as well as focus upon the difficulties confronted by their child. In many instances parents were able to give explicit descriptions of how the family worker had impacted upon the performance of their child in school and had thereby benefited themselves and their relationship with both the school and the student.

Well what it was is my son, he wouldn't open up to no-one, he wouldn't talk to no-one. But (the family worker) managed to get through to him and it did, although it took a while with him, she did get through to him and he did find it helpful with her... I mean, you know, he wasn't seeing her like every week but she was there if he needed her and he did seem to open up to her. And at the moment one of my other children sees (the family worker) just on – it could be

every month or so, just to see that she is alright, if she has got any problems in school. And (the family worker) has helped her to sort out a few things as well. So to me the whole project was really helpful because without it I didn't know where else to go.

Some parents expressed a view about the way that they believed they were perceived by the school and were able to demonstrate how the family worker had assisted in building a bridge between the school and themselves. In this transcript excerpt a parent has been encouraged not only to express her opinions, but also to see the point of view of the school. She sees the role of the family worker as an essential one in enabling a relationship with the school and with social services to be maintained. The recognition that the family worker is someone who can be trusted is clearly important to this parent and has enabled her to discuss her feelings and express her opinions in a positive manner.

School looks upon me as a very manipulative person and I can understand why they are saying it because I have been. But (the family worker) has helped me to open my eyes and realise just what it is that everybody has been saying to me, they have made me really question everything I do. I have a social worker that is really, really too hard. I can understand why she is doing what she is doing because I do need a shove, but not to the extent that my social worker has made me. (The family worker) has been there to support me with that. She puts it in a different way but still gets the message across, where I felt with my social worker I am some sort of criminal... (The family worker) I can speak to. I can tell (the family worker). I know that I can trust her.

The impact of family workers was equally well articulated by teachers within the two study schools. Understandably, teachers tended to focus upon the changes they saw in students and how this had assisted in overcoming difficulties

and lessening the risks of disaffection or exclusion. An example of this can be seen in the following excerpt from an interview with a head of year who had asked for intervention from the family worker to assist with a student whose attendance had become a cause for concern. Of particular note is the teacher's perception that communication between school and home had broken down and that the student's mother had developed a negative view of teachers.

She (student) now fits in and she is a lot happier and she attends well. And it has just changed her whole life in that sense, because she was going down the route of non attending and that school held nothing. So by (the family worker's) work, she has actually been able to speak to mum. Her mum wouldn't speak to me and she wouldn't speak to any teachers because in her eyes we are a waste of time, you know? So just the different aspect and (the family worker) having that knowledge from the social services background meant putting mum in touch with other things that she can access or ways of dealing with it.

Moving forward

Conversations with service users about the role of the family workers in these two schools provided a useful indication of how a key individual playing a liaison role between school and home can have a positive influence in preventing or addressing disaffection or disengagement. However, if we are to learn from the experiences of these schools it is necessary to consider those factors which were critical to their success.

The independence of the family workers who, in this case, can be seen to have been embedded within the schools whilst maintaining autonomy by being partly managed from an outside agency is significant. While parents recognised that the family worker came to them through the school, they trusted them as independent individuals in

whom they could confide in a way which would be impossible with a teacher or other member of the school staff. Todd (2007) has suggested that some parents see themselves as being consumed by negative views, which present them as inadequate and failing to respond positively to the demands of supporting their children through school. Such negativity can become an impediment to the development of positive home and school relationships. In such instances, the role of an independent arbiter who is afforded the time to establish a relationship with a parent is helpful in building confidence and conveying positive messages about the student and their schooling.

The credibility of the individuals undertaking the family worker role was certainly a significant factor in the success witnessed in these schools. The considerable respect and appreciation shown towards both the individuals and the work which they were undertaking was achieved in a number of ways. Firstly, the family workers showed themselves to be good communicators who were willing to engage with school staff and other professionals at a number of levels. They made themselves available for both formal meetings and informal conversations about students, but equally important, they employed an approach which ensured that each conversation was followed up and where appropriate, actions were taken. Lacey (2001, 2003) indicates that such a climate cannot be created without the commitment of senior managers in a school who create structures for the development of supportive systems. In the case of both these schools, the family workers had regular and direct contact with senior managers who placed an emphasis on enabling them to access both the procedures and resources required to fulfil their responsibilities. Secondly there was an appreciation on the part of school staff that the family workers had skills and experiences which were different from but complementary to those of teachers and that these could be significant in enabling the school

to achieve its goals. Sergiovanni (1984) has discussed how individuals coming from outside of an organisation can bring positive influences to bear upon decision making if their skills and understanding are recognised by the individuals within that organisation. The profile of the family workers within the two schools researched was such that all staff and students were aware of their role and the importance attached to this by senior managers. This enabled the family workers to conduct their duties confident in the knowledge that their role was respected and would be supported throughout the school.

A further important factor, which contributed significantly to the successes achieved by the family workers, was their personal attitude towards the individual students, their families and the staff with whom they worked. Rogers (1980) has emphasised the need for acceptance, which is inherent within all individuals. He stresses that when a student believes that this acceptance is conditional and that those conditions are imposed by figures of authority, this may lead to disaffection or withdrawal. Rogers suggests that a key factor in working with vulnerable individuals is the expression of *unconditional positive regard* whereby a person in a position of power or authority communicates absolute acceptance of that individual as being worthy of interest and attention. The family workers observed for this study played a non-judgmental role in respect of the students and families with whom they worked. This enabled them to gain the confidence of individuals and to demonstrate to them the benefits of establishing a close working partnership.

Conclusions

The observations made in this paper are based upon small scale research which cannot therefore be widely generalised. However, the study does suggest that the development of the role of family workers such as those deployed at

the two schools is worthy of further consideration as schools strive to become more inclusive and to meet the needs of a diverse population of students. The *Every Child Matters* agenda (DfES, 2003) demands that a more holistic approach to the development and wellbeing of learners be prioritised. This requires that schools re-examine their roles and the responsibilities of staff and this could lead to an increase in the diversity of professionals employed within schools. Recent research indicates that many teachers believe they are spending increasing amounts of time in the management of students who present challenging behaviours (Lloyd-Bennett, 2006). These teachers often indicate that the intervention of other agencies to assist in the management of such students may be essential (Nafpaktitis and Perlmutter, 1998; Sandford *et al*, 2006). However, multi-agency working is far from easy and unless it is well planned, co-ordinated and monitored, it can lead to a significant investment of time and resources with little return (Visser *et al*, 2002, Soan, 2006). The work of the schools reported in this paper provides a clear indication that the deployment of family workers has had a positive impact upon ensuring that students perceived as vulnerable and at risk of disaffection remain within the education system and develop a more positive attitude to schooling. This success was founded upon the implementation of clear guidelines and procedures. More importantly, it placed a great emphasis upon the maintenance of respect for all parties, in support of students who might otherwise have been lost to the schools.

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