



Connected Education – Parents as Researchers Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

The Evaluation

The evaluation of Connected Education was conducted to establish the impact of:

- Involvement in the project on individual parent researchers and the wider parent community.
- The Connected Education model on:
 - schools, school communities and partner organisations
 - students
 - the wider community

In so doing it questions what school/parent partnership can realistically contribute to community regeneration and how Parents as Researchers can make a contribution.

There is a robust research base used to inform the evaluation rationale - this is explored more fully in the introduction which follows.

Evaluation evidence base

The evaluation principally involved document analysis and fieldwork involving semi structured individual and group interviews with key stakeholders. Three of the original parent researchers were employed as field researchers. They conducted ten of the thirteen parent interviews. In addition senior leaders from each of the participating schools, 8 students (children of parent researchers), representatives of 2 partner organisations, the project leader and project commissioner were interviewed.

Findings

Impact on Parents

Students say:

- Parents engage differently with them (e.g. asking them more questions at home) or are more supportive of their learning.

Parents say:

- Their horizons have been broadened and their confidence has grown

Impact on School, school communities and partner organisations

- All schools are implementing changes in response to research findings. Some are extending or developing the process for further use.
- The process impacted on only a small number of the wider staff beyond the core leadership team. Implementation of actions in response to research findings, however, has increased wider staff engagement.
- Improved links and relationships between parent researchers and school.
- Both schools and partner organisations have had their perceptions challenged through the process (e.g. the belief that parental aspirations are low was largely unfounded).

Impact on students

Resulting from student research:

- Though the parallel student researcher process did not inform the work of parent researchers' schools did value the outcomes of the student research and the perceived impact on those students involved (e.g. a growth in confidence).

Resulting from Parent research:

- Some children of parent researchers report benefiting from parents growth in confidence, improved relationship with school and greater understanding about learning.
- At least two parents have changed their at home behaviour in response to their experience of the process.

Impact on wider community

- Parents have acquired a better understanding of their local community and in some cases it has positively challenged their perceptions of those they live alongside.
- Some parents adopted and promoted a more proactive approach to supporting other parents in dealing with problems.

Learning about the Connected Education Process

- Quality project leadership is a critical component of effective outcomes
- High quality training and support is important to and valued by parent researchers

- Headteacher (or occasionally deputy Headteacher) commitment, engagement, understanding of and vision for the project are evident in schools where the impact is more advanced or distributed.
- Helping schools make sense of the analysed research findings has been valued by the schools.
- Building stakeholder ownership of the project is valued.
- Partnership working is considered crucial – it may be that more sustainable partnerships include personnel who have a personal and professional interest in the work.
- The change occurring in each school at the time of the project makes it difficult to attribute the source of impact. Some schools, though happy with the outcomes of the process, question whether the timing of this investment was wise.

Recommendations

- Involve the wider staff in participating schools much earlier in the process.
- Recruit parents using a wider variety of media and methods
- Explore using methods other than survey
- Raise awareness of the project in the community and involve members of the community in interpreting data collected by parent researchers.
- Involve end users at each stage of the research process to build ownership and build capacity to sustain this work without substantial external resource.
- Develop a clearer vision of impact before the start of a future project.
- Build in a further evaluation
- Develop a set of recommendations for potential commissioners or project teams that would help them appoint a project manager
- Develop a cost/benefit analysis to establish Connected Educations viability as a commercial product.

Project context

In 2009, East Sussex Children and Young People's Trust commissioned Turning Point to design and carry out an extensive peer-led action research project involving parents, carers and young people from five different school communities in Hastings and Eastbourne. Each of the schools participating in the Connected Education project serves a largely white working class neighbourhood with extensive and profound social, economic and educational deprivation. Across the country, young people growing up in communities with high levels of deprivation are less likely to develop challenging aspirations and are more likely educationally to underachieve.

The Connected Education methodology is based upon Connected Care, Turning Point's model for involving the community in the design and delivery of integrated health and social care services. Using peer research, Connected Care seeks to determine the needs and aspirations of the local community and involves an intensive programme of community capacity building and a bespoke audit of need. It enables communities to become meaningfully involved in decision-making about local health, housing and social care.

Connected Education uses a similar methodology, giving a voice to parents and young people, enabling their needs, views, experiences and ideas to become part of school improvement planning. The research in East Sussex set out to explore in depth the factors impacting upon aspiration and achievement in the five secondary school communities. It also aimed to identify ways in which the schools could build closer relationships with parents as a means of enabling them to become more involved in their children's learning. The project is believed to be the first of its kind to take place in the UK.

26 parents were recruited to become Community Researchers and undertake the research. The recruitment process aimed to be as inclusive as possible and parents did not need any qualifications or experience. They received two days of training, during which they explored the reasons for the project taking place and the role of parents in supporting their children with learning, including barriers to involvement. The team achieved 414 in-depth interviews with other parents, averaging an hour in length and mostly carried out in people's homes. In addition schools nominated 29 students from Years 8 to 10 to become student Community Researchers. After a day's training they went on to undertake 275 face-to-face interviews with peers across the five schools. In addition, 789 students completed an online survey, and 14 Focus Groups were facilitated by professional researchers to explore in more depth some of the emerging themes from the research.

The project was overseen by a Steering Group, with sub-groups for each town. The Steering Group included a number of parent Community Researchers as well as representatives from the five schools, the commissioning team, the School Improvement Service, Local Partnerships for Children, health, business, adult education and local VCS.

Turning Point

Introduction

*“**Connected Education** is targeted at schools experiencing low levels of pupil attainment and poor parental participation. Our community engagement approach aims to bring improved educational and broader well-being outcomes for young people and families, through increasing educational aspiration and bridging the gap between schools and parents. It recognises that tackling low aspirations held by young people and their families is critical for schools in raising standards and personalising learning.” (Connected Education marketing materials)*

This objective, taken from Turning Point’s publicity materials, places schools and parents at the centre of a community regeneration strategy: the catalyst for this pilot. Understanding the relationship between these parents and schools is therefore of central importance to understanding how Connected Education works.

The diagram in figure 1 shows the interconnected roles of parent and school in affecting children’s learning. This evidence based model is derived from a systematic literature review *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievements and Adjustment* written for the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) By Professor Charles Desforges.

Our decision to refer to this model and the evidence base it represents was informed by Connected Education’s explicit focus on schools and school improvement. But is making the link between improved standards in school and improved communities too tenuous a link? We would suggest not. As Professor Charles Desforges writes:

“Governments worldwide invest large amounts of money in their schooling systems. There is incessant pressure on schools to improve the quality of students’ experience and outcomes. This is known as the challenge of raising educational standards or, more colloquially, ‘raising the bar’. But raising standards of achievement is by no means the only pressure on schools. It has long been recognised that some students perform very much better in schools than do others. The difference between the most and least successful students is called the ‘achievement gap’. This gap has major social consequences. High achievers in contrast to low achievers earn more, live longer and healthier

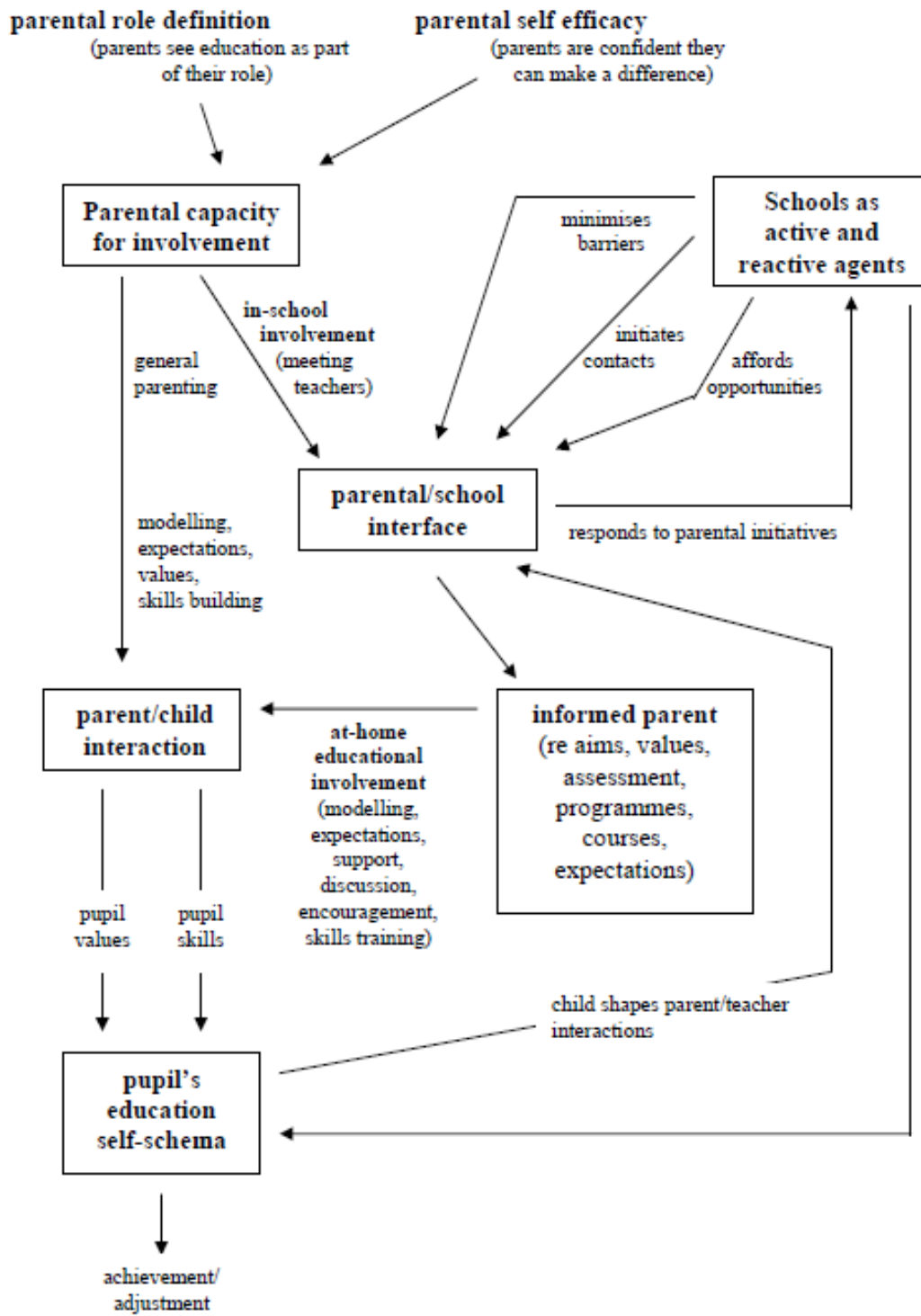
*lives, spend less time in prisons and pay more in taxes into the nation's coffers. These are broad statistical generalisations but they contribute to the widely held view that differences in educational success play a significant role in creating and maintaining social differences, which in the extreme are bad for all of us. In the most unequal societies there is five times the rate of imprisonment than in the least unequal societies and five times the rate of mental illness. The poor envy the rich and the rich fear the poor. Tensions across the divide diminish citizens' feelings of wellbeing. For these reasons schools are called upon to work to 'narrow the achievement gap'." (Professor Charles Desforges, *Developing Outstanding Teaching and Learning*, McGrane and Lofthouse, 2010)*

So achievement matters. Improving achievement therefore matters. This may seem like the schools' domain and that an investment in teaching, learning, curriculum, pastoral care could be a better investment. The evidence however, demonstrates convincingly that improving parental involvement matters too:

"The research review showed that, all other things being equal, parental involvement varies considerably across families and that this variance is a major factor in shaping pupils' achievement in school. This conclusion provokes the question: what can schools do to enhance where it is perceived to be relatively lacking." (Engaging Parent Toolkit, Julie McGrane 2008)

This evidence is explored further in the foreword authored by Professor Desforges that accompanies this evaluation. For the purpose of understanding this evaluation design, however, we turn to the '*research based model of effective parental involvement in schooling*' first presented in his literature review (figure 1). The evidence presented in this model gives us confidence to conclude that if the Connected Education process positively impacts on a wide range of the component parts of the model then it is likely to make a positive contribution to enhancing achievement and adjustment of young people and thus, in turn, will have a positive impact on communities in the long term. This evidence is summarised in an annotated version of this model in the conclusion on page x.

Figure 1 A research model of effective parental involvement in schooling.



Our approach to evaluating Connected Education was thus informed by:

- (i) our team's knowledge of the research evidence about parental involvement in children's learning - the benefits and challenges and important factors, stakeholders and processes to which we'd need to attend; and
- (ii) early interviews and discussions with the project team at Turning Point to discover the culture and expectations of participants from their point of view, and a review of project documentation as part of this;
- (iii) as always, the resource available to complete the work.

Developing an evaluation framework

On the basis of our review of project documentation, related research evidence from beyond the project and discussions with the project team, we developed a draft logic model for Connected Education, which set out to link the stated rationale, aims and intended outcomes of the pilot to its inputs. Our intentions in developing the logic model were to (i) verify that we had understood clearly the narrative or logic of the pilot as a precursor to (ii) designing a framework for evaluating the extent to which the pilot's aims and outcomes had been achieved, which accurately mapped and analysed relevant processes intended to contribute towards goals.

Figure 2 A Logic Model

The Context

Educational underachievement is linked with social deprivation.
Lack of parental involvement in their children’s education contributes to educational underachievement. Barriers to parental involvement include lack of confidence, social chaos, and deprivation.

Evidence points to the importance of minimising barriers to parental involvement and enhancing the quality of the school/parent interface. This serves to enhance parent/child interaction and thus achievement and adjustment.

Educational underachievement and the associated problems (e.g. limited employment opportunities, poorer health and well-being) are both a symptom of social decay and a cause. The cycle of decline needs to be broken to enable parental involvement to impact underachievement and community regeneration.

We need, therefore, to engage parents in a process which will enhance parental involvement (in particular ‘at-home’ talk) in an attempt to break the cycle of underachievement and lack of involvement.

The Process

We know that action research as a process can build confidence and a sense of self efficacy through studies carried out with teachers undertaking research. There is evidence that facilitating parents to undertake research relevant to school and their children’s education can deliver these same benefits. So the process of carrying out research has the potential to enhance parent’s capacity for involvement in their children’s learning. In addition, the outcomes of parents’ research provide intelligence to help schools improve and sustain the quality of the parent school interface.

The Outcomes

Increasing the skills and confidence of parents has immediate positive impact for those individuals and for community well-being.
Developing parents’ capacity for involvement in their children’s education has a positive impact on children’s attainment.
Raising attainment has a long term positive impact on communities (e.g. higher aspiration, greater income generation).
Involving schools in the process builds schools’ capacity and commitment to sustain meaningful work with parents and other agencies.

Having built the logic model and validated it with Turning Point, we were able to develop a set of 43 enquiry questions that reflected the scope and complexity of the evaluation task. Questions covered the context, processes and intended and actual outcomes of Connected Education, from the points of view of parents and schools taking part and Turning Point.

At a meeting in September 2010 at Turning Point's offices in Central London, we held a short seminar to which we invited individuals whom Turning Point identified as being representative of key constituencies from amongst the potential audience they envisaged for the evaluation report. These included senior officers from a number of children's services, researchers and social entrepreneurs working with local and national government in relevant areas (children's services, parental involvement, community engagement etc) and policy makers working for national government departments. A full list of attendees can be found at appendix 1 at the end of this report.

Our purpose in convening the seminar was to test our evaluation framework (the logic model and the enquiry questions) with people likely to be interested in its findings to ensure that we were asking the right questions, the answers to which would be interesting in the way Turning Point hoped. We also created the opportunity by holding the seminar to make good connections to other projects as part of understanding the context of and backdrop to Connected Education. Finally we raised awareness of the evaluation and engaged an audience for Turning Point as a first step to disseminating its findings.

As a result of the seminar some refinements were made to our enquiry questions and the overall design of our evaluation. The framework formed the basis for the design of a range of research instruments such as interview schedules to gather evidence and structured our coding and analysis of the resulting data set. All instruments can be found in the at the end of this report.

Evaluation Questions

The final piece of the evaluation framework was a set of questions that Turning Point set at the beginning of the evaluation. These high level questions form the basis for the report that follows.

1. What is the impact of involvement in the project in individual parent researchers and the wider parent community?

Turning Point asked that the evaluation address the following research questions:

- Does the model help build parents researchers' skills, confidence and employment prospects?
- Does the model promote raised awareness of the impact of parenting among parent researchers?

- Has involvement in the project had an impact on parent researcher's own parenting?
- Does the Connected Education model change parent attitudes towards school?
- Does the Connected Education model promote better engagement of parents with the school?
- Does the Connected Education model result in parents being more involved in their children's education?
- Does the Connected education model promote better connections within the parent community?
- Does the Connected Education model promote peer support within the parent community?

2. What is the impact of the Connected Education model on schools, school communities and partner organisations?

Turning Point asked that the evaluation address the following research questions:

- How does the Connected Education model influence schools attitudes towards and relationships with parents?
- Does the Connected education model enable parents to influence decision making within the school?
- Does the Connected Education model promote a more cohesive school community?
- Does the Connected Education model result in better home school partnerships?

3. What is the impact of the Connected Education model on students?

After describing the answers to these questions we can begin to interpret the outcomes in relation to the logic model above. If we consider these findings alongside our knowledge of the social conditions prevalent in these two communities it allows us to establish whether a programme of this nature can positively impact them. An evidence based assumption is made from the outset. If this process can impact both the achievement and adjustment of children and their parents then communities benefit in both the short and long term.

Thus we can ask:

4. What is the impact of the Connected Education model on the wider community?

Thus, the central evaluation question asks:

What can school/parent partnership realistically contribute to community regeneration? How can Parents as Researchers make a contribution?

If a Connected Education model proves of worth to community regeneration then building capacity in schools to facilitate Parent Research requires consideration. The process must be tenable without a

requiring dependence on external expertise. This requires us to focus upon the strategic issue of **capacity and scale**.

Evaluation methods

Methodology

The evaluation principally involved document analysis and fieldwork involving semi structured individual and group interviews with key stakeholders.

Semi structured interviews were conducted face to face and by telephone with Becky Surman, the project lead for Connected Education at Turning Point and a senior leader (deputy headteacher or headteacher/principal) from each of the 5 schools that took part in the pilot. For the sake on anonymity these interviewees are all referred to as Senior Leaders. The project commissioner was also interviewed as were two representatives from other agencies who became involved in the project (these are referred to as 'agency leaders').

Interviews were audio recorded and detailed notes were sent to each individual for validation or correction and final versions were agreed in each case.

We also completed group interviews with students in two of the participating schools, one in Eastbourne and one in Hastings. In each case 4 students took part in an activity in which they chose from amongst a set of cards, which carried statements designed to stimulate discussion amongst the group. Students said whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement and explained their reasons. The discussions were audio recorded and detailed notes produced.

Engaging parent researchers

It became clear very early in the planning of the evaluation that to really understand Connected Education and its effects, we would need to gain access to the views of participating parents. This presented a significant logistical problem in that the time required to arrange and carry out field work in communities we knew would far exceed the time available to complete the evaluation by our core team of professional researchers. Our proposition to Turning Point was that to achieve proper access, we should recruit and train fieldworkers from amongst the parent researchers who had taken part in the project and appoint them to our team. As well as offering the best solution to our access problem, we firmly believed that parent researchers, with the right support, would collect better data than we could and that their involvement might also represent an opportunity to consolidate any benefits to themselves and their families accrued through the original pilot.

As this was part of a funded project, we set aside a proportion of the budget to pay for 3 parent researchers' time and expenses.

We developed a role specification and published criteria for selection and Becky Surman arranged for these, along with an invitation to apply, to go out to all of the 21 community researchers who had remained active until the end of the pilot. We received applications from 5 parents. Applicants were interviewed and 3 were appointed.

Training was held in September at Turning Point's offices in Central London. Parents were introduced to drafts of the various research instruments which were under development and they jointly planned their use in a one hour face to face interview.

Some refinements were made to the instruments following feedback on this test and a detailed set of instructions were developed for their use in the field. Instructions and templates for recording output from the processes were also produced. A pack of all the resources and supporting materials was sent to each parent researcher's home address. Follow up telephone calls were made and ongoing telephone and email support was available throughout the 6 weeks of the fieldwork phase of the evaluation. Research instruments and supporting materials can be found in the appendix at the end of this report. The instruments were:

- an interview schedule
- a ranking tool setting out parents' reasons for getting involved in the project
- a gap analysis comparing what parents think about their communities with the effect they think that has on parents getting involved in their children's education
- an activity using different sizes and colours of circles to map the importance of child, parent and school from a parent's point of view.

In addition, one of the parents agreed to conduct a further group interview with students and was provided with a set of statement cards so she could complete that using the same method as the research team (see page 13).

The researchers were provided with contact details for parents who had taken part in the pilot and Becky Surman also sent a letter of introduction to prospective interviewees encouraging them to respond when contacted.

At the end of the Connected Education pilot, 21 parents were active including the 3 parent researchers carrying out fieldwork for the evaluation. Each parent researcher took responsibility for contacting and recruiting 6 parents i.e. a total of 18 parents were contacted. Of these, 10 out of a possible 15 were interviewed about their experiences of Connected Education and what if any effects they had noticed for themselves, their children and their communities. With the 3 parents completing the fieldwork, the sample contributing to the evaluation represented 60% of parent researchers taking part in the pilot. It is unfortunate that the 40% who were out of the scope of the evaluation included those who Turning Point identified as having the most chaotic lives.

‘The sample of parents taking part in the evaluation is mostly made up of those who have remained in closest contact after the end of the research. Those parents with more chaotic lives have been more difficult to re-engage for the evaluation’ (Project Leader)

The sample

Of the 13 parents who agreed to take part in the evaluation, 5 were based in Eastbourne and 8 in Hastings. The average length of time parents had lived in their community was 18 years (range 3.5 – 40 years) in Hastings and 13 years (range 5.5 – 20 years) in Eastbourne. Four parents said they’d lived in their communities ‘their whole lives’.

The 13 parent researchers had 42 children attending 10 schools in total, including primary and other secondary schools. Parents had children attending 4 schools taking part in the Connected Education pilot; Filsham Valley and Hillcrest in Hastings and The Causeway and Eastbourne Academy in Eastbourne. Two parents had children with special educational needs (SEN).

Evaluation findings

What is the impact of involvement in the project in individual parent researchers?

Parents' reasons for get involved in Connected Education

As a part of the process for exploring the extent to which taking part in Connected Education had met parents' aims and expectations, we asked parents what motivated them to get involved in the first place and what they hoped to achieve. Parents were asked to choose from amongst a set of possible reasons¹ and/or to suggest one or more of their own. They then ranked the reasons they'd chosen in order of importance to them. The 6 reasons most frequently chosen were:

In joint first place...

- My own child or children were attending a school taking part in the project (7/13 parents gave this as their top reason); and
- I wanted to improve relationships between the school and parents (4/13 parents had this as their top reason).

Though having a child in school was a prerequisite to become a parent researcher this high frequency is, therefore, not unexpected. Yet for 5 of the 13 parents involvement was motivated by reasons other than their own child's attendance at school.

Next came...

- I wanted to improve my community and make it a better place for children to grow up (although only 2 had this as their top reason it was consistently a second or third choice); and
- I was looking for work/wanted to earn some more money (this ranked second for 4 parents).

And in the third group was...

- I wanted to help families who didn't know how to find out about the school and what it could offer them; and

¹ The full list of possible reasons offered can be found in the appendix at the end of this report.

- I wanted a new challenge.

Parents were least likely to choose:

- I thought the school was getting a bad press and wanted to do something about that;
- I had a difficult relationship with the school and wanted to improve it; or
- My child doesn't tell me anything about school – this was a way to find out more.

These last 3 are interesting in the context of examining our sample because they indicate that parents who took part in the evaluation already considered that they had good communications both with the school and with their children about school, and perceived the school's role in the community in a positive light. This may be important for thinking about the overall population of parents in the pilot and how representative they were of parents in the communities.

There may be a link here to how parent researchers were recruited. We know from other sources that schools struggled initially to attract parents to the project (see page 30) and needed additional resource and support to reach recruitment targets. Of our sample of 13 parents, 9 responded to advertisements in the local newspaper or a school newsletter, and the remaining 4 were nominated by schools and contacted by the Connected Education project manager, who encouraged them to apply. This suggests that our sample may be biased towards parents with the confidence and imagination to see the potential in an entirely new and unknown project for themselves, their families and their community and to take a chance on applying to join. This would certainly help to explain their positive outlook on the school from the outset, which contrasted with teachers' perceptions of how the schools were viewed in the communities more generally.

When we interviewed groups of students about the project, they told us that they noticed changes in the way their parents talked to them about school. Parents ask more questions (universally, in this group anyway, deemed to be a good thing) and;

“She doesn't just ask how was school today? She asks what we did and how it went and how I behaved.” (Student, Eastbourne)

Others talked of how greater insight into how the school works helped their parents to be more supportive of their learning;

"...they see things they wouldn't see and now can help more at home."

(Student, Hastings)

Benefits that parents identified for themselves from taking part in the Connected Education pilot fell into two related categories:

- (i) **Broadening horizons:** parents met new people and learned new things about themselves, their children, their schools and their communities;

"I enjoyed it very much. It was an opportunity to get excited about something that might bring about change and positive outcomes." (Parent, Eastbourne)

"I've made lots of new friends and made some money." (Parent, Hastings)

"I have found out an enormous amount about education. I know more about what my son does at school now, because I know what questions to ask." (Parent, Hastings)

- (ii) **Growing in Confidence:** parents' perceptions of themselves and what they were capable of were altered;

"I know I will contact the school now before they contact me. I have the confidence to suggest ways to solve problems for my child." (Parent, Eastbourne)

"I gained in confidence – I am no longer fazed by meeting new people and can relate to other parents better." (Parent, Hastings)

"I gained a lot of confidence which has had a huge effect on my family life. I felt able to go out and get a job after 5 years on benefits. Being involved in the project was definitely a route back into work." (Parent, Hastings)

This last was just one example of parents making the connection between participation in the pilot and making changes in their own lives. Another parent completed an NVQ qualification and became a parent governor. Another told us that taking part had *“given her more focus and she felt ready to return to work as a result.”* (Parent, Hastings).

To start to explain some of these effects we need to consider parents’ experiences in the pilot; how they perceived the training and support they received, and what opportunities and challenges they encountered through their involvement.

Training and formal support

Parent researchers were unanimous in their appreciation of the quality of the training they received at the beginning of the pilot. The sessions were *‘invaluable’, ‘well organised’, ‘motivational’* and *‘fun.’* Parents particularly valued the group work and discussions although the *‘ice-breakers’* were not appreciated by all. Several specifically recalled their confidence growing over the two days of the course;

“...we got to talk and it brought me out of myself. I gained confidence and was able to voice my opinion.” (Parent, Eastbourne)

“At first I was nervous but through the activities my confidence improved and felt that I could do a good job.” (Parent, Eastbourne)

“The training made me feel very welcome and comfortable and I felt equal to everyone else. (Parent, Eastbourne)

Parents expressed a concern that more time could have been spent in helping them to be, *“better prepared for the reality of going into people’s homes and hearing difficult testimony.”* (Parent, Hastings). Others talked of hearing *‘harrowing stories’* and the difficulty of dealing with the *‘emotional side of interviewing.’*

One Hastings parent suggested that an informal support network available throughout the pilot might have been helpful here. Though there was a network of support in place this parent did not perceive this sort of support to be its function. Others, however, highlighted how useful they found the fortnightly meetings held to update and debrief, which was described as a 'great support group', suggesting that formal support may have been available that was not universally taken up. These meetings were mentioned by only 5 of the 13 parents taking part in the evaluation.

Informal networks

Regular informal contact was maintained by phone, email, text and through social networking, in particular Facebook. Communications were parent to parent as well as between the Connected Education project manager and parents. Parents valued these communications highly and were at pains to point out in their interviews the absence of the schools, which did not take part in these informal communications. In fact in one school, parent researchers attended a parents evening to recruit to interviews to find that teachers knew nothing about their attendance or the project.

Changes in how parents saw their role in their children's learning

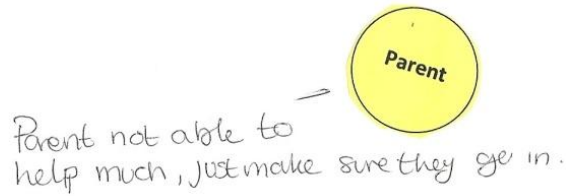
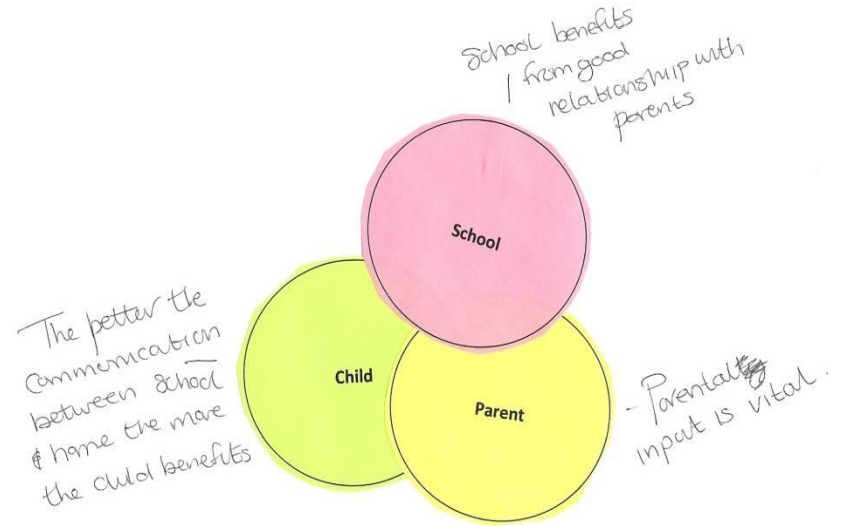
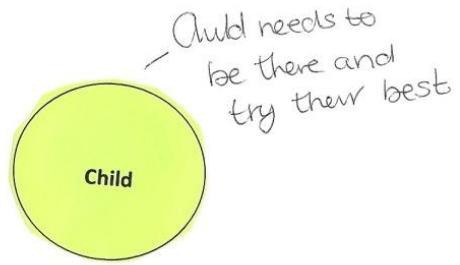
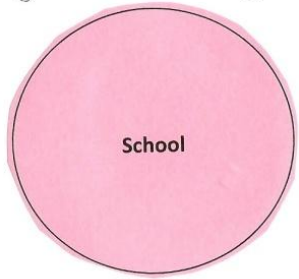
As part of the interviews, parents were invited to represent the relationship between themselves, their child and the school at the beginning of the Connected Education project and at the end. They chose between circles of different sizes (to represent the relative influence over learning outcomes) and positioned the circles on a sheet of paper, with the distance between circles representing the degree of collaboration or closeness between the parent, child and school.

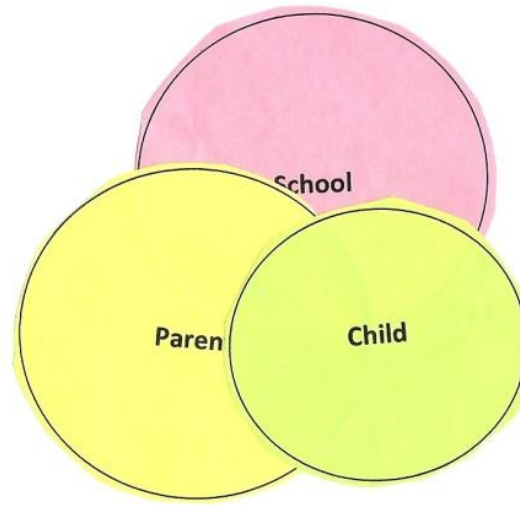
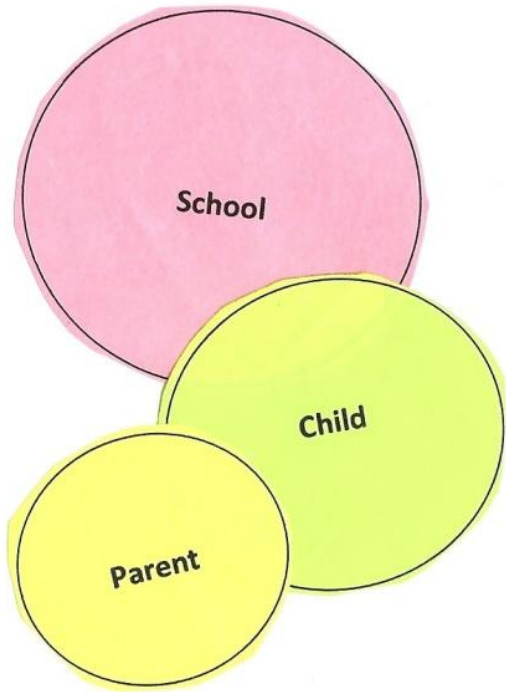
We have chosen 3 which are typical to include here, which between them tell the range of stories illustrated by the circles activity and related discussion.

In this first pair of pictures, the parent researcher explains how her beliefs about the roles of teacher, parents and child were overturned by her involvement in Connected Education. In the second 'after' picture the sizes of the circles are equal and overlapping, and she now describes the parent's role as 'vital', whereas before she believed their role was 'to make sure they (the children) go in'.

Part 1

Teachers are there to teach
they have the expertise and
the responsibility to
teach the children





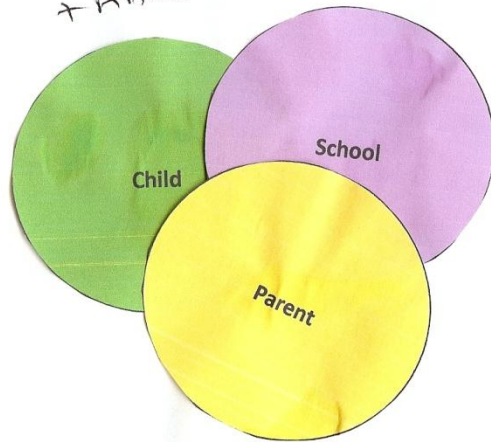
More that parent feels able to approach the school than the school changing.

In this picture the parent envisages an important role in their child's learning from the outset, but shows this as being unconnected to the school. In the 'after' picture the parent's role has grown in size and has moved to include a relationship to both the school and the child. However, from the notes it is clear that the parent wanted to emphasise that this shift resulted from a change in their own confidence and willingness to approach the school, rather than from any change in the school itself

Finally these pictures produced by a parent whose child has special educational needs also tell a 'coming together' story, which she attributes to working on the project – 'the surveys'. In her 'before' picture, this parent sees a significant role for herself, because her child has learning difficulties. Interestingly the size of the circle representing the child has grown in the 'after' picture which may indicate more cooperation from him, in contrast to her comment about his 'trying– defiantly' before she became more involved with the school.

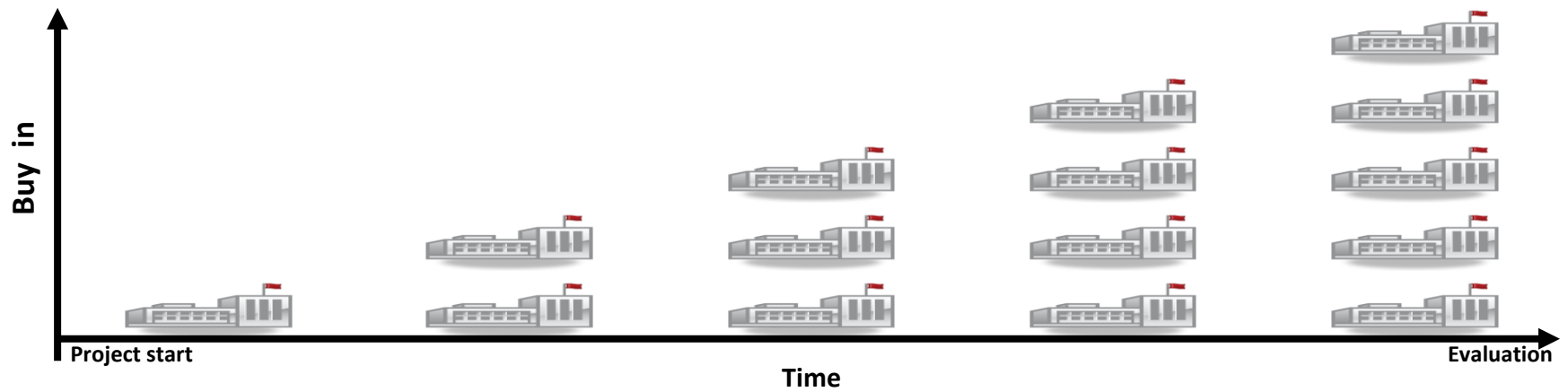


After
Survey's
me + school now work much closer
+ AA down TOGETHER.



What is the impact of the Connected Education model on schools and partner organizations?

The diagram which follows serves as a summary of findings regarding the impact of Connected Educations impact on schools. It identifies the key characteristics of the point at which the schools appear to become most committed, the subsequent investment they make and the subsequent impact.



The tipping point

Though not convinced of the timing of the project one school communicates a clear understanding of the potential of the Process as well as the Project.

Another school, also with a history of parental involvement, approaches the project with some scepticism but on meeting the parent researchers has confidence in them.

These schools all share a belief that parents matter and that this project can make a positive contribution to improving relationships and impacting perceptions of the school in the community.

This school (as well as the others) see it as an opportunity to receive "feedback on a great range of areas that affect us".

This school All schools are impressed by the quality of the findings (though some do fear they are time specific and another feels there is little they do not already know). This school considers the student research of most value.

Buy in

This school invests Headteacher time in addition to commitment. Engaged in recruitment and meetings. Sends senior leader to deputise in their absence

Hands on Deputy head teacher who strategically engages some key personnel and utilises their expertise (e.g. SENCO)

Engagement in the project, support with recruitment process. The school added at this point is the only one who reports having Turning Point to speak to the staff.

Values the help with workload. It used to be staff that worked to improve parent/school relationship, but Turning Point have helped with this.

This schools invests it efforts in the technical and practical aspects of the student research. This leader did not know who the parent researchers were until shortly before the feedback.

Analysis of impact

← This leader begins to ask questions regarding how to measure the extent of the impact on parents →

← These two schools recognise the change in parents. There is now has a deep commitment from both of these Headteachers →

← These three schools plan to continue the parent research process in some way →

← Of the schools merging to become academies they all see this as an effective methodology and evidence base to inform the amalgamation of the parent bodies →

← All leaders value the findings and are planning a wide range of activity in response to emerging research findings. All leaders report having their perceptions challenged in some way →

The context: Engagement and ownership

“What we wanted was parents having a better relationship with schools and feeling more able to support their children and then obviously the ultimate outcome being the children doing better in exams ... education is more than exams, but life chances depend on people getting qualifications and we wanted to improve the qualification rate and their GCSE pass rate in their schools and actually give those children a better chance.” (Project Commissioner)

This project was conceived as an education led community regeneration initiative. The schools, consequently, have been a focal point of the work. In this section we consider the impact of the Connected Education project on the five schools and their partner organisations. This includes a consideration of school and staff aspiration for and engagement in the project as well as the outcomes and impact on culture and actions.

Throughout the research process four schools were involved in a period of substantial change and all five were under pressure from external target setting. Four were in the process of amalgamating to form Academies and all were National Challenge schools. At a time of external pressure there is evidence that some schools felt initially this was another externally driven process - one which the schools bought into with varying degrees of confidence and engagement (see figure 2). One school leader “believe[d] this was a Local Authority decision and that they decided on the schools before they were “given” the job.” At the outset “everyone and his wife” was involved in the set up meeting:

“it felt like a local authority initiative with all of the agencies attending but focused solely on education without an additional remit to look at police, health services etc”.

Consequently there was a sense of “OK, here we go again”. This perception may well have been accurate as was described by the project leader:

“Schools had already been chosen and meetings held before [I] was appointed. I had to start by re-engaging the Head teachers. Some, for instance, were unhappy about the way National Challenge money was being spent. I had to work hard to build the credibility of both the project and me.”
(Project leader)

Nevertheless the same school leader who raised those concerns now believes that;

“had they not been involved and they’d heard about it they would have instigated the same process in school as the project sounded so interesting.” (Hastings School Leader)

That same school leader admits to an initial degree of skepticism. Though “they may not have been absolutely convinced at the outset” those concerns quickly dissipated on meeting the group of parents. At that point they knew;

“it was absolutely worth it. The quality of the dialogue that was happening with [them] and with the other schools helped see that after all the talk and set up this really was going to be worth it.”
(Hastings Senior Leader)

The initial lack of confidence expressed by two senior leaders may be attributable to a perceived lack of clarity about the purpose of the work. One school leader admitted that;

“The move to the Academies meant that an educational vision was also being developed alongside the parent research. Though there has been some overlap it is not absolutely clear what the intended outcome of the involvement was meant to look like.”

It is also evident that any vision made explicit to school leaders rarely travelled beyond an individual or core team. Only one school used Turning Point to share with staff the vision or rationale for the process. None of the other interviewees describe any professional learning opportunities pertaining specifically to parental involvement emerging from the project. In two schools where a change of personnel occurred after the initial start up phase there is less clarity communicated about their reasons for involvement at the outset of the project. The vision, it would seem, was not fully articulated or owned. This may in part be due to the locus of ownership.

“Having ownership of the project passed from pillar to post in some of the schools sometimes made it difficult to keep focused on the original vision. It also impacted on governorship by the Steering Group, and on operational activities, as there were many occasions when decisions needed to be made but the school representatives didn’t have the seniority to do so. This led to delays in the project and a general feeling that some schools were more engaged and on board than others.”
(Project Leader)

Staff engagement beyond those designated to lead the project in school has been minimal. When asked about staff involvement and training one school did not answer the question. Another cited the legacy of substantial work with parents as the reason why staff were so “well equipped to respond to the research findings. Nevertheless they acknowledge the challenge of addressing the inconsistencies in practice among staff identified by the research. Interestingly, however, three schools made explicit reference to increasing staff involvement as the research findings were shared in school. One for example;

"commissioned an Assistant Head Teacher to work with Becky both to understand what they have found out and develop an action plan." (Hastings School Leader)

Turning Point were also aware for the need to rethink staff involvement in any future iterations of the project:

"If I were to run the project again I would have involved staff more in the process... Their perceptions are just as important in terms of building relationships with parents... If you are trying to break down barriers you can't just do it from one side. At the end of a Connected Care project there is a tangible product for example the redesign of a service. I believe that the tangible end to this project is changing whole school culture and that if staff were more involved throughout the project they would be better prepared to respond to the findings of the project." (Project Leader)

The project leader feels that would make it “more of a complete package”.

Although the schools were unanimous in their praise of the project leader in particular and the project in general, the schools consider their changing or challenging contexts significant when considering the impact of Connected Education. For some this is an empirical question of cause and effect. One senior leader articulates the difficulty of working with schools in challenging circumstances:

"Not only does this make looking at cause and effect more difficult due to the variety of investment happening simultaneously but it has impacted the usefulness of the findings. Change goes ahead of reputation. For some parents it looked like an opportunity to moan about what the school used to be like." (Hastings Senior Leader)

They later described the project as “a fascinating walk through the findings”. They are aware, however, “that they are heavily time specific which makes their validity questionable.” Because of the state of change being experienced by the secondary schools one senior leader wondered whether:

“working with Primary Schools to impact parents when their children are younger may have been of greater interest.”(Hastings Senior Leader)

For others the transition to Academy status signified the end of the school as a distinct community. Some school’s therefore expressed a concern that due to the timing of the research the findings would be rendered obsolete.

“It was felt that in Hastings because the schools were closing that they would get the report and they’d only have another year to run. Combined with the fact that at the time the Academies issue was a ‘hot potato’ there was a concern that the purposes of this work would be confused with that agenda and the findings would get lost.” (Hastings Senior leader)

The interviewee went on to explain “that concern wasn’t realised.” Indeed the evidence gathered from the schools indicates that the feedback of the research findings as a positive and substantive moment in the process:

“The participation has brought nothing but benefits. Though it shouldn’t have been these schools, [I am] glad it was.” (Hastings Senior Leader)

It is the planned action emerging in response to parent research findings and the analysis of socio-economic data that has led to the most tangible evidence of impact. In all five schools what is quantifiable is the new activity started or planned. Though all schools can identify action in response to research findings one school believes though the “reports are very useful,... they confirm what the school already knows”.

The cycle of enquiry: Purpose, Process and Outcomes

At the point of the evaluation these plans were still largely at a development stage. Consequently parents told us they were disappointed not to see evidence so far of schools making changes to areas highlighted in their research:

"I hoped there'd be more positive changes. They (the school) are bringing in more changes from the joint school (recently federated following a poor Ofsted report), which makes it seem like they're not listening to what was found in the questionnaires. The people in the direct community need different things." (Parent, Eastbourne)

"Apart from my daughter passing on her teacher's email address, I haven't noticed anything different." (Parent, Hastings)

Though this is parents' perception at the time of the evaluation appendix (page 70) highlights many changes that have begun in schools in response to the research findings. Improvements in home - school communications, for example, do seem to have emerged in one school in Hastings and in parents of children attending there see this as a direct result of the pilot. The school has started using text alerts to contact parents and has taken to posting important letters to parents rather than relying on children to carry them home. These were both ideas raised through the research carried out with parents and implemented during the life of the pilot. Another parent spoke with pride in affecting change in school.

"There were suggestions made that the school should give parents a list of email addresses for staff, so that they are able to contact them. Lo and behold, in the post last week was a list of email addresses for all the subject heads at my school. I felt a little shiver of triumph!"
(Parent researcher, Hastings)

Since completing her research one parent researcher has reported changes experienced by a non parent researcher:

"I do know of a divorced parent who now gets copies of her child's reports and letters whereas before they always only went to the father. As a result of the interview process we interviewers were shocked that it should be like this and drew the matter to the attention of the deputy head teacher." (Hastings Parent Researcher)

Though the individual school aspiration for the project was varied the mediated analysis of the findings has been valued by every school as a positive outcome of the process. They all communicated a shared objective: a quest for new knowledge much of which would be gathered by parents. The purpose of this knowledge collection was slightly different in each school. Interestingly the senior leaders interviewed

did not always communicate or know their original stated priorities (as described in Connected Education's Research Framework). In one school for example the priorities as understood by the senior leader were School Improvement Plan priorities rather than project specific priorities:

- To engage more effectively with parent and to enable them to support their children
- To develop effective partnerships including within the local community
- To recruit a larger and more representative student intake by improving the image of the college in the local community.

The school leader interviewed from this school, who had not been involved when the project was launched, expressed the priorities at the time of the interview as:

- *feedback about how their key stakeholders see them.*
- *Parents have a better understanding of what the school is trying to achieve*
- *Students are supported in with their learning and therefore their achievement*
- *Staff get more support from home*
- *Standards are raised*

(Eastbourne Senior Leader)

There are some differences. While the school found the information of real value, and it shaped action plans accordingly, this school has ended up finding the student research one of the most valuable aspects of the process – a different outcome to those it prioritized. It is unclear the reason for differences between planned and recalled priorities. It may be caused by experience of the process affecting recollections of its potential. Alternatively it could offer further evidence of a lack of clarity about vision or the preimposed agenda perceived by some leaders when they took on leadership of the project in their school after its initial launch

Regardless, interviews with school leaders revealed that most saw the purpose of information collection as a way of improving parent/school interactions and engaging parents in school and in learning. For a few it was about raising aspiration for parents and students. Another of the schools saw this as an opportunity to

"empower parents...and...give a higher profile to parent voice and more opportunities to get involved and interested in what's happening with their children's education." (Hastings Senior Leader)

Only one of the senior leaders interviewed communicated an understanding that the process had been potentially as important as the product. They saw that in order to understand a problem was itself part of the solution. That school leader describes it as

"an opportunity for collaborative working that had the potential to help the school better understand the problems they were dealing with while building relationships with parents".(Hastings Senior Leader)

They reported being "involved in deep thought about the issues [which helps] you travel some way towards solving them". Consequently the school is "asking itself what they can do to change families".

Interestingly that school was the only one that described the process as well as the outcomes as a force for change though another reached the same conclusion as they participated in the work. Interestingly it is the school that recognizes the value of the process from the outset that asked itself more challenging questions about impact at the end (see figure 2). This senior leader, for example, said;

"I suspect that the research process has helped parents to grow...[pause]... how can we capitalise on their skills. How much has is changed their aspirations? Does it, as I believe, empower parents and help to build the necessary social capital to affect change?" (Hastings Senior Leader)

Here is a leader who communicates an understanding of the rationale for the parents as researchers approach which the project leader describes as;

"building social capital in school communities: people as part of the process is a significant feature. It's what makes it successful – it helps drill down beneath the surface." (Project Leader)

In addition this is the only school leader who described how the process was designed to engage the wider school community:

"One of the excellent features of the process was that Becky engaged the schools to work out the collaborative research methodology. This helped the school feel ownership." (Hastings Senior Leader)

There is a sense of developing a 'done with' rather than 'done to' culture'.

Other school leaders saw the project as a feedback mechanism. For one the attraction had been the extra capacity the project gave the school:

"The fact that researchers were identified, trained and did all the work was an opportunity not to miss. A group of us have spent a great deal of time trying to work with parents (usually the same small group) trying to find out what they want/how we can support/how we can work better together etc. So yes, the fact there was no workload as such was brilliant." (Hastings Senior Leader)

Another school leader who took a lead after the project began was unclear about how the Senior Leadership Team had wanted the research to impact other than receiving "feedback about how their key stakeholders see them". After receiving their findings this school valued feedback about

"the social set up and social conditions, the comparative data and the feedback around what we do well and what could be better." (Eastbourne Senior Leader)

Similarly in another school knowledge about low car ownership in the wards that they serve has informed the arrangements of social events at school. One school leader who took on the project after it has been launched saw it as a "brilliant way to receive feedback on a great range of areas that impact on us". They hoped that by responding quickly to parent feedback would mean that

"by our prompt actions [parents] can begin to see that we do listen to them, and therefore will become more willing to share concerns and offer advice to us. Once the whole school community has an understanding of the views of many of our parents and can act to support these views there is the hope that the parents will support us, particularly in being aspirational for their children." (Hastings Senior Leader)

The range of actions planned did result in prompt action. In fact this was the school attended by a child of the parent quoted above – an issue raised, action taken, parent happy!

The Commissioners too are pleased with the impact on schools:

"we definitely feel that there are some much better links between those groups of parents and the schools than there had been in the past...I think it's too early to be able to say that the wider parent population feel better about the way the school responds to them but we have seen some very concrete steps been taken by schools... One [has] remodeled their reception area and are changing

the way they communicate with parents which we are optimistic about. It's too early to say that the children have done better as a result, as that was never going to be a two year outcome. The children have done better over the last two years at Hastings schools because of a whole stream of things that have been put in place... but there are very concrete practical recommendations that the parents have come up with and that schools have been receptive to and that's the thing that is encouraging to me as commissioner." (Project Commissioner)

What next?

One indicator of the perceived benefits to the schools was evident in their plans for continuing with this model. Three schools hoped to continue a version of the Connected Education process. One hoped to use parent researchers from both schools to create a parent's forum in the new academy. They also believed the schools could adapt the process having been through it in order to continue with the approach in the Academy. This school leader admitted that they would not have expected at the outset. They felt it is so worthwhile that they could "justify continuing to reward parents in some way for this work." Another school planned to "continue the research in some way". They were

"very enthusiastic about developing the role of a family support worker to include family engagement." (Eastbourne School Leader)

For them "the research process is proving a catalyst to getting more involved with families."

At one school they intended to develop the student voice work (as a result of the student research). They do not, however, anticipate continuing with parents as researchers. Though they did consider training more they did not consider it the best investment of time. Another of the schools planned a response to the findings with the Headteacher Making "clear that this piece of work must be a key guide in our future plans".

It is positive that the quality of the process has engaged headteachers'. Arguably, however, engaging them more fully at the outset may have resulted in a wider staff engagement. One senior leader

"Imagines that engagement at the highest levels reflects the level of notice given to the work. There was, for example, the only head teacher at the first meeting. The rest ranged from Teaching

Assistants to Deputy Head Teachers. Does this reflect the significance different school leaders gave to the programme?" (Hastings Senior Leader)

Despite the effort Turning Point put into securing head teacher engagement at the start of the project this leader does not report this. Instead they see it as a mistake not to seize Headteacher attention from the start.

"The heads should have found out the scope of the work then worked out who the representatives should be. Nevertheless the outcomes have still been positive. One head who wasn't particularly enthusiastic at the outset has found the outcomes really useful." (Hastings Senior Leader)

The Project Leader identified this re-engagement of Headteachers as one of the project's biggest successes;

"Other successes have been centred around the engagement of the schools. This has been surprising considering how difficult some of them were at the outset. I think this change is in part influenced by the amount of time she spent at the start reassuring them and instilling in them a belief that the project would be worthwhile and give them something useful. The schools then seemed to agree to give me a chance to prove myself. Through steering group meetings they could see that the project was always moving forward. This, combined with drip feeding them feedback, meant they began to see it is something worth participating in. For them the biggest thing has been meeting the parent researchers. This brought it to life for them. They began to see that this diverse bunch of parents was not completely disinterested in their children's education and neither were the wider parent community. They saw that part of the solution was changing the way the school communicates and so on. Consequently the schools have moved from being vaguely interested to really onboard." (Project Leader)

This may be a success because it kept the project on track and led to positive outcomes from parents, students and school but had headteachers been more engaged at the outset certain aspects of the project may have run more smoothly. With headteacher support for instance, schools may have been able to adopt a more proactive and strategic approach to recruitment – one of the biggest challenges for the project.

'All senior leaders were asked to suggest and support the first round of recruitment actions. This included adverts in newsletters and websites, and nominating parents they thought would be

interesting to include, in other words, those they might have identified as 'hard to reach'. Most of the schools seemed to find this latter action quite difficult, which made me wonder if they actually knew anything much about their 'hard to reach' parents, or whether they were just lumped together as a faceless group.' (Project leader)

Turning Point found the process of recruiting parents one of the most challenging and time consuming aspects of the project.

'It was relatively easy to recruit in one school, but the other four were much more difficult. The harder it was to recruit, the more closely we worked with school leaders.' (Project Leader)

This may provide some explanation as to why some of the schools felt they had no involvement in recruiting parents. Two schools reported being actively involved in recruitment of parent researchers while two recalled no involvement: "I only learned names two weeks ago" (this may be attributable, in part, to taking up a project leadership role after it had already started). Another was very committed to the set up process but wasn't involved in recruitment directly. This meant that Turning Point took on much of the responsibility for recruitment. Though all the schools seemed happy with those that got involved there is an acknowledgement that it may not have targeted those who could have benefitted most. For example:

"though this didn't represent the "hard to reach" parents it wasn't "the same old people." (Hastings School Leader)

Similarly, through Turning Point's evaluation of the socio economic data is considered by the schools to be of real benefit: for example:

"The analysis revealed an interesting disconnect. Parents articulated that they wanted their children to be successful but another answer suggested that they didn't see the connection between achieving this and their children doing well at school. Thus the interpretation of the data has proved very useful." (Hastings Senior Leader)

It is possible that involving the school and other stakeholders more fully in the analysis of data could have built internal capacity to sustain this work. This may also be applied to the design of the research focus in each school. Though they were engaged in defining the priorities for the project in their school none declare any involvement in identifying the research focus. According to Turning Point, however;

'The research focus was suggested in the first instance by the Local Authority, and then taken to the Steering Group to shape and develop in detail.' (Project Leader)

One school, however, are positive about the benefits of co-constructing the research methodology.

Regardless of these possible areas for improvement there is no doubt that this process has changed attitudes in school resulting in the beginnings of change action (see appendix page 70): work that can be seen to be a potential catalyst to improved achievement and adjustment.

This has been a significant financial investment of £180,000 which the commissioner acknowledges would not have been possible in the current economic climate. So has it been justified? They believe so and it has been the power of the process which seems to underpin this:

"Some of the things that come out of it may seem really obvious - things that people would have thought about themselves without necessarily having done this work. What I would say is actually that people on the ground don't think about these things. Schools don't always listen to messages from policy, research, local authorities or HE institutions. They are all saying 'ok, that's fine', but not really hearing it. When they get it from their own parents who they can see have taken enormous pains to go and talk to other parents to put together a report and feel really committed to it, the message, even though it's an obvious message, and one that perhaps they should have listened to in the past just has such a huge amount of extra weight. So that what you are paying for in my view is a process which demonstrates authenticity and is a powerful way of getting some really important issues raised. It gets the message across even though, when people look at it they say 'you spent all that money in order to find out X Y and Z? Isn't that fairly evident? Could somebody just have thought about that?' They don't, and they don't hear the message. That's what I would say has been of value." (Project commissioner)

Impacting other partners

Engaging other agencies/partners – lessons learned

"Although the project was predominantly school facing there were other partners involved who would share in the outputs. For example the Local Partnerships for Children coordinators had been very involved in the steering group of the project (they are responsible for localised children and

family initiatives) although the report isn't directly targeted at them Turning Point hopes the outputs would be of use to them." (Project Leader)

Both agencies interviewed believe they have been. They report that the findings and/or expertise generated by the project has reinforced or shaped their current practice.

[The project leader] has become a key member in our research group. We now have two of the parent researchers on the Hastings & St Leonards Learning & Skills Research Group... [In addition] I chair a local project involving children's centres using the Turning Point model and the [project leader] is helping to advise on that. She has also got some of the project's parent researchers to mentor these new parent researchers which is extraordinarily good for our area." (Agency Leader)

These outcomes are, in this case, even more positive considering their initial contact with Turning Point. This was noted by other projects participants. As one school leader describes;

"One of our connections was with [an agency] who was working in Partnership with University of Brighton. They were already engaged in research about local aspiration. Turning Point came and swept them aside. Though they were initially cross the misunderstanding ended and they have now connected with Turning Points work. These challenges have meant that [the project leader] looked a bit 'set up'; trying to grasp sand as it slipped through her fingers. Nevertheless she has been absolutely stunning. She is a super resource." (Hastings, School Leader)

This sentiment is echoed by the agency leader:

"I got to know about the project when we were invited to a launch event in Bexhill in early 2009 when we were told that Turning Point had been appointed. There was a sense of frustration felt at this point. We had already established a research committee and had started doing things with the University of Brighton and East Sussex wandered off and poured lots of money into an organisation which we had never heard of, who intended to do wonderful things in what we thought was a very short timescale, given that nobody much in Hastings outside of school and the Education Authority seemed to be very concerned with the schools' performance, least of all the parents. Certainly when I was a governor there were never streams of parents wondering why exam results were so poor. So my view at that stage was that it was highly ambitious, the people involved probably didn't

understand what they were taking on and I didn't think it would be done in the timescale that was set." (Agency Leader)

In spite of this potentially problematic start they would consider the success to be attributable to two things: the effectiveness of the project leader and the strength of the process.

"My view now is that they have done an amazing job, I think it is superb that they have come up with a report that answers some of the things that I was wondering about but never had the money or the resources to go into. The way [the project leader] got the peer researchers involved was most impressive." (Agency Leader)

"A lot of this is down to the project leader. We invited her onto our research group and it was evident that she wanted us to help her and also wanted to help us in the any way that she could. It was not difficult to strike up a very good working relationship with her and I am very grateful for that." (Agency Leader)

The very high regard in which the project leader is held is a recurring theme throughout this evaluation. The Commissioner also recognises the crucial role the project leader played. They strategically employed someone with an education background believing the project *"had vulnerability, in that its success would depend absolutely crucially on that project manger"* (Project Commissioner).

"There is a huge dependency... on the quality of the project manager. There is no simple way to make sure that you get the right project manager to be honest. But it is really, really, important that you take great care in that appointment." (Project Commissioner)

One agency leader attempts to deconstruct the qualities which underpinned that successful leadership and identify the features that they felt were key: enthusiasm, willingness to listen and a willingness to share. Another agency leader shared a similar view:

"[the project leader], Turning Point and even the County Council seem to have encouraged openness... I always felt I could ask a question about what was emerging and that it would be listened to. They had a methodology but were going to adjust it as the project unfolded when they found out what arose with the parents and even more with the pupils." (Agency Leader)

Though some partners fell away as financial and logistic constraints placed them under pressure, it is interesting that the two people interviewed highlight a personal commitment from the outset. One had

for a number of years been chair of governor of a school involved in the project and communicates a deep commitment to the school and the community. Similarly, the other describes a desire to support a school that they felt some professional responsibility for:

“I wanted to support [the school]...I think I would have felt that anyway but I perhaps had an additionally strong reason for wanting to support them. We were a Trailblazer area. There were only two in the county and they focused on trying to develop interagency and collaborative working using the insights of practitioners. They focused on the 0-11 age range during the Trailblazer phase which finished in the autumn of 2009. I was aware of the three secondary schools and felt, in a way, that I was giving them slightly short shrift by concentrating on the slightly younger age range, but also that transition into Secondaries’ was such a key theme for Trailblazer that I wanted to take any opportunity that came my way to support the Secondaries’ move forward.” (Agency Leader)

“I also wanted to support the county council because I thought it was very good on their part that they actually wanted to do this and had commissioned the research.” (Agency Leader)

The importance of partnerships

Multi agency working is a challenge. One interviewee had felt that in the region there were;

“In Hastings & St Leonards there were lots of people involved in education and few of them were linked up. I often attended meetings where people didn’t know each other and who didn’t know what each other was doing”. (Agency leader)

Connected Education exemplifies a project where different partners have worked effectively together to affect change. For both agencies this work has reinforced the importance of partnership working.

“It has absolutely endorsed my belief in partnership working... You sort of feel the unique opportunity [parents and pupils] were given to get involved in dialogue with schools and to say things as they see them. It brings out this awful process across the generations of things not working very well and that being passed on, with the inevitable misunderstandings of the other person’s view point. I think it’s about a triangle between the school staff, the young people and their parents/carers and how the misunderstandings creep into that triangle in spite of everybody’s best efforts. I think I always believed that, but the project has shocked me because it has shown that.” (Agency Leader)

Though the project has effectively brought parents and schools and some partners together in productive and influential partnerships those interviewed identify two main challenges for the future. First, in this age of austerity and with the subsequent reduction in funding both agencies are fearful of the potential for the project's findings to impact beyond school;

"I think all of these developments would have been challenging and difficult to undertake and would have required an immense amount of support and scaffolding and I just think, though we at [my organisation] were moving forward in a very constructive way, it now all appears to be in jeopardy...largely for financial reasons. On the ground there is still tremendous commitment from people at all levels to try and stay in touch and build on what's been achieved, but it's becoming clear that that has already been eroded and will be more eroded. (Agency Leader)

"Some of the issues the report highlights are to do with transition support - communication not just within a school and its parents/carers and its students but across the age range. There is really interesting information coming through which, for example, in my LPC the primary schools and even people involved with younger children would be really interested in knowing about. If we still have that strong support structure of the LPC, one could envisage gradually transmitting some of this and that would benefit the whole community, and I think that side of it is probably going to be lost at the moment. That is a great pity. There is evidence from other places to support this, showing that these sorts of developments with school and community engagement and the Extended Services take time....It is sad for me that future developments are probably not going to be as good as the project would like them to be and is trying to support." (Agency Leader)

One partner has already seen evidence of this:

"Going to the final meeting of the Joint Steering Group recently, I think I was the only person there who wasn't actually a parent researcher or a representative of one of the schools involved. That made me take stock and reflect that other agencies who were involved from the outset...haven't been able to attend meetings for quite a long time. That made me sad, but it's only a reflection of what is happening [economically] at the moment. I am still delighted to have been involved and I still have a very high regard for the project itself and the way it has been run, but I am very worried now about the context we are in and by the fact that to carry forward the work the project suggests

will be very, very hard to do and much harder than it was at the outset of the project.” (Agency leader)

Another interviewee shares a similar concern:

“It is such a good report but I fear that...it is still not evident what is happening to it. I just don’t want it to get lost...I worry slightly that some of the information in it won’t get used in all schools (primary and secondary) by teachers and governors...What are East Sussex County Council are going to do with it?” (Agency Leader)

In spite of these concerns we have already considered evidence that the expertise generated by the project is impacting the work of these partners.

Challenging perceptions and reinforcing beliefs

One agency in particular was impressed by the quality of information the research elicited. They believe this was due to the parents working as field researchers:

“They were parents, not professional researchers, and so were able to talk to other parents on an equal footing; other parents would open up and they would tell the parent-researchers things that they wouldn’t have told other people who they may have associated with authority... a lot of people from deprived areas are wary about what they say for all sorts of different reasons and a lot of them may not have had a very good experience of school themselves and wouldn’t naturally want to give schools their views . The way that Turning Point approached things enabled parents and students to open up and say things and provide information we probably would never have got any other way.” (Agency Leader)

Consequently the evidence gathered by parent researchers has served to challenge perceptions:

“I was surprised to learn about parental aspirations. Hastings and St Leonards had always been described as low skill, low aspiration and low wage and in reality there is a lot of aspiration out there; it’s just that many parents can’t translate it into a form that will encourage their children to do better. It had always worried me that some parents and some children didn’t make the

connection between good education/qualifications and good jobs or increased wealth.” (Agency Leader)

Another of those interviewed has extensive experience in the careers guidance sector. They were particularly struck by the findings of the student researchers:

“the young people highlighted nine points, seven of those are about careers education”. (Agency Leader)

For this agency leader the findings endorsed their view that careers guidance is crucial for the success of young people beyond school.

What is the impact of the Connected Education model on students?

Connected Education was designed with a parallel student research strategy running alongside, though not integrated into, the parent research. Turning Point themselves recognised the limitations of this model:

“I would also do the student research completely different. It would have been better to do more focus groups designed around some of the findings emerging from the parents. Rather than a completely separate process students would have been testing these findings. As it is, it is rather disjointed and that it was somewhat sidelined because of the scale and associated time commitment, of the parent research.” (Project leader)

Each school leader was asked, when interviewed, what the role of students in the parents' research was. The only reference they made to students engaging with the research process related to students own research which the schools facilitated via an online questionnaire. Consequently this evaluation has focused upon the impact on students as a result of the schools participation in and response to the Connected Education process and the impact on the children of parent researchers as described in the rationale above.

It is, however, worth noting that one school did value the student research and saw it as one of the strengths of the process:

“I think that the student researchers in particular will have impacted. I expect [that there will be] more of them involved (in interviewing prospective staff for instance) and that those involved would have developed confidence and self esteem to take on responsibilities and get involved in decision making. (Senior Leader, Eastbourne)

Evidence was gathered from parent researchers as well as interviews with groups of children of parent researchers. Parents identified benefits for their children’s learning derived from taking part in the pilot. For some, these centered on their being more likely to engage with teachers than in the past, and more confident that their communications would be helpful;

“I’m more able to communicate with his teachers effectively, which makes life easier for him.” (Parent, Hastings).

Parents developed a more nuanced appreciation of teachers’ roles in their children’s education:

I thought teachers were all just worried about their results. What I have found is that they may be, but not at the expense of their students’ welfare. They almost always want what’s best for the children and want them to enjoy school.” (Parent, Hastings)

Also interesting was the effect that this parent’s increased and visible involvement in school seemed to have on her child’s attitude to school;

I feel my youngest son has a different mum. Yes I have always been interested in school life but now I feel part of it, really helping him on his journey. I feel he knows that the school is a place he can voice his worries and where he can develop. This has been achieved by seeing me work on the project. He is taking part more in school, and is enjoying it. (Parent, Eastbourne)

Another parent offered an interesting perspective on this too:

“People who have underachieved themselves tend to have lower expectations for their children. Raising expectations raises achievement, and parents’ input here is vital.” (Parent, Hastings)

The impact of parent research on their children

The students represented four of the schools and included male, female and children with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND). The students were most insightful giving answers which could have merited further consideration. Had the student research been more closely related to the parent research as is suggested by the Project Leader this could have been even more revealing. When asked for instance whether 'Getting parents more involved in school is good for students. One student disagreed:

"It doesn't really help the students as "it's not them who help the kids learn" (Student)

"Because it doesn't really help you with school work, parents just help with homework."

This may offer an insight into student's willingness to let parents support their learning at home. If they don't perceive parents make a positive contribution to learning then this could exacerbate the barrier to 'at-home educational involvement' (see figure x page y). Conversely one student considered that

"It helps them to learn more and do better in school."

One student had a different view of the contribution this involvement can make to learning:

"Kids learn and help their parents to learn"

Parent's participation in the process did appear to have had a direct impact on attitudes and engagement in learning:

"Mum met quite a few teachers and now checks up on me more at home."

"Shows they take an interest this has helped"

As a model for enabling learning getting parents more actively involved in school meant:

"Parents can support their children better because they know what the school is like."

One student, however, seemed quite keen on maintaining the inconsistencies in parental involvement:

"It is actually better to have your parent more involved than other peoples, because it gives you the advantage."

Another student also suggested they noticed a change in their parent and communicates a personal satisfaction in seeing their parent flourish:

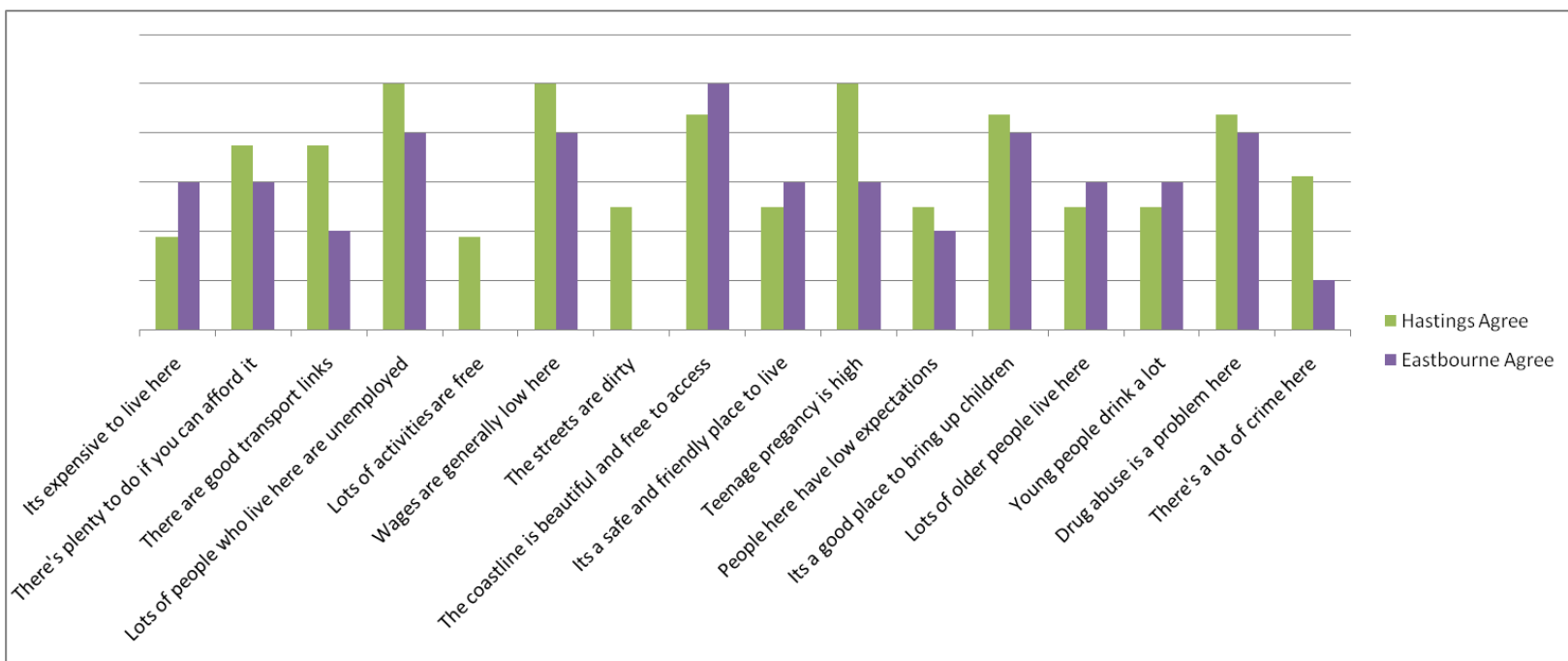
"I have met some new people because of this. I quite like that my mum is involved going to the school and going to appointments."

What is the impact of the Connected Education model on the wider community?

“The regeneration of the coastal strip has to involve improvement of the skill levels of the population and raising their aspirations is something that’s important to the county council... We want everybody wanting to earn more, wanting to get more out of life, wanting to contribute more, wanting to improve their skills. The chance to do something which would help raise expectations of teenagers was very much linked to the wider regeneration strategy. It may be that we also find out things about parents that would help to remove blockages to their involvement in the labour market or their uptake of services.” (Project Commissioner)

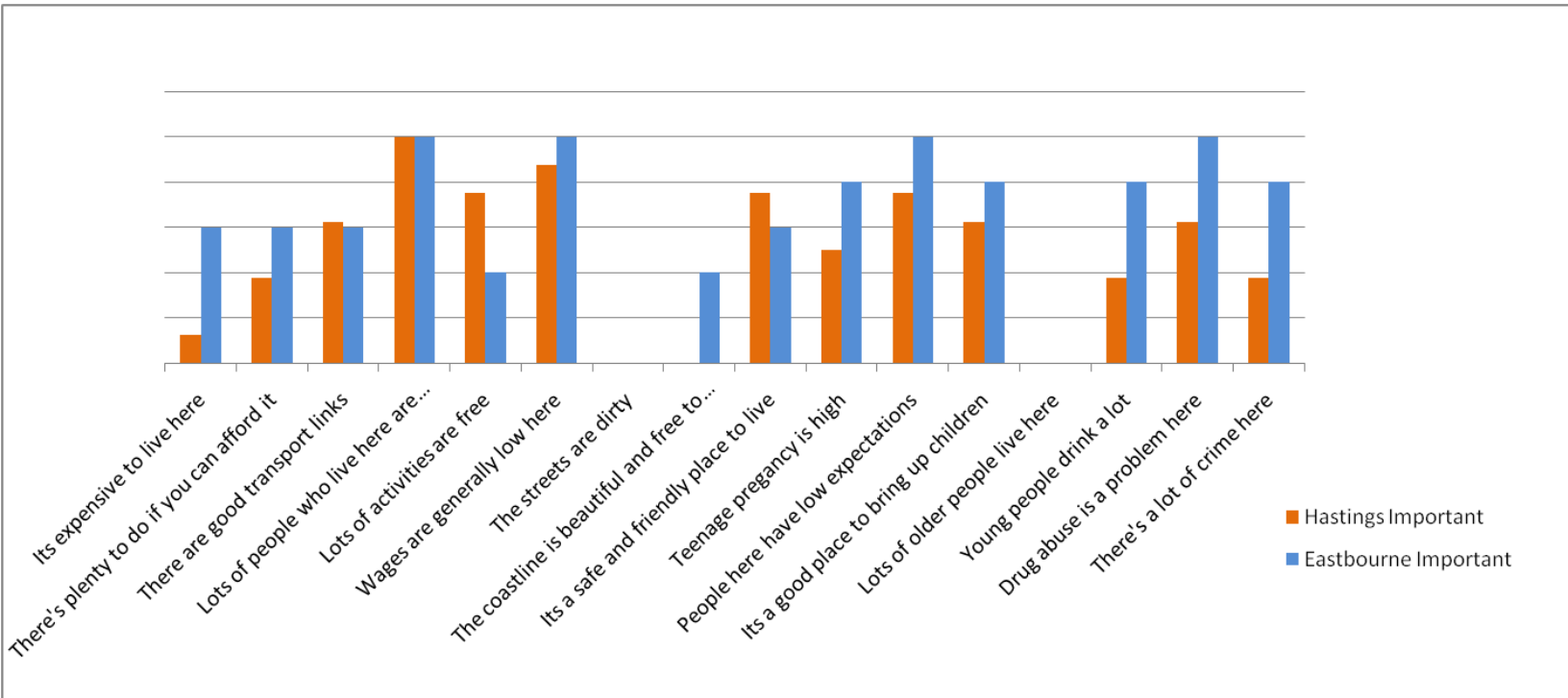
This was part of the aspiration but in order to understand what if any effects for the community parents perceived as being attributable to Connected Education and their involvement in it, we first needed to establish what parents perceived their communities’ strengths and challenges to be.

The 13 parents taking part in the evaluation were offered a list of 16 statements that described characteristics of their different communities. These statements were adapted from actual contributions made by participating parents to describe their own communities during the Connected Education training. Parents assigned a value of 2-5 to each statement, where 2 indicated that they strongly disagreed and 5 that they strongly agreed. Assigning a 1 meant they didn’t know.



So it would appear that parents in our sample who lived in Hastings worried about high unemployment, low wages, teenage pregnancy and crime, while parents in Eastbourne were challenged by poor transport links, a high cost of living and teenage drinking. Both groups valued the natural environment although street cleanliness seemed to be a problem in Hastings. In both groups a majority agreed that their communities were good places to bring up children. Around half of parents in both groups agreed that people in their communities had low expectations.

Next we tried to understand what links if any parents perceived between the issues facing their communities and the likelihood of parents being able and willing to support their children’s learning. In other words we wanted to know how relevant parents believed, for instance, teenage pregnancy to be when thinking about parents’ role in their children’s education.



Eastbourne parents felt that economic factors were the most important, which they had also highlighted as the main challenges facing their community. However the same parents were also more likely than their Hastings counterparts to see problems such as crime and drug and alcohol abuse as having an effect on parents’ involvement in their children’s learning, even though these issues were less of a concern for them in their communities, (see especially crime in previous figure).

Hastings parents thought that access to free activities and neighbourhood safety were important.

In both groups all parents thought unemployment was an important factor;

“Being unemployed might mean that the parent has more time to spend with their children. But equally it might mean the parent is too demoralized and demotivated to do anything.” (Parent, Hastings)

One Hastings parent volunteered an interesting perspective on barriers to parental involvement;

“They (parents) are prevented from being involved in their children’s education for many and varied reasons, but almost never because they are uninterested.” (Parent, Hastings)

The schools interviewed provide limited evidence of change in the communities they are located. Most do recognise the need for affecting the community they serve though this is often centered on the school community. One Eastbourne school identified the physical location of the school compounding the psychological divide between school and community, something they believe will be alleviated through the building of a new school. Another perceived low expectations within the community and hoped the project would explore this further. Interestingly a Hastings school who had perceived the same issue discovered that the issue was less about low expectation and more about the mismatch between high expectation and effort at school. Challenging schools perceptions of community attitudes may prove to be a first step on the road to improving their work with communities.

Only 1 parent from our sample of 13, however, said they had noticed a difference in their community;

“Within my community parents I have seen are more interested in the project and what it may achieve. I feel this could have an impact on the community and be part of a change for the young people that live here and go to school here.” (Parent, Eastbourne)

However responses to less direct questions surfaced some interesting trends. In particular there was evidence of parents learning more about different sections of their communities;

“I now realise how much poverty there is in the area. I would like to make it a better place to grow up and improve how families work together.” (Parent, Eastbourne)

“I’ve learned that the South is very different to the North in that we were always in and out of each other’s houses, whereas here (Hastings) people wait for an invitation. Not even your neighbours drop in for a brew. But people are very welcoming once you’re inside their home.” (Parent, Hastings)

*"I didn't realise how many parents struggled to communicate with school about their problems.
(Parent, Hastings)*

A Year 7 student told us;

"It was good because our parents learned more not just about the school, but about other people and parents. (Student Eastbourne)

Shifts in perceptions about other families in their communities were taking place;

"Before the project, I would unconsciously prejudge people. The project made me realise this and my attitudes towards other people (in the community) have now changed."(Parent, Hastings)

And even some evidence of the parent researchers coming together proactively to affect change in school for the good of a parent they had met while interviewing;

"I know of a parent who we encouraged to go and talk to the teacher 'now 'rather than just waiting for parents evening, again because as interviewers we personally felt that it was imperative that the parent should be active in the matter that was being described. I know that many of us researchers have changed the way we relate to the teachers and to our children as a result of the process of hearing about so many other people's experiences of the various schools and teachers, and in particular as a result of the training and follow up next steps meetings. If this kind of interactive process of learning could be extended to more parents that could really make a difference to parent and child relationships and to parent and teacher relationships." (Parent Researcher, Hastings)

This Eastbourne parent told us that she intended in future to;

"... venture out of my comfort zone, outside of my parent network, and meet more parents from different ethnic backgrounds." (Parent, Eastbourne)

While another;

"One parent definitely has 'family time' now at weekends, where she and her boyfriend have quality time with their kids. i.e. bike riding and picnics." (Parent researcher, Hastings emailing evidence of change behavior in a family who had been interviewed)

So maybe this parent is right;

“I haven’t noticed any changes yet, but I think it’s still too soon after the project. It is still very early and the seeds may have been sown.” (Parent, Hastings)

Student perceptions of the impact on community

We asked students what the benefits of parents getting involved in school had on the whole community. There replies indicate a variety of perceived and tangible benefits:

“Brings a positive perception of the school “ (Student, Hastings)

“People notice somethings are happening. Notice that parents are supporting the school. People notice that they are trying to bring the school and community together.” (Student, Hastings)

“because parents are part of the community when they get more involved they tell their friends and they get more involved too” (Student, Hastings).

“Parents tend to work together and share things that they have found out with each other, and this is good for the community.” (Student, Hastings)

“His mum told her friends about the project and they now ask their children more questions about what they are doing at school.” (Student, Eastbourne)

For one student the potential benefits are far reaching:

“Change education; change our way of life!”

Discussion and recommendations

What can school/parent partnership realistically contribute to community regeneration. How can Parents as Researchers make a contribution?

Recruitment of parent researchers

The process by which parents were recruited to the pilot understandably set out to identify willing volunteers. Adverts were placed in the local press and distributed via school in the first instance and the majority of parents taking part in the pilot applied in response to these prompts. This meant that participating parents were by definition (i) able to be engaged by these media (ii) alert to the opportunity that they pilot might represent and (iii) were able and willing to take a risk on something new. As a general point, we wonder how representative this group might be of their communities more generally.

But actually it's more interesting to consider the minority of parents who were recruited later in the process, when these more direct routes had 'dried up'. These parents were instead identified by teachers and school leaders and approached on their behalf by the project leader. In the school that made the best use of this opportunity, a wider and more representative parent group was recruited (see page 30)

We think that the potential of the recruitment process to contribute to the overall impact of Connected Education in schools and in the community might be underexploited in the current model. If teachers were to be involved from the outset in nominating parents they'd like see take part in the project, they would be engaged much earlier and more practically in making connections between their own concerns for their students' achievement and how the extent and quality of parental involvement. We think this is important for buy in and sustainability in the school.

Recommendation: Involve the wider staff in participating schools much earlier in the process. Ideally involve them in nominating parents to take part. Invite them to take part in the training. Involve them in developing research questions and in analysing and interpreting data.

Similarly nominating parents creates the opportunity to extend participation to the 'already active or 'looking' parents to include parents known in the community and/or the school who could have influence but who might not immediately see themselves in this role. For instance parents with poor literacy skills who may not engage with the local press or letters home, or parents who themselves had a difficult relationship with school as a child.

Recommendations: Recruit parents using a wider variety of media and methods. Parents indicate SMS text messaging and social networking were effective in keeping in regular informal contact throughout the project.

Questionnaires –safety net or barrier?

School leaders' aims in becoming involved in the project centred on finding out more about how parents viewed the school, as a first step towards helping them work out how to do better at engaging parents. Their hypothesis was that parents were variously suspicious or ignorant of school, or were straightforwardly uninterested. School leaders wanted information about parents' perceptions of school and how school dealt with them at present.

Developing a questionnaire containing items that sought out this information as an instrument for parent researchers to use in the field was a natural and obvious choice in response. Its collaborative design helped build relationships and better understand the contextual environment in which they would be researching. We also think that the carefully designed questionnaire gave structure to interviews for inexperienced parent researchers (and therefore confidence to carry them out) and enabled the project lead to quality assure data collection. Finally gathering data in a standardised format like this made it possible to read across from school to school to build a coherent data set as a basis for reporting to the commissioner, the Local Authority.

These advantages should be taken seriously, however we wonder whether the decision to administer a questionnaire in some ways limited from the outset the impact that Connected Education could have in schools, and in particular, in communities. Turning Point themselves identify this problem:

'In an ideal world we would like to make more use of other research methods, but the reality is we are limited by the time we have available to develop the skills of our community researchers. The questionnaire is quite inclusive in that it is something that can be used by people with different

abilities. The researchers generally work in pairs and having a 'safe' structure like a questionnaire really helps to develop confidence. Having said that, we would like to develop additional tools to use as well.' (Project leader)

The decision to specify items in a questionnaire in some ways proscribed the conversations that parent researchers could have in the community. Parent researchers talked of the difficulty they had keeping interviews 'on track' and getting the survey completed.

School leaders were in part frustrated by the limitations of survey responses, calling them 'time limited', for instance. This is a common response and elsewhere we have strongly advised against using survey instruments, precisely for this reason. The Engaging Parent Toolkit (McGrane 2008), for example, highlights the limitations of questionnaires and promotes a more discursive methodology. We think that in managing the undeniable risks associated with an intervention like Connected Education, some of its potential may have been lost.

Recommendation: Explore using methods other than survey. Parent researchers working in the evaluation successfully used a gap analysis tool, a visual metaphor and a ranking activity to stimulate recall and discussion and the quality of the data they gathered was excellent.

Growing involvement to grow impact

In the seminar held at Turning Point in September for stakeholders, one delegate raised the point that, whilst achieving impact for participating parents would be admirable, the real goal was to work out how to spread the benefit of the project out into the wider community. Without this, the impact could only reasonably be described as limited; therapeutic in effect for the small group of parents taking part.

Our response to this is partly to refute it by pointing to the indirect but very real effects of raising expectations and attainment amongst a cohort of young people in a community which improving education provision and outcomes might engender. Parental engagement as a route to school improvement is a legitimate goal with benefits for communities as demonstrated in figure 1, page 4 and captured in the project rationale and design for Connected Education.

However we also agree that more could be done to amplify the effects for the wider community.

Community involvement currently ends in Connected Education when the data collection phase is over. Data are analysed, interpreted and presented to school leaders by the project researcher on behalf of the parent researchers. We wonder what additional benefit there might be if community members could be involved in the interpretation of data – what does this mean for you, for your children, for our community? - through meetings and workshops held either in school or, even better, elsewhere in the community, led by parent researchers.

Recommendation: Raise awareness of the project in the community and involve members of the community in interpreting data collected by parent researchers.

The process has helped schools to become more ‘contextually literate’². They have developed a deeper understanding of parents needs and aspirations and acquired greater knowledge of the socio-economic issues faced by the communities they serve. This knowledge is of value. We wonder whether involving the schools in interpretation of the research findings would have built capacity for a more sustainable model of Connected Education.

Recommendation: Involve end users at each stage of the research process to build ownership and build capacity to sustain this work without substantial external resource.

Planning for Impact

This feels like an evaluation of an unfinished project. The research findings have served as a catalyst for head teacher engagement and commitment. As a consequence evidence of impact on schools and school communities is yet to be fully realised. Plans for action are now abundant, some have begun but none are embedded. This is in part an issue of timing. The activity stimulated by the research findings may simply be ‘part two’ of this project. We would suggest it is also due to a lack of planning for impact at the outset. Schools had priorities and aspirations but they shared minimal clarity about anticipated

² This is a concept explored in *‘What we know about school leadership’*(2007) and is cited in Connected Education’s Research Framework

impact. Building a clearer view on impact at the outset of the project might have helped develop the potential for the work more widely across the school.

Recommendation: Develop a clearer vision of impact before the start of a future project.

Build in a further evaluation to examine what schools do now which they didn't do before and interview/questionnaire a sample of parents to see if they notice a difference.

Project Leadership and Management

The success of the project is attributed, in part, to the quality of its leadership and management. Not every future project can have the benefit of this specific person but the evaluation has begun to make explicit the qualities and attributes required of a project leader who can work across a range of partners, project manage and deliver high quality training and support and outcomes.

Recommendation: Develop a set of recommendations for potential commissioners or project teams that would help them appoint a project manager with the right qualities and attributes to help Connected Education model have the best chance of success.

Cost/benefit

Though the project commissioner does make clear the cost of the project in total no evaluation of cost/benefit has been undertaken.

Recommendation: Develop a cost/benefit analysis to establish Connected Educations viability as a commercial product.

There have, however, been many positive outcomes of Connected Education. Figure 4 below examines some of them and in so doing exemplifies the potential of this model to make a positive impact on the achievement and adjustment of young people.

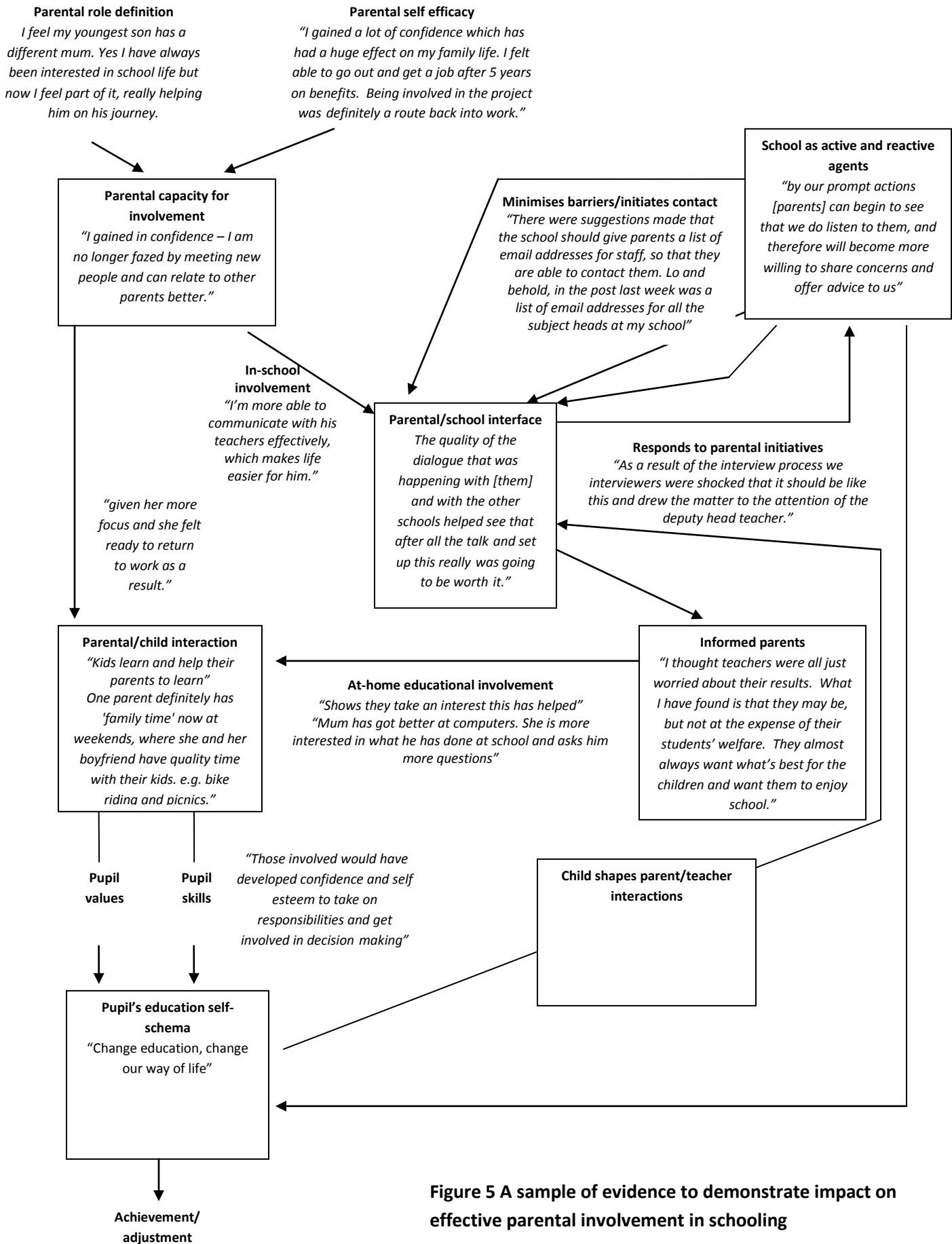


Figure 5 A sample of evidence to demonstrate impact on effective parental involvement in schooling

Evaluators Biographies

Julie McGrane

Julie McGrane is Director of Leading Learning (Education) Ltd, a development and research consultancy committed to helping individuals and organisations develop and innovate by making learning their core business. Having been a teacher and network consultant for the National College for School Leadership, Julie's clients include individual schools, networks and organisations. Julie observes in schools in a wide variety of capacities and works with them as they innovate in the areas of curriculum, teaching and learning, professional learning and leadership. Julie is author of a variety of publications including *Engaging Parents Toolkit* (2008) and *Developing Outstanding Teaching*. She is a visiting fellow at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. To find out more visit www.leadinglearning.eu .

Julie Temperley

Julie Temperley is a researcher working close to policy and practice in education. She connects evidence from research to policy makers', practitioners' and stakeholders' priorities informing both the development and evaluation of their work. Her approach to research is disciplined, but also imaginative and problem solving, adapting the processes and outcomes of research to create opportunities for people to engage with evidence in interesting and useful ways. Julie works across the public sector, but is a specialist in education and has designed and directed a wide range of national research projects about teaching and learning, teacher education and continuing professional development, school leadership, curriculum and other innovations and effective networking and collaboration between schools. Julie is a Director of Temperley Research Ltd and a Senior Associate of Innovation Unit.

Appendix

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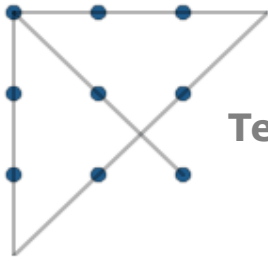
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Connected Education seminar

16th September 2010

Delegate list

| Name | Role / Organisation |
|------------------------|---|
| Colin Anderson | Policy Manager East Sussex Children and Young People's Trust |
| Peter Apostolou | Parental Engagement Team Department for Education |
| Sonya Brindley | Parent Researcher Turning Point |
| Gemma Bruce | Research Manager Turning Point |
| Vikki Climpson | Parent Researcher Turning Point |
| John Craig | Director of Innovation Exchange The Innovation Unit |
| Prof Charles Desforges | Emeritus professor, Exeter University Independent consultant |
| Alison Jeffery | Children's Trust Manager East Sussex Children and Young People's Trust |
| David Kelly | Senior Programme Manager National College for Leaders of Schools and Children's Services |
| Richard Kramer | Director Turning Point |
| Judith Lewis | Parent Researcher Turning Point |
| Sophia Looney | Director of Policy Equalities and Performance Lambeth Council |
| Jasbir Mann | Head of Service, Learning Transformation and Development Leicester City Council |
| Julie McGrane | Project evaluation lead Leading Learning (Education) |
| Prof Denis Mongon | Visiting professional fellow, Institute of Education Senior research fellow, University of Manchester Senior Associate, Innovation Unit |
| Becky Surman | Senior Research Advisor Turning Point |
| Julie Temperley | Project evaluation lead Temperley Research |



Temperley Research

04 October 2010

Connected Education Evaluation Interview Materials

With this letter you'll find almost everything you need to complete your interviews. Here's what's in the pack:

- An interview schedule – the questions you should ask and the order you should ask them in
- Four instruments or activities
 - **Instrument 1** a ranking tool setting out parents reasons for getting involved in the project
 - **Instrument 2** a gap analysis that compares what parents think about their communities with the effect they think that has on parents getting involved in their children's education
 - **Instrument 3** the circles activity mapping the importance of child, parent and school from a parent's point of view

Finally there's **Instrument 4**, which is the student focus group. This doesn't appear in the interview schedule and Becky is setting these up separately for you.

You'll notice I said, there's *almost* everything here you need. For the circles activity you will also need some plain paper and a glue stick. You may also find that you start to run out of circles after a few interviews. Two of you have spare sheets of the brightly coloured paper and I have emailed a template in case you need to cut out any more.

For the student focus group you will also need small red and green post it notes, or you could cut out some cards. I'm sorry I couldn't include these in the pack, but it was starting to get really heavy and likely to cost more to send the items than they cost to buy. I hope you are able to find them easily and cheaply locally and please keep any receipts so we can reimburse you.

Please read through all the materials and pilot them with each other as soon as possible. Remember your data are just as valuable as all the other parents' so please do record the outcomes of the pilot carefully. I look forward to hearing how you get on with the materials. If you have any questions or problems at all, you can reach me on the phone or email at the top of this note. Good luck!

Draft Interview schedule Parents as researchers

Preamble:

- Introduce self and purpose behind the interview
 - Ask permission to record interview and take notes for reference purposes
 - Explain that information and views given in the interview may be quoted and used in a report to Turning Point. We don't yet know whether TP will share the report with participating schools or parents and/or how else the report will be shared.
 - If a question is asked that interviewee doesn't want to or can't answer then they may simply ask to move on and nothing will be inferred from that
 - Are there any questions before the interview begins?
 - Switch on recorder
1. Let's start by hearing a little about you. How long have you lived in Eastbourne/Hastings? Whereabouts do you live? How many children do you have? Which school(s) do they go to and so on? **Prompt:** Is there anything else about you that you think it would be helpful for me to know?
 2. I want to try and find out what prompted to you to get involved in the project to begin with, and it was a long time ago so I have some reminders here (*instrument 1*).
 - These are reasons that some of us gave when we applied to join the project. Can you have a look down the list and see if you can remember which of them applied to you?
 - Just put a zero beside any that you don't recognise at all.
 - Then of the reasons that are left, can you put them in order of importance to you. What was your top reason and then your number two reason and so on?**Prompt:** Choose one or two reasons given and ask...: What was it about the project that you thought would e.g. improve your relationship with the school, help you make things better in your community etc?
Then ask: If you could go back now and talk to yourself in the past, what kinds of things might you say to 'past you', based on what you have learned through the project?
 3. Ok we're going to move on to think about some of the wider issues that the project set out to tackle.
 - Here are some things that people say about our communities – in fact we said them at our training. (*instrument 2*)
 - Can you have a read down the list and on the left hand side put a circle round the number that's closest to your own view. If you strongly agree that where you live is expensive put a circle round number 5 for example. We'll go down the list on the left first and then stop.

- So now what I'd like you to go down the list again, this time of the right hand side and decide how important you think each item is for thinking about why parents might or might not get involved in school. So if you think high levels of teenage pregnancy are very relevant put a circle around number 5. If you don't know, you can just circle number 1.
- **Prompt:** Choose any that have interesting number combinations e.g. 2 number 5s for a negative item and ask...: Why do you think this is so important?

4. Complete circles activity Part 1 (instrument 3)

5. How did you hear about the project?

6. Can you describe the process you went through to apply and be selected?

7. What was the training like? What happened? Looking back, having completed the project, how useful did you think the training was? Is there anything that should be done next time round to make it even better?

8. How did you stay in touch with each other? With the school? With turning point?

9. What about doing the research itself? Can you talk about how that worked? What you found helpful and what challenges there were?

10. Lets go back to your list of reasons for taking part in the first place. Which of these aims did you achieve? What benefits do you think you have gained as a result? Has anything changed for you?

11. Do you think there have been any benefits for your child(ren)? If yes, what are they and why do you think they arise from the project? If no, why not? What would have needed to be different to get some benefit for them?

12. OK now let's go back to the things we identified as issues for your community. Have you learned anything or noticed any changes that might make a difference here? It might help to think about the following:

- how you think or act differently
- how the school that you have been researching on behalf of has responded differently than you might of expected or are doing things differently.

13. And finally, let's have another look at those circles. Where would you place them now?

We are at the end of the formal questions. Is there anything else you'd like to say, that I haven't asked you about?

Do you have any questions for me? Thank you and close.

Guidance notes for using the ‘circles activity’

Adapted from McGrane J (2008) Engaging Parents Toolkit Optimus pp 39-40

In the interview you will be completing the circles activity in two parts:

- In **part 1** you’ll be asking parents to cast their minds back and to map the relationships between themselves, their child and the school **at the beginning, when they joined the project**
- In **part 2** you’ll be asking them to represent those same relationships **at the present time**

Part 1 (Question 4 in the interview schedule)

1. Ask the parent to choose the size of circle that they think represents a parent’s, the school’s and the child’s contribution to achieving well at school. So if they think that the parent has a big effect on student achievement they’ll choose a big circle for themselves. If they believed there wasn’t much they could or should contribute, they’ll choose a small one, and so on for the school and the child too.
2. Be clear that they are choosing the circles to represent their perception of the real situation, not how they think it should be
3. Ask the parent to position the circles in relation to each other to show their experience of involvement in their child(ren)’s learning . Circles can touch, overlap or be as far apart as the size of paper will allow.
4. Ask them to talk through their circles prompting them to give as much detail as you think they can with questions like “why do you think that?” or “What do you think that means?”
5. For some parents this could be a very sensitive activity. Don’t underestimate what it might feel like for someone who sees herself as the smallest circle with no connections to any of the others.
6. When the parent is happy that the circles are in the right place. Stick them to the paper and set it to one side saying you’ll come back to this later.

Part 2 (Question 13 in the interview schedule)

7. Offer the different sizes of circles and a clean sheet of paper to the parent
8. This time ask them to choose the size of circles based on how they feel now about the different contributions that parents, children and schools, make to student achievement.
9. Repeat the positioning of the circles again touching overlapping or far apart to show how they feel about the relationship between the different parties now.
10. Put the two versions side by side and compare them. Ask about any changes that the parent has made. What made them change their minds? How has it affected the way they interact with their child? With the school? Have there been any other changes that this activity brings to mind?

Guidance notes for using student focus group question cards

Preamble:

- Introduce self and purpose behind the interview
- Ask permission to record discussion and take notes for reference purposes
- State that information and views given in the interview may be quoted and used in a report to Turning Point. Explain that we don't yet know whether TP will share the report with participating schools and/or how else the report will be shared.
- If a question is asked that students don't want to or can't answer then they may simply ask to move on and nothing will be inferred from that
- Are there any questions before we start?
- Switch on recorder

Ask students to introduce themselves by saying their name and year group and say a little about their parent and how they've been involved.

True or false

Invite each student to 'pick a card' and read out the statement to the group.

Each student has red and green post its. They vote red for false and green for true. Given them a few moments to think about it and then vote.

Ask each student why they voted true or false using questions like "why do you think that?" and "what was your experience" to open up the discussion. Expect to spend about 2 or 3 minutes on each statement and move on as soon as you feel the conversation is dropping off. Try to keep the energy levels high and to make sure that each student speaks, asking individuals by name to invite them into the conversation if you need to.

Statements

- Getting parents more involved in school is good for students. It helps them to learn more and do better in school.
- Parents who get more involved in school understand more about school and are better at supporting their kids' learning.
- Students whose parents are involved in school sometimes get teased or bullied by other students because of this.
- It's ok to have your parent more involved in school than your friends' parents are.
- Parents who get more involved in school learn a lot and change because of this.
- When parents get more involved in school, the school changes things because of this.
- When parents get more involved in school, there are benefits for the whole community.

At the end ask if there's anything that anyone would like to say that they didn't get a chance to in the discussion.

Ask if there are any questions? Thank you.

Reasons for getting involved in Connected Education – Instrument 1

Here are some of the reasons that parent researchers gave on application for wanting to be involved in Connected Education.

- Rank these in order of importance to you personally, with number 1 being the most important.
- Award a zero to any reasons that weren't at all important to you.
- Add any reasons that you think are missing and say where you would rank them.

| Reason given | Ranking |
|---|---------|
| My own child or children were attending a school taking part in the project | |
| I had worked in schools before and enjoyed it | |
| I wanted to improve my community and make it a better place for children to grow up | |
| I wanted to meet new people | |
| I wanted a new challenge | |
| I was looking for work/wanted to earn some more money | |
| I wanted to help families who didn't know how to find out about the school and what it could offer them | |
| I thought the school was getting a bad press and wanted to do something about that | |
| I wanted to improve the school | |
| I wanted to improve relationships between the school and parents | |
| I was interested in education generally and wanted to find out more | |
| I had a difficult relationship with the school and wanted to improve it | |
| My child doesn't tell me anything about school – this was a way to find out more | |
| Working in the project fitted in with other commitments | |
| Working in the project gave me experience that was helpful for other things – study, career development etc | |

Other reasons... (turn page over if necessary)

Perceptions about communities and the link with parental involvement

| To what extent do you agree with the statement? | | | | | Here are some things that people living in Eastbourne or Hastings have said about their communities. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circle the number in each column that most closely represents your own view. • Start on the left and think about whether you agree or disagree with each statement in the list. Work all the way to the end of the list. • Then move to the right hand column and circle the number that most closely represents how relevant you think this is feature of community life is for thinking about the way parents engage with schools. | How likely is this to affect how parents engage with their children's learning | | | | |
|---|-------|----------|-------------------|------------|--|--|---------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------|
| Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Don't know | | Very likely to affect it | likely to affect it | Not very likely to affect it | Not at all likely to affect it | Don't know |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | Its expensive to live here | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | There's plenty to do if you can afford it | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | There are good transport links | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | Lots of people who live here are unemployed | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | Lots of activities are free | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | Wages are generally low here | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | The streets are dirty | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | The coastline is beautiful and free to access | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | Its a safe and friendly place to live | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | Teenage pregnancy is high | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | People here have low expectations | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | Its a good place to bring up children | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|--------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | Lots of older people live here | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | Young people drink a lot | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | Drug abuse is a problem here | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | There's a lot of crime here | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

Evaluating Connected Education: enquiry questions for parents schools and project leaders

| The context | | | The process | | | The outcomes | | |
|--|--|--|--|---|--|---|--|--|
| parent | school | turning point | parent | school | turning point | parent | school | turning point |
| What motivated parents to become involved in Connected Education? What did they hope to achieve? | What motivated school leaders to become involved in Connected Education? What did they hope to achieve? What barriers, if any, to their involvement did they perceive? | What were the aims of Connected Education? | How were parents recruited? What was the process by which they were identified/selected? If they were volunteers, how did they find out about the project? | What role did school leaders take in identifying and recruiting parents? What were their criteria? | What support and advice did the project team give to schools about recruitment? Were there 'target' groups of parents? If so who and why? | To what extent were parents' aims and expectations met through their involvement in the project? How did they benefit? What plans do they have for further development? | To what extent were school leaders' aims and expectations met through their involvement in the project? How did they evaluate their involvement? | What do project team members consider to be the most important achievements of the project? |
| What problems, if any, did parents perceive in their community, that they believed the project might help to address? | What problems, if any, did school leaders perceive in the community, that they believed the project might help to address? | What was the rationale behind the approach? | How was the research focus chosen and how were methods and instruments developed and agreed? | What role did school leaders play in choosing the research focus? | What guidance did the project team offer to parents choosing a focus for their research and developing their methods and instruments? What was the rationale behind these suggestions? | What, if any, benefits to their own children's learning did parents taking part in the project notice? | What, if anything, was different in school, following the project? | Were there any aims or objectives that were not met? What were they and what changed/went wrong? |
| What barriers, if any, did parents perceive in being involved in their children's education/with the school? | What was the school's experience/history of working with parents? | Who were the intended audience(s) for any output from the project? | How were parents' starting points e.g. experience and expectations assessed? How were their learning needs analysed? | Were there any parents or groups of parents that the school would like to have involved but did not? Who/why/why not? | What was the rationale for the approach taken to training parent researchers? What did needs analysis indicate the parents' starting points to be? | What was the effect of the project in tackling problems identified by parents in the community? | What, if any, benefits to children of parents taking part in the project did staff notice? | What, if anything, has the project team learned could be achieved by this project or similar, that they didn't know at the beginning? |
| What were parents' perceptions of an appropriate role for parents in their children's education before taking part in the project? | How did the school brief and prepare teachers and support staff for working with parents in the project? | What resources e.g. budget, time, materials, reviews and other evidence were made available to the project team? | What training and support was available to parents taking part? When did it take place, who delivered it? How did parents evaluate it? What methods were used? | Which members of staff became involved in the project? How and why were they selected? | How and by whom was training carried out? What resources were used NB include an estimate of cost. | How did the project help to overcome barriers to involvement - their own and, if known, other parents'? | What, if any, benefits were there for staff directly involved in the project? | How much did the project cost in total? Which of these are one off development costs and which recurring running costs? |
| What were parents' perceptions of the relationship between the school and the community before taking part in the project? | What was the relationship between this project and other development activity in school during the period? How did the project feature in the SDP/RAP? | What were the skills and experience of the project team? Why were they selected? | How were meetings between parents and school staff planned, managed, used throughout the project? | What training and development was offered to staff and how did this relate to other relevant CPD? How was this provision evaluated? | How was the project monitored? What project and change management processes were used? | In what, if any, ways did parent's involvement in their children's education change following the project? | How does the project feature in the school's SEF? | What materials were developed through the project that could be reused? What additional work at approximately what cost would be needed? |
| What were parents' perceptions of the role of schools in community regeneration before taking part in the project? | What other community regeneration work is the school involved in? | | How did parents communicate (i) with each other (ii) with the school and (iii) with TP throughout the project? | What was the role of students in the parents' research; in recruitment, set up, support and evaluation? | How was parents' learning evaluated following training? What changes, if any, were made to the training between episodes? | What changes, if any were there in the relationship between the school and the community, following the project? | What plans, if any does the school have to continue with this project or similar? | |

Update on progress in East Sussex - April 2011

Information for External Evaluation Report

The project report

The parent and student Community Researchers collected so much detailed and interesting information that it took longer than planned to analyse it in detail and bring it together into a coherent report with relevance for all audiences. It was also decided to contextualise the findings within a broader narrative around engaging with parents and families as a means of tackling inter-generational poverty and disadvantage. This ensured that the report reflects not only the 'snapshot' findings of the research, but also contributes to an understanding of the role that schools and school leaders can play in community regeneration.

In addition to the research for individual schools, comparative analyses were made of the following:

- The experiences of parents and young people from the two different towns
- The experiences of parents and young people where the family receives free school meals, against those which don't
- The experiences of parents and young people where the child has a special educational need, against those with no SEN
- The experiences of parents according to their own levels of educational engagement

Each school was given individual verbal feedback at the end of July 2010. The report took a further three months to produce. The first draft was sent to the schools and to the Local Authority in November for reaction and feedback. A Steering Group meeting was also held, offering some of the parents and partner agencies a first look and a chance to comment. Agreement on the final draft was delayed, in part due to Local Authority restructuring and also because of the changes taking place in the schools as four of them close to become Academies.

The final draft was signed off in March 2011 and is now available on the Turning Point website. Hard copies have been sent to each of the parents, the schools and the partner agencies involved in the Steering Group.

School actions

The positive reactions from school Leadership Teams following the verbal feedback given in July 2010 indicate that both the process and the research findings have been invaluable in helping schools plan for improvements. Despite the length of time it has taken to finalise and distribute the report, schools have been proactive in building upon the early feedback and recommendations. Some of the actions already in place or underway were shared at the March 2011 Steering Group, These include:

The Eastbourne Academy (*formerly Eastbourne Technology College*)

- Has incorporated research findings into both the self evaluation and school improvement planning processes, with a primary focus on Communications
- Has started to simplify school policies, making them more child and parent friendly and in clearer language
- Is making use of face-to-face interviews at parents evenings to get routine parent feedback, rather than relying solely on the Ofsted questionnaire for parents
- Is making greater use of text messaging to keep parents informed
- Is bringing in email communication for parents (with paper still an option)
- Is examining ways of sharing more curriculum information with parents
- Is creating more formal and informal opportunities for parents to talk with teachers

- Has start a new Y6/7 transition project with feeder schools, with a focus on improving transition for parents
- Is involving parents in the design of the new Academy buildings and facilities to ensure they are more welcoming and available to the local community

The Causeway School

- Is focusing its immediate actions on Communications and how to improve these
- In conjunction with the parent Community Researchers has established a new parent-led reference group called 'Causeway Parents for Excellence'. Is currently promoting this to all parents as a means of having a say, supporting each other and getting involved. One idea they are currently working on is how parents can support each other with homework issues.
- Is exploring how to use students to facilitate the relationship between home and school, with a focus on increasing the participation and engagement of parents
- Has developed a transition plan for the summer term 2011 based on the premise that engaging with parents as their children move from Year 6-7 is the best opportunity for establishing sustainable relationships and involving parents in their child's school life and learning at home
- Is making greater use of text messaging to keep parents informed
- Has designed and issued a leaflet with contact details, photos and role descriptions for all those staff and partner agencies involved in pastoral care at the school
- Has established a rota of Governors to come into Parents Evenings to walk round and meet parents

The Grove College / Filsham Valley School (*joint actions as merging in Sept 2011 to become **The St Leonards Academy*)**

- Are redeveloping all policies as part of the transition phase into becoming an Academy, taking account of how these are worded and communicated to students and parents
- Have started a parent reference group building on the involvement of the parent Community Researchers, bringing together parents from across the Grove and FV.
- Are leading discussions with the parent reference group about how to implement parent self-help groups around specific issues
- Are planning to embed parent-led research as a central tenet of school improvement, self evaluation and parental engagement
- Are planning a programme of social events / evenings to encourage parents to come in on an informal basis and to start building relationships
- Are posting letters home to parents more frequently
- Have issued email addresses for staff to parents
- Are assessing different SMS tools for implementation in September
- Are planning a single point of coordination for communications to parents from Sept 2011, so that one person has an overview of all letters, newsletters, texts, mailings etc to ensure language and format used are consistent and parent friendly
- Have planned several transition events for the summer term, for parents in feeder primaries
- Have put in place a primary school model for the new Y7, which will encourage parents and teachers to get to know each other
- Have carried out a number of parent surveys at Parents Evening regarding priorities for the new Academy

Hillcrest School (*re-opening in September as **The Hastings Academy*)**

- Is holding an Open Evening for parents on the night before their children start in Y7, to meet the tutors, talk about the children and find out how to get involved in the life of the Academy
- Has changed the existing Parent Voice group so that it focuses each week on a themed issue of interest to parents. Curriculum Heads and other staff are expected to attend as appropriate.

- Has published a new contact leaflet for parents / carers with email addresses and extension numbers for more staff
- Has made improvements to the design and content of the newsletter, based on parent comments in the report
- Has set up transition meetings with Year 5 children and parents to meet the Hillcrest staff
- Is developing Year 5 and 6 transition events for children and parents
- Now sends home a Parent Voice and a contacts leaflet with every mailing, to ensure that all households receive copies regularly and know they are welcome into the school
- Is developing a Student Voice forum through the school council and house councils
- Is involving older students in Y6/7 community-based transition projects supported by local business and FE providers

Future actions

In addition to the changes already in place or underway, schools will be developing detailed Action Plans with us in the summer term around the themes of the recommendations. They have asked for the Steering Group forum to continue, to enable the sharing of ideas, practices, issues and successes. The themes of the recommendations are:

- Developing **professional knowledge** and awareness of the report findings, including the importance of parental engagement and partnership-building
- Developing a **Communications Strategy**
- Developing a **Parent Partnership Programme**
- Raising parental awareness of the importance of the parent role through a **'Parents Matter' campaign**
- Developing **Careers education** for young people and their parents
- Developing a **Homework / Home Learning** strategy and policy

Communicating actions and plans to parents and young people

As part of the dissemination process, we are in the process of compiling a booklet that will be sent to every family from each of the five schools. This will thank those parents and young people who took part in the research, summarise the findings, explain what has been happening over the past few months and outline what is going to happen next. It will encourage parents and young people to show support for their school by continuing to ask questions, give feedback, share ideas and work with staff as part of the Action Planning process.

Evaluation of outcomes

An evaluation of school actions and outcomes is planned for 2012. Schools have asked that this ties in with their own self-evaluation timetables.