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**The role of family support in facilitating transformatory change for schools trying to tackle disadvantage**

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## **Introduction**

In recent years, attention has turned to the premise that, in order for children to thrive and achieve, they need a nurturing and positive home environment as well as support at school. Intervention has a part to play in assisting families to address any problems they have and enable children to concentrate on learning. Family support work in England has traditionally been the domain of Local Authority Children's Services and voluntary sector providers. The first decade of the twenty-first century saw a plethora of programmes and interventions aimed at improving children's life chances. The emphasis was on providing holistic support and integrated services which could help children to meet five key outcomes: be healthy; stay safe; enjoy and achieve; make a positive contribution; and achieve economic well-being, under an overarching 'Change for Children' agenda. Underlying policy and practice involving young people was that they should be actively involved in their communities and able to influence decision-making. Extended services were expected to enable schools to deliver these outcomes for children. The concepts of 'community', 'full service' and 'extended' schooling are not new, however. In the USA the 'Full Service' model (Dreyfoos, 1994) originated over a decade ago. In England, the establishment of village colleges was promoted by Henry Morris in the 1930s and there have been a countless initiatives around parental involvement and community schooling at secondary level since then. From 2006, all state schools in England were expected to offer extended services to children and families

until recently, when decisions about which extended services to offer were devolved to schools. The core offer of extended services that each school might provide is made up of five elements: a rich and varied menu of activities for pupils; childcare; parenting support; swift and easy access to specialist services (for pupils and families); and community access (including adult education). Several evaluations of extended services took place from 2001 until 2011 (Cummings et al 2007; 2010, Carpenter et al 2010; 2011).

Following the requirement that schools should provide an enhanced menu of services for children, families and communities, and the introduction of the Parenting Support Advisor (PSA) pilot, funded by central government, many schools chose to employ family support workers to assist in ensuring children were ready to learn. Findings from the PSA pilot (Lindsay et al 2009) indicated that the provision of parenting support could be successful in improving pupil attendance, and increasing parental engagement with learning (which in itself is thought to lead to improved educational attainment for children see e.g. Shuang Ji and Koblinsky, 2009; Patrikakou and Weissberg, 2000; Hanafin and Lynch, 2002).

## **Methodology**

The paper is drawn from research that took place in England from 2009-2011 as part of the National Evaluation of Extended schools (Carpenter et al, 2010; 2011). Interviews were conducted with senior leadership and family support workers (FSWs) working in 20 schools in England and analysed thematically to ascertain the rationale behind employing FSWs in school, their role and function, barriers and facilitators to effective practice and the outcomes they hoped to achieve. Interviews were also conducted with family members (including children and young people) who had had contact with FSWs. The evaluation utilised a theory of change to provide a conceptual framework for obtaining and analysing data.

## **The role of Family Support Workers in Schools**

Family support work in schools took many forms. Family Support Workers were employed under a variety of job titles, and had a variety of roles, depending on the needs and ethos of the school. In some schools there was a strong sense that supporting parents meant taking the social context into consideration and enabling a bridge to be built between parents and their children's lives. The context in which schools were operating had important implications for

the work that family support workers undertook. In one school with a high proportion of newly arrived ethnic minority families, a large part of the role was to ensure that those families were linked in to other services, such as doctors and dentists, and had further information about their community. In this school the FSWs have been recruited from the communities in which they live. This not only gives the workers credibility within the community but has provided the school with a wealth of knowledge about the wider community. As the Head teacher explained:

We've got a very well established [FSWs] and support in there, and we've actually employed from the community as well, and that has been an absolutely superb resource because they have come with knowledge of knowing what the community needs.

The provision of a FSW was crucial to most schools in enabling trusting, positive and supportive relationships to develop with parents, and particularly those parents who were disadvantaged or vulnerable in some way, or who had bad experiences of school and were therefore less likely to engage with teaching staff. In some schools, the FSW role was very much about engaging parents and signposting them to local services. This involved strong partnership working with local agencies.

A few schools had developed the FSW role to such an extent, that they were able to take on individual casework, and act as a lead professional for a family. The cases they worked with were often complex and these FSWs were used to liaising with specialist services and acting as advocates. One FSW described her role in helping a family to work with specialist social services:

We prepare them for [core meetings], so it isn't such a frightening thing. You know, if they come and they go, "Oh we've got this core meeting, and I don't know what they're going to talk about and what they're doing. And what does it mean?" ...we'll say, "What would your reply to that be? But also what do you want to ask them? You know, is there anything you would like to ask them about. (FSW)

In some areas, FSWs were felt to be plugging the gap between specialist and universal services, providing early intervention and preventing cases from escalating. This led to

concerns from schools and local authorities about the type of caseloads FSWs were taking on, and the level and type of supervision they were receiving. In some schools, FSWs were supervised by Heads, or Co-ordinators, who had little or no training in family support. In one school, however, specialist mental health services (CAMHs) had been commissioned to provide mentoring and supervision on a regular basis, as the FSWs were expected to work intensively with very vulnerable families. Family support work in these cases was evidently filling what schools see as an important gap between universal services (including education) and statutory services whose threshold for referral, according to several of the schools in this study, is getting higher and higher:

...the people that sit on the [local partnership] are people from [health], fire, police, parish councils, voluntary sector and quite frankly they are shocked by what some of the families are going through at the moment and what kind of work our FSWs have to do to get in there and do early intervention work so they're not going on to social services thresholds (Headteacher).

Teachers we spoke to, appreciated having FSWs in school, as it gave them an avenue to seek support when they had concerns that did not warrant specialist referral:

It's nice to know, when you've got a family in school, and you're a bit concerned and you think you're not quite sure where to go or what to do, at least they are on site. Before... I'm not really sure who I would have phoned to be honest. In the past you probably would have left it because you think well what do I do? Where can I go? There was nothing there! (Teacher).

The FSW role enabled vulnerable families to be identified and engaged, so that targeted services and family and learning opportunities could be offered.

### **Producing change through family support**

The roles that FSWs took on were seen by senior leadership to contribute to transforming children's life chances. In some schools, the ethos was about transforming the life chances of the community that it was situated in, not just the children attending at that point in time.

Transformative provision was intended to break down barriers and increase engagement in both education and society (for pupils, families and the community) and reduce social and educational inequalities. This kind of provision relied heavily on engaging intended beneficiaries and FSWs could help with that:

Community engagement is absolutely vital for any educational institution, but particularly in areas of high need. If we don't engage families with the school, and we don't engage them through things like extended services, then we have failed. There is no chance you can be a success. (Head teacher)

In some other schools, there was the recognition that for transformatory work to become a reality and for the proposed impact to be a possibility (and this may be changing the culture of the community; improving life chances etc), it was necessary to attend to the basics first – ensuring children are safe, secure, well fed and dressed – and ready to learn.

Well basically it's our ethos...obviously that they are being fed, but that they are safe secure in a secure environment, and that they are fed, they are clothed, and they are warm. Because if they are not safe, fed, and clothed then... you could be doing back flips around and around the class and they won't learn anything at all. So its meeting their survival needs to a certain extent for a lot of our children (co-ordinator).

Some schools wanted to be seen as a caring school, and a hub of their community. Others wanted to encourage parents into the school in order to improve their children's and indeed their own learning. Some schools felt it was important to improve the levels of communication between parents and school so that a shared understanding was gained of what they school wanted to achieve for its children, and the ways in which this could be done. Other schools sought to engage parents more in order to identify vulnerable families, or to improve parents own skills. Some schools that were particularly skilled at engaging parents were able to engage them as volunteers or staff (thereby also improving life chances).

Wellbeing was an outcome desired by many schools. Although not easy to define, many staff referred to the Every Child Matters outcomes framework to demonstrate what they meant in this context, and indeed wellbeing was an outcome very closely linked with other outcome domains. Boosting resilience by improving children's self-esteem and confidence, and

promoting healthy lifestyles was seen as an important aim. Many different methods were employed to ensure these outcomes were met. FSWs sometimes worked directly with children and families, and could make a real difference to enabling them to deal with difficult family situations. One parent told us:

[The FSW] gave me, gave me back, my confidence to be able to deal with life. I was ready to sort my life out, to take the next step, um but I didn't know how...I think that's where I was flummoxed. And obviously [the FSW] coming in and being able to prod me, poke me and push me in the right direction was really good.

This parent received support and encouragement for around a year. This involved support to overcome personal problems and build self-esteem and confidence so that she could identify her own abilities and strengths. There was also encouragement for her to complete adult learning opportunities and to seek employment. She is now in employment and in control of her life. Her daughter was previously known to be a regular non-attender but the support her mother received and the intervention that she herself was part of means that she is now engaged in learning and is attending 100% of the time.

Many schools identified that working with young people requiring support could not be done effectively without engaging the wider family. For this reason, FSWs often had an important role to play in the support offered to children. Sometimes this role was to encourage good family functioning or to overcome problems at home that were manifesting as barriers to learning for the students.

## **Conclusions**

FSWs were seen as pivotal by schools in disadvantaged areas as part of a new transformative provision that was intended to break down barriers and increase engagement in both education and society (for pupils, families and the community) and reduce social and educational inequalities. Schools articulated a theory of change that for transformatory work to become a reality and to influence outcomes (and this may be changing the culture of the community; improving life chances etc), it was necessary to attend to the basics first – ensuring children are safe, secure, well fed and dressed – and ready to learn. This involved engaging parents and encouraging good family functioning or to overcome problems at home

that were manifesting as barriers to learning for the students. FSWs had the capacity to establish good relationships with families on the one hand, which could help ensure that families who needed support were identified and engaged, and they had a good knowledge of local services that they could refer to quickly and easily if the need arose. In some areas, FSWs were felt to be plugging the gap between specialist and universal services, providing early intervention and preventing cases from escalating, which supports previous work undertaken around FSW outside school (Gray 2008). Teachers we spoke to stated their appreciation at having FSWs in school, as it gave them an avenue to seek support when they had concerns that did not warrant specialist referral.

The reasons that schools undertake to provide family support services underpin what they see as their role. For some schools, family support is seen as a route to ensuring children attend school, and are ready to learn. For other schools, their view is wider. These schools are often situated in deprived areas and aim to transform the community in which their children live. They see themselves as a crucial part of the local community with a part to play in ensuring regeneration and increased opportunities for all.

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