

RAISE project case studies – Kirklees (1)

Seeking and Responding

A project at Eastborough Junior, Infant and Nursery School, Kirklees: it sought accurate, sensitive and relevant information about the pupils' families—and acted upon it

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This paper was contributed in 2004 to the RAISE Project. There is background information about the project at www.insted.co.uk/raise.html.

Context

It has long been of real concern that Pakistani and Kashmiri pupils have consistently achieved at lower levels than their peers. Many causes of underachievement have been suggested. The pressures pupils face include the many and varied expectations placed on them by the school, their peers and the community. Access to the curriculum is dependent on teachers' ability to analyse the language demands on pupils with English as an additional language. The language competency and aspirations of parents are also a significant factor. Further, the ability of the school to meet parents' and pupils' cultural and religious expectations impacts on self-esteem and attainment.

The aim of this study was to seek accurate information about the community of Eastborough Junior, Infant and Nursery School and to disregard any previous assumptions in relation to links between parents' language competence, own level of education, aspirations and pupils' attainment. Key facts about the school include:

- ❑ Eastborough Junior, Infant and Nursery School is a single-form entry school near the centre of Dewsbury, West Yorkshire.
- ❑ Most pupils live near the school in a densely populated area in which there is a high degree of economic deprivation. The level of pupils claiming free school meals varies from 37 to 60% per class.
- ❑ At the time of this project, there were 196 pupils on roll: 125 Pakistani and Kashmiri; 71 White; two Indian; and two Libyan.
- ❑ In total 109 families responded to the questionnaire. There appeared to be no particular ethnic bias in the families that did or did not participate.

The study specifically sought to ascertain and explore:

- ❑ the level of education of the adults within the family

- the language(s) of oracy and literacy used for daily communication between family members and the wider community
- parents' aspirations for their children.

The results were interrogated for possible correlations between these factors and pupils' achievements.

The study involved a questionnaire that all parents of the school were encouraged and supported to complete. It was recognised the number of returns was likely to be low if information gathering relied on a posted questionnaire. However, it was agreed that a questionnaire would provide the most detailed information and so consideration was given as to the best method of introducing the questionnaire. Consideration was also given to the different types of support parents might welcome so that the majority would feel comfortable in providing the school with the information being sought. The format of the questionnaire was therefore agreed through consultations with parents and the LEA. Bilingual support was available to all parents at informal discussion groups.

The story

Following consultation with the headteacher, and in conjunction with the LEA Adviser, the school-based ethnic minority achievement coordinator drafted a questionnaire. In the trial of this first draft, the format of the questionnaire and its purpose were explained to a small number of parents. They completed the questionnaire and then commented on it, expressing their feelings about the questions. Based on this parental feedback, the questionnaire was re-drafted. Some questions were rephrased and others were removed altogether if parents felt that they were intrusive or their purpose was obscure. This procedure was repeated until a questionnaire was achieved that was both sensitive to parents and also addressed the original aims of the project. It was further refined to ensure that the questionnaire format and the method of recording information facilitated analysis that was pertinent to the original requirements.

At a whole-school assembly the headteacher outlined the purpose of the questionnaire and explained how the resulting information would be used. The children were encouraged to share this information with their families and were told that every family would receive a letter and a telephone call about the questionnaire. To make these high priority calls, the bilingual classroom support assistant was released from classroom and other duties.

The school recognised the possibility that some parents or other family members may have difficulty in completing the questionnaire and that support to parents would result in more reliable responses to questions. This guidance took the form of informal meetings between teaching staff and parents, in which bilingual members of staff facilitated communication. The ethnic minority achievement coordinator was a speaker of Punjabi and Urdu. In addition, two bilingual curriculum support workers, who identified themselves as Pahari speakers, participated actively.

There is currently a great deal of debate regarding the status of Pahari and whether it is a discrete language or a dialect of Punjabi. The debate is influenced by the current political climate in the region of Kashmir.

Meetings were arranged giving consideration to previous feedback and comments from parents. In total four meetings were arranged at various times over a two day period. They began with an explanation of national and local underachievement of Pakistani and Kashmiri pupils, compared with average LEA and national attainment levels at Key Stages 1 and 2. The questionnaire was presented as a way forward for the school community. Parents were told that the findings would be used to identify specific issues or potential barriers to learning, which staff and parents could address in partnership. Parents were then invited to complete the questionnaire, with staff available at all times to give clarification and to answer specific queries. Parents found the majority of questions easy to answer. However, questions relating to the identification of languages used were more problematic: some parents lacked the vocabulary to label the language they used; a minority described their language as 'Pakistani'. Parents were enabled to identify their own language with confidence through discussion with bilingual staff, who themselves were able to identify their languages as Pahari and Punjabi, respectively.

When questioned about the languages used between family members and within the community a number of languages were identified beyond those expected by the school. Most minority ethnic children used two languages for daily communication, as well as Arabic to varying degrees as part of religious instruction. All of the White families operated monolingually on a daily basis. Parents welcomed discussions to resolve the issue of language identification. Being able to identify their language positively and having the vocabulary to label it correctly enhanced their self-confidence and sense of personal identity. Subsequently Pahari speaking parents have identified themselves on school forms as speakers of Pahari rather than Punjabi. Parents recognised the political dimensions of language and nationality: some families described themselves as 'Kashmiri'—a group distinct from 'Pakistani'.

When questioned about their aspirations for their children, parents' responses were wide-ranging; many parents had no personal experience of further or higher education and this lack of awareness appeared to impact negatively on their ability to express their aspirations.

All parents stated that they wanted their children to exceed their own achievements. Many expressed a desire for their children to continue education post-16 and many indicated technical college as the most likely institution to be attended. This may have been because there is a technical college in Dewsbury and no university in the immediate vicinity.

A significant finding was the length and level of parents' education, and the country in which they were educated. It was found that some parents in all of the ethnic and linguistic groups had experience of higher education.

However, there were discrepancies between linguistic groups in relation to parental experience of the English education system. There were some Punjabi and Pahari speaking families in which one of the parents had no personal experience of the English education system. It was only in the Pahari group that there were families in which neither parent had personal experience of the English education system. Most parents felt that they lacked knowledge about their children's education and therefore the confidence to approach the school or individual teachers. Parents indicated a strong desire for their children to achieve academic success but were unsure of their role or the actions that they could take to help ensure this.

Analysis of the questionnaire

Raw data was entered into a database to facilitate comparisons and analysis. Responses indicated that, of the families previously recorded as Pakistani, many identified themselves as Kashmiri. Several of these families perceived Kashmir as a state independent of Pakistan and also felt strongly that their ethnic identity should be accurately recorded.

Prior to the questionnaire the school had recorded the heritage language of all Pakistani pupils as either Punjabi or Urdu. Subsequently a number of families have identified themselves as Pahari speakers.

A major finding was that, although a significant number of mothers of Punjabi speaking families had limited education in England or in Pakistan, this was true for a greater proportion of the Pahari speaking mothers. As stated earlier, all the families in which neither parent had direct experience of the English education system were Pahari speaking. However, it was clear from the response to question 8 (regarding pupils' destination after secondary school) that all linguistic groups had high expectations for their children. Although expectations were high, the parents who indicated little or no direct knowledge of higher education were less clear about the variety of options available to their children. These parents also expressed a degree of trepidation when faced with the need or desire to make contact with the school, which went beyond any possible communication difficulties. When these issues were discussed further, it became clear that many of these parents lacked self-confidence and felt their lack of experience and education limited their capability to support their child effectively. Some felt unable to offer their child any support because they felt their command of English was limited.

As a result of these findings the following actions were taken:

1. At an initial meeting, parents were able to discuss the conclusions that the school drew from the questionnaire.
2. The school suggested a programme of action to take place over the following year to address the issues they had identified and invited parents to comment and suggest further actions the school might take.

3. Discussion meetings were timetabled to raise parental awareness of systems to plot pupil progress and what this means for their child.
4. Advice and support on behaviour management was offered, specifically linked to the school's own policy and practice.
5. Literacy and Numeracy workshops were organised to inform parents about current teaching and learning styles used nationally and within the school.
6. Subsequent meetings provided parents with strategies to support their child at home including support through heritage language. Parents were also given advice on how to support their child with homework.

Evaluation

Although the process of devising the questionnaire was time consuming, consultation was necessary to arrive at a document that was sensitive to parental feelings, whilst obtaining the necessary information. This also ensured maximum participation. The level of responses was extremely high when compared with the norm for the return of questionnaires. This was felt to be a result of the support offered to parents—including bilingual support—that was taken up by a significant number of families from all ethnic groups. It enabled them to complete the questionnaire in a non-judgemental environment. The high return and the consistent way in which the parents had interpreted and understood the questions rewarded this expenditure of both time and effort.

Issues arising from the questionnaire informed the school's development plan which placed a greater emphasis on parental-school liaison.

Parental responses to some of the questions provided evidence to challenge some assumptions previously made by the school regarding language, education and cultural expectations. For example, a number of parents had obtained higher qualifications or experienced higher education abroad. As a result these parents were more aware of the higher education routes available to their child and were more aware of the role they could play in supporting their child.

Whilst the questionnaire identified greater linguistic diversity, this appeared to have minimal impact on parental expectations because aspirations were high for children from all groups. A more significant factor was the level of parental understanding of the English education system and how a lack of this knowledge had a negative impact on the level of belief that parents had in their own ability to support the education of their child. Although the school had previously run parental workshops and programmes to support home-school liaison, the questionnaire provided insights that changed the focus of this type of meeting so that they better met parental needs.

Post-16 education and positive high school experience appeared to have the most significant impact on parents' attitudes to school and their confidence

in supporting their child. This appeared to be true for all parents, irrespective of linguistic or racial grouping.

Osted inspected the school in 2003 and considered it a strength of the school that “most parents have very positive views of the school” and “skilled support staff help the school to maintain vital oral communication between parents and class teachers.”

To strengthen links between the school and its community further, the school engaged parents and grandparents in an oral history project: they were asked to visit the school during the school day and to face questions from all year groups. An initial meeting informed them about the project and what would be required. A mark of the project’s success was that there were more than enough participants for every class in the school to have at least one person to interview; many more agreed to be interviewed at home by their children or grandchildren.

Recommendations for similar research projects involving parents

- ❑ Know what you want to investigate, and why and how you will use the information.
- ❑ Be open-minded about the results.
- ❑ Ensure full support of the senior management team, from the headteacher down.
- ❑ Understand fully the considerable time commitment and allocate adequate preparation to the project.
- ❑ Give the questionnaire high profile and status.
- ❑ Allocate appropriate bilingual support such as informed parents, staff ‘loaned’ by another school or LEA service.
- ❑ Use a variety of strategies to reassure parents about the purpose of gathering the information and the use to which it will be put.
- ❑ Establish one-to-one contact with parents to enable discussion of the questions, so as to aid their understanding. This can be before or after school, at lunchtime or at any time convenient for parents—be flexible!
- ❑ Feed the findings and proposed actions resulting from the questionnaire back to parents and staff.
- ❑ Visibly undertake actions as a positive outcome.