

What we tell them is not what they hear: the importance of appropriate and effective communication to sustain parental engagement at transition points.

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This paper examines the way that parents perceive and react to the way schools communicate with them. Particular focus was placed on parents who could be identified as moderately marginalised and despite ready engagement with their children's primary education, were likely to disengage at the transition stage. The research found that parents are often alienated as a result of poor communication – significantly, at the stage of transition from primary to secondary. Specifically, the research revealed tensions resulting from misinterpretation of well-intentioned strategies to communicate in various ways. Parents drew attention to a range of communication barriers that to closer collaboration and engagement with the school, highlighting factors such as: the formal and dictatorial language and tone of newsletter; difficulty in communicating with members of staff; absence of a named person to contact when concerns were experienced; communication that appears to be one-directional; lack of prompt responses; administrators acting as gatekeepers; inconvenient timing of school meeting and parents' evenings; parents felt that the school viewed parents' evenings (and other related activities) as more focused on the needs of the school as opposed to the needs of the parents or their children. Others found them to be intimidating and/or not 'family-friendly'.

Keywords: Home/school communication - barriers and facilitators; Primary/secondary transition; Parental engagement.

The evidence gathered for the research that this paper is based upon shows that although secondary schools may strive to provide comprehensive information and guidance for parents and to offer them opportunities to engage more fully with the school, many parents remain disengaged and disenfranchised. By looking at the school website and reading school newsletters, for example, there would appear to be no shortage of information readily available to parents. Similarly, it would appear that schools provide many opportunities for parents to engage in activities - such as, parents' evenings and school based functions.

Our investigations with parents identified as at risk of disengaging with their child's secondary school education at the point of transition however, highlights that many adopt a very negative attitude to the communication strategies designed by schools to communicate with its parents. By gathering feedback on the personal experiences of some of these parents through interviews, the paper aim to examine and illuminate some significant reasons why some parents' do not seem to 'hear' what the school is actually trying to communicate.

The Department for Communities and Local Government Cabinet Office in collaboration with the then Department for Schools, Schools and Families in the United Kingdom dedicated £10 million in support of an initiative in 2009 intended to help young people from poorer communities to unlock their talents. Fifteen projects from deprived

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neighbourhoods across England shared the funding and these areas were identified on the grounds that low aspiration could be identified as a barrier to their young people achieving their potential. The then Local Government Minister Rosie Winterton introduced the initiative said: "We recognise that young people from poorer communities can be less likely to aim high and can have low self esteem, low aspirations and limited horizons that act as barriers to success. This fund is about taking steps to redress that balance and goes to support those community-led projects that will best foster young people's talents." (<http://www.whitehallpages.net/news/archive/221391> Accessed 19/12/2010). One of the fifteen areas awarded the funding commissioned a team from the University of the West of England, Bristol (UWE) to undertake a formative evaluation exercise to inform and support the initiative in an urban area on the outskirts of a large city in the South West of England which for the sake of anonymity we call 'Checkers'.

Earlier research in the area (Communities and Local Government, 2009) had indicated that many parents of school aged children are either disinterested in education (or hence indifferent about engaging with educational settings)

The school was viewed by parents with fear; a daunting place where they didn't know any other parents or teachers, and in some cases, seeing it as a place where they would only receive negative feedback about their children. (p. 6)

or at worst, positively antagonistic and fail to see any real benefit in working with schools.

Parental disengagement from children's learning and school is underpinned by a perceived disconnect from education. This is characterised by a lack of parent's own self confidence and a social attitude that places very little value on the importance of education. (p 7)

In common with others (e.g. Owen, Thomas & Joyce, 2008; Harris & Goodall 2008; Grant, 2010; Deslandes & Rousseau, 2007; Williams, 2005) the same research draws attention to the fact that whilst many parents seem supportive and happy to engage with education settings during their children's early years and primary experiences,

this tends to dissipate as the child moves into secondary education:

Parents often expressed that once their child had left primary school and moved onto secondary school, there was less of a need for them to be involved in their child's education and in some cases parents felt their involvement ends once their child enters secondary school. Parent's generally reported the only time they would get involved with the school were if they were called into the school because of a problem with a child. (p. 11)

These findings resulted in some degree of speculation relating to negative parental attitudes and limited levels of self confidence that fuelled this fracture. A key element of the first phase of the evaluation that the UWE team was commissioned to undertake, was to establish (from the parent's perspective) reasons why they were disengaging with their children's education experiences as they transitioned from primary to secondary school. It was hoped that this would identify significant issues that could then be drawn to the attention of senior school leaders and action taken to address concerns. It should be stressed that the brief identified parents who were seen to be 'on the margins' of engagement – and not parents who had never shown an interest in education and who could be described as the 'hard to reach' (Crozier & Davies, 2007).

Identification and interviewing of parents

Experience had shown that engaging with reluctant participants can prove challenging and can result in eliciting inaccurate information and or a limited data set. The research team had little experience of the neighbourhood under enquiry and no knowledge of individual families. Neither was there time for the university team members to forge meaningful links with parents and even less opportunity to develop a degree of trust on the part of the parents.

It was therefore decided that professionals from the Connexions service who worked in the area would be approached with a view of recruiting them to identify parents who fell within the target group and following a period of intensive training, undertake the task of securing the cooperation of these parents and subsequently interviewing them.

Twenty four parents were interviewed about their perceptions and reflections on the process of transition for their children moving from the local primary school into Checkers Comprehensive School. Parents interviewed were selected from a list of sixty parents who were known to the Connexions Service in the Checkers area as parents who already engaged to some extent with their child's school but who were not viewed as totally committed to support the school in all its activities. The interviews varied in length but ranged from 60 minutes to 120 depending on the interviewee's desire to continue sharing their experiences. The Deputy Headteacher of Checkers Comprehensive School was also interviewed as were the Headteachers of two of its three feeder primary schools.

Parents were asked to offer reflections about issues relating to their child's preparation for transition and the way that this was managed; the part they as parents had played in this process; their views about the post transition period; their present involvement with their child's education; the receptiveness of the secondary school to their issues and concerns; experience of enablers and barriers to engagement with the secondary school experience and the transition phase.

Issues and lessons emerging from the interviews

Analysis of the transcripts provided a wealth of evidence that offered insight into the differing perspective of transitioning parents compared to that of the school leadership team. Further analysis identified the importance of good, clear communication on the part of the school as particularly important for parents and pupils alike. This bore a particular significance during the preparation for transition phase and during the early stages following the child's admission to the senior school when he/ she can often be confused by unfamiliar surroundings and procedures. The same may apply for parents at this time of transition.

It's going pretty well as the secondary we are sending her is different choice than what we made for brothers and sisters, and already we have seen improved communication with this school, some of this is directed at us but also straight at our daughter, this gives her more

involvement and responsibility for her own education.

The emphasis that these parents place on the importance of good and clear communication is very significant. By treating the pupil (and parents) as a responsible participant and providing clear guidance that requires a responsible action, it would seem that all involved are more likely to be appreciative and responsive.

It would seem that secondary schools often adopt a radically different approach to communication when compared to primary schools and this in itself can cause additional difficulties for pupils and parents alike. Primary schools often see the parent as the focus of communication where information is relayed directly to them (frequently when they arrive at the school to accompany their child home at the end of the school day. This is in sharp contrast to secondary schools, where communication with parents tends to rely on them accessing information on the school website, or the child taking letters home for their parents. All too often these letters do not arrive into the hands of the parents, resulting in an immediate reduction in effective communication.

Communication is completely different. When my child was at primary school, the teachers would see me and let me know what was happening. Now he's in the secondary school, he's given a letter to bring back with him. This doesn't always work. (Parent informer)

Whilst engaging parents in the secondary education phase is widely acknowledged as challenging. Catsambis (1998) claims that

Parents report a serious lack of communication from schools, and the families themselves contact the schools infrequently. It seems that few middle schools have comprehensive programs for parental involvement and few parents volunteer at school (Epstein & Lee, 1995). Some schools, though, foster higher levels of communications with parents than other schools (Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Epstein, 1990 p2).

For some parents, it was evident from their responses that they had valued the relationships they had formed with the primary school their child attended and would very much wish for a similar structure at the secondary phase so that they might continue to be involved in the school's activities and support their child's learning. In practice however, the ethos and structure of secondary education systems are such that this desire is likely to be frustrated. It may be important that the secondary school is sensitive to these opinions and seeks to find some strategy that can address these feelings in a way that may help retain the parent's interest and involvement within a radically different structure and operating ethos.

We are really involved with his education at the moment, taking part in different school activities with him, like school trips, breakfast mornings and doing work in the class before lessons start. We read at home with him and do his times tables, things like that. With my other son, who is at secondary school, we are involved through parent's evenings and helping with homework, where we can. When they go up to the big school, you lose that daily interaction with the school and this impacts on how involved you can be. (Parent informant)

Yes I feel involved with primary education and really do hope that I can be involved when she goes up to secondary school. (Parent informant)

Support was provided by primary school but the shock of being dealt with by enforcement rather than support did not sit well and made her confused and made matters worse. (Parent informant)

The size of the primary school is such that you have a more personal relationship with the teachers and therefore the school. (Parent informant)

Respondents also placed considerable significance on receiving a speedy response by the school when their child is identified as possessing additional needs. In some cases, there is little doubt that such negative parental perceptions can again result from inadequate or inappropriate communication between school and home regarding what provision the school is taking or has taken to address such issues.

Disappointed, xxx primary asked me to sign a referral for a behaviour action plan to be delivered by Checkers secondary school when he went up. But nothing has been done and this has caused difficulties with my son's transition. Still waiting for action plan to be put in place by the school. (Parent informant)

One parent said that she had her faith in the school dented despite a very positive initial impression of the transition phase her child was experiencing resulting from inadequate communication between the school and parent at a very fragile time in their relationship. Such frustration can result in the alienation of the parent at a critical time when it is particularly important that parental confidence in the school is imperative if they are to be successfully encouraged to collaborate more actively with the school and take a sustained interest in their child's education.

First few days of school was ok but then bullying started to happen and we became frustrated with the school as result of no action being taken to sort out the bully's. This made us lose faith in the school and now we are trying to move him out. (Parent informant)

Although it is likely that the school did take action to address this situation, the parents remained unclear about what had been done and what plans were in the process of being implemented. If this parent is to be encouraged to take a fuller part in the life of the school and in supporting her child at secondary school, that process is more likely to be facilitated where she feels that she is working in partnership with the school and party to what is being done on her child's behalf – as well as what expectations are held by the school for her role in that process.

Widlake and McLeod (1982), made the case for parental involvement almost thirty years ago. One of the publication's key findings was that when parents were encouraged to help, children from less privileged backgrounds were not as likely to fail in school and, in fact, did as well as or better than their middle-class peers.

In recent times the Successful Schools Project has broken new ground in exploring the potential for schools, parents and students to work together. It has been successfully implemented in

schools in England and Wales. These schools explored approaches for involving families in their adolescents' learning, and in contributing to the life of the school. In the most positive cases, the project has revealed that parental involvement can bring about:

- 1) a rise in students' self-confidence and self-esteem;
- 2) practical cooperation between parents and teachers;
- 3) improvements in student behaviour and attendance;
- 4) recognition within the schools of the importance of family involvement the inclusion of parents who may have been categorized as hard to reach;
- 5) improved communication between school and home;
- 6) an increase in professional confidence among teachers in working with parents and families. (Street, 1998)

Along with clear and speedy communication, there are other significant priorities for the school to consider if it is to ensure parental collaboration. Parents are more likely to participate productively with the school where they are clear about what it is that they have been promised by the school and what form this is to take. Any ambiguity at this sensitive period in the transitioning process is likely to result in parents adopting a view that the school is at fault and is reneging on what it had previously promised. Once such views are formed, the damage that can accrue in terms of parental readiness to collaborate and work in partnership with the school can be difficult to redress at best - and can become insurmountable at worst:

Fine at first, with one days visit to secondary for son, and one parents evening for us. [...] At parents evening lots of things were said were going to happen but didn't. (Parent informant)

Promises not kept, this damaged our relationship with the secondary school straight away. (Parent informant)

Much has been said above about the significance of positive and clear communication. It is unfortunate therefore when a parent reports that his/her lack of engagement with the school is a direct result of communication difficulties and when others highlight communication difficulties as a prime issue that is accountable for limited engagement. Some parents within this study raise this as a problem that is highlighted when

compared to their previous experiences of the way that the primary school would communicate:

I'm not happy with the organisation of the school. [...] They have sent me very personal information that was for someone else at the school with the same surname; phone calls from them asking to speak to the same person. (Parent informant)

I feel very distant with the school with hardly any communication. (Parent informant)

Nowhere near as closely involved with his education as I was in the little school, due to poor communication. (Parent informant)

Communication should be better, when I call the school to ask to speak to his tutor she is always teaching and there is no means of leaving a message on her answer machine because it just keeps ringing and ringing. (Parent informant)

When we ask the receptionist to leave a message no one ever gets back to us and we spend ages trying to make contact. (Parent informant)

Finding ways to communicate with all parents is a real challenge for the school. Some parents interviewed suggested that they remained unclear about the level of engagement that they had or were experiencing to have with the school. It was evident that there had been some communication but that this had not always registered in any detail with some parents:

Don't know. I think they take them to the school so they know where it is. (Parent informant)

Don't know, I think they did but not sure. (Parent informant)

I think, or I hope they will be doing some work on this, but not too sure as to what or when. I will check this with the school. (Parent informant)

A visit to the school - it could have been two visits, but I am not sure. (Parent informant)

Not sure. As far as I know no work has been done to prepare him. (Parent informant)

No, nothing just a couple of letters here and there. (Parent informant)

It would be understandable – but complacent for the school to suggest that for these parents, little more could be done. Elsewhere in their interviews, it was evident that parents cared passionately about their children and wanted the best for them. It is more the case perhaps that additional or different ways of communicating need to be attempted in order that all parents are more actively engaged in the transition process and their affiliation with the school and their child's education sustained long after.

One parent recalled the painful period early in her daughters' secondary career when she experienced some heavy bullying by a group of girls at the school. Her experience suggested that whilst the school had dealt directly with the children concerned, they had left the parents totally uninformed and uninvolved. She subsequently came to feel alienated towards the school -as a result of the lack of communication.

Teachers should involve us where bullying is involved. They deal with the child but don't involve the parents. I got her [the teacher] email address to communicate with her after this but I don't know if other parents could discuss things with her in the same way. (Parent informant)

Communication could be further improved were parents made to feel respected and valued. The response of some at interview suggests that this is not always how they perceive the way the school perceives them. Even where this is a misperception on the parents' part, it is significant and needs addressing if they are to be kept on side.

The school don't even know who I am, every parents evening we have someone new who I've never met and we just seem to be talking about the same thing every meeting. (Parent informant)

No one takes any notice of what we say. (Parent informant)

It is self-evident that this issue of communication is central and despite considerable work already undertaken by the school to facilitate better communication strategies, these responses make it evident that there is much that remains to be done. In practice, much of this is likely to be low cost and readily achievable since steps can

readily be taken to ensure for example, that parents phoning the school have their calls answered promptly and messages responded to rapidly when these are left for a member of staff who is engaged elsewhere when the parent calls. Informants told the research team that this was far from the norm.

Communication between teachers and parents takes a range of forms. All parents should receive a written report at least once a year concerning their child's achievements, progress, areas for improvement, behaviour and attendance. However, research suggests that some parents find written reports too general and difficult to understand. Face-to-face meetings with teachers are facilitated by parents' evenings, which should be provided by schools at least once per year. These meetings provide an opportunity for parents to discuss their child with teachers, and also offer the potential for the school to actively involve parents in supporting their child's school targets and learning.

There can be difficulties where teachers and parents have different expectations for the meeting resulting in frustration and mismatched expectations. Some schools are developing new forums and modes of communication to attempt to ensure improved parental involvement, for example, through academic review days, class/tutor group meetings, newsletters and the use of information technology to link home and school.

Despite a language of parent 'partnership', teachers' access to school information and professional expertise may give them more authority in such meetings.

Some parents were naturally anxious about communicating with the school due perhaps to their own earlier experiences of schools as a student. Others expressed a fear that their child might suffer if they raise a concern with the school:

I find it a little hard to complain to the school, just in case they take it out on my son. (Parent informant)

Some parents find that their own academic limitations form a real barrier when it comes to supporting their child's education and feel embarrassed as a result. It is also a fact that the world of secondary education is a rapidly changing one and practice (indeed, terminologies) that were common a generation previously are unrecognised

today. The changing practices of teaching and learning as well as the introduction of new curriculum areas and examination programmes (and nomenclature generally) all make it difficult for many parents to really engage with their children's secondary education. It may be possible for the school to offer facilities that can support adults alongside their children in addressing this:

Not sure of what they are learning and I find it harder to help him with his homework which makes me feel bad and shy away from trying to help him because it makes me feel stupid not being able to understand the work - So I tell him to look it up on the Internet. (Parent informant)

Not very involved at all, actually very distant. I don't understand the work and the lesson names have all changed. When we went to school cooking was called home economics not food sciences. (Parent informant)

So long as his education is going ok I don't really know why or how we could be more involved or what impact this would have on him receiving education. (Parent informant)

Yes. Help parents understand the work the kids need to do so that we can have the confidence to help. We try and help with homework and haven't a clue what it's all about. (Parent informant)

Provide a parent and student homework group where support is available to us both. (Parent informant)

When discussing what the school could/should do to encourage and support parents in engaging more fully during and after transition, some parents felt that the school needed to take this more seriously and begin to explore ways of making parental engagement easier and more rewarding. Unfortunately, whilst signalling a need for this, parents were not always clear as to how the school should set about achieving it.

Yes they could do a lot more. (Parent informant)

I think they could yes, don't know how though, haven't got a clue. (Parent informant)

Parents also made the point that the school needs to be both more inviting (and in the case of

one parent, at the same time more formal) in its approaches to parents to become involved in various aspects of the wider school life. For some, anxiety resulting from a lack of understanding as to how the school felt about their involvement resulted in a reluctance to be more actively engaged:

To provide more formal request and or opportunities to become involved. (Parent informant)

We don't know how the land lies with us just going into school at secondary. (Parent informant)

Several parents indicated their regret at losing opportunities to meet informally and to discuss their children's experiences and concerns about education. They felt that whilst their children were at primary school, they had been able to meet informally at the end of the school day. One suggested that she would value the school facilitating regular informal evenings for parents at the school where they could meet over a coffee.

At primary, parents chat a lot and it's surprising what you pick up. We don't do that at secondary. (Parent informant)

Some however, expressed a wish that the school adopt a more energetic approach by seeking to find ways of involving parents in the wider context of the school life and being as enthusiastic in supporting parents in this as they tend to be when summoning parents about concerns they are experiencing with their children.

To be as keen to talk and involve us with general education as they are when things go wrong. (Parent informant)

The importance of ensuring that the school has in place opportunities and facilities to engage parents at times that are convenient to them was again raised in discussion around the way that school practice could be refined to support parental involvement after transition. Finding effective ways of surmounting the potential barrier represented by the times that parents are working and hence, unable to partake in school-based activities was seen as especially important. Others who were also the mothers of very young children showed a desire to be more closely involved in their older children's secondary education but

hindered by the constraints inherent when rearing the younger children, pleaded for a more 'family friendly' approach being adopted to activities such as Parents' Evenings. Sadly, they did not expand on this and a further enquiry into parental views about what schools could/ should do to improve occasions such as 'Parent Evenings' would be worth pursuing.

Tell us to come in to school more, if it needed it, be open on the weekends so that we have more time and that. (Parent informant)

Yes they could be a lot more family friendly when it comes to things like open evenings. At the moment we are not allowed to bring our young children or toddlers with us, so if I can't find a baby sitter I can't go. (Parent informant)

It is perhaps not surprising that during the transition phase, some parents reflected on the benefits that they had accrued from good primary school practice and would welcome something similar being adopted by the secondary school.

I used to help him in class with his reading and that, and helping out in class with the whole class. (Parent informant)

Others wondered whether there might be opportunities to open some of the school's activities so that parents can be involved alongside or in parallel to their children. Given what is said above about the rapidly changing nature of secondary education, this could go some way to helping some parents become familiar with what is otherwise alien to them – but the fact that such engagement brings with it additional complexities should not be ignored.

Activities for parents and children at the school. I enjoy art, for example and it would be good to join in some art lessons that xxx is taking – where we can work together. It would also be good to have more opportunities to go into the school and watch the children performing – dance, for example. (Parent informant)

Yet again, parents were keen to emphasise the importance of efficient and effective two-way communication, instigated and facilitated by the

school. This was seen as especially important and was raised by several in one form or another.

To be more approachable, improve their communication direct to parents and not relying on students to pass on letters and information. (Parent informant)

Yes. Listen to our suggestions and act on them when they can. (Parent informant)

Communicate in a way we [parents] can understand what they are telling us. (Parent informant)

Other parents tended to be a little more specific and raised issues of communication within a specific context, particularly that of school homework policy, to ensure consistency that could help parents play a more proactive role in supporting their children's work.

School could be more organized with homework policy so that parents can support child in this. (Parent informant)

They could be a lot more consistent and organised when it comes to homework, we enjoy helping her with homework when she gets it. It is hard to become more involved if we have no homework to work with. (Parent informant)

Home work clubs for parents and kids to go together. (Parent informant)

Attention was also drawn to the fact that the school could adopt approaches that would support parents in gaining greater access to current teaching and learning methods as well as the curriculum and other facets of school practices that had changed significantly since they were pupils and that would need explaining if they are to support their children more actively. It is possible that anxiety generated by unfamiliarity (that may be perceived by parents as 'ignorance') is itself a major barrier that prevents greater interaction with schools and schooling.

Don't understand the work they do or the workings out. Very different from when I went to school. (Parent informant)

Offer support to parents so that we know how the kids are learning and what it is they are learning so that we can help with homework and stuff. (Parent informant)

Simplify the curriculum. (Parent informant)

I would help her if I knew a bit more about their work, so now I just tell her to look on internet for the answer, if she can't find it then her work doesn't get done and then she gets in trouble and we end up going round in circles. (Parent informant)

The form of communication adopted by the school is also seen as important. It is possible that the format of the present school news letters are not immediately appealing to many parents and some serious consideration as to how these might be modified could be of assistance. Engaging parents in this process might also prove beneficial to all concerned. One parent drew attention to the potential for using modern communication tools to ease and increase communication between school and parents. Particular mention was made of the way that the school's website could be enhanced to facilitate this. Mention was also made to the fact that some schools communicate by parents by texting them. They cited this as a useful tool used by schools elsewhere in Bristol during the snow of last winter when many schools had to close.

Unfortunately, there were also parents who were reluctant to become involved more actively with the school, seeing the school as the appropriate instigator of fuller participation of parents. Sadly, it is unlikely that much headway can be made with parents who adopt this negative approach

No not really. They have got my number so they call me when they want to speak to me. (Parent informant)

I don't know, the school's crap and I can't be bothered with them. The sooner he is out of there the better. (Parent informant)

The school aims to provide parents with a report on their child's progress in a form that is more succinct than has been the practice to-date and that this will support parents in engaging with the information it provides more readily. Where parents are no longer living together, the father has too often not been sent information about a child directly from the school since this tends to go directly to the mother. It is anticipated that this practice will be revised to ensure that both parents are kept informed of their child's progress. The tone of the letters sent to parents prior to

Parents' Evenings is also being refined, so that they increasingly state that "this meeting is an opportunity for you to fulfill your obligation to find out about your child's progress as per Contract..." , as opposed to "We invite you to attend..." There is a clear expectation that as a result of this approach they are expected to attend.

However, this issue of communication assumes a significance such that it is suggested that a close and comprehensive audit of how the various aspects of the school's life is undertaken with particular attention paid to ways that parents can access related information. Equally important is the need to ensure that all communication is such that parents have a real opportunity to be a part of it – in which they see their views listened to and taken into serious consideration by the school. It is in such a context that parental confidence and support in and for the school is likely to flourish.

Better communication. (Parent informant)

More consistent approaches to sharing information and other communications and suggestions I make to help her and the school. (Parent informant)

You need to sort these schools out; they don't listen or care as long as we send the kid

in that's all their worried about, not getting in trouble with the education board and Ofsted. (Parent informant)

The school is taking steps to address many of the concerns raised by parents within this research. The school has, for example, recently appointed a Parent Support Worker' who's brief is to work outwards from the school. The job specification for this person was still being finalised at the time of our interviews but it is likely to reflect the role as perceived by the Teacher Development Agency (TDA). This initiative will probably qualify for financial support provided by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) for school-based parent support advisers (PSAs), as outlined in the Children's Plan. http://www.tda.gov.uk/remodelling/extendedschools/whatarees/parentingsupport/psa_project.aspx (Accessed 10/11/ 2010)

The school has also been made aware of a range of other issues, such as, time constraints, work commitments and childcare duties, which are

often cited by parents as barriers to engaging with their children's school experiences. This is particularly the case with working parents and with lone parents (Owen, Thomas, & Joyce, 2008). There may also be difficulties associated with securing what could be regarded as appropriate language to communicate with parents. This is often an additional barrier for

parents for whom English is not their first language (Harris & Goodall, 2008), but parents may also be alienated by the sophisticated language and professional jargon used by academics and professionals in newsletters, reports and other documentation that is sent home.

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