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Migrant Parental Engagement in Schools: Review of the Literature

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Abstract: *This paper presents research evidence on parental engagement in schools, particularly as related to families at risk of social exclusion, including migrant families of lower socio-economic status. It was developed as an information resource for participants in the 'city working groups' of the 'Action for Inclusion in Europe' project, funded by the Open Society, specifically city personnel working on strategies to engage migrant parents for better outcomes. The review considers what the research evidence suggests about the potential of parental engagement as well as the challenges faced by actors involved in implementing schemes of home-school cooperation. The research literature on this topic is vast, and the review considers a selection of the peer-reviewed international academic journals, books and relevant 'grey' sources on the issue. It focuses (mainly) on research published since 2000-2015 within Europe, with some reference to the extensive North American literature on the subject. It concludes with some examples of promising practice.*

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1. Introduction

Home-school cooperation is important in addressing the challenges in securing equal achievement for all children in schools across Europe, since families are recognized as having great influence on student attendance and engagement (Epstein and Sheldon 2002). Evidence suggests across the board that some children, particularly from lower socio-economic-status immigrant groups however do not achieve as well as children from majority populations (Alba and Holdaway 2013). These children often come from homes where a language other than the dominant language used in schools is spoken. Some immigrant parents are also restricted in their ability to help through having lower levels of education than those of parents of ethnic-majority students (ibid.) This said, many migrant parents arrive in European countries with high expectations of the education system and high aspirations for their children, with education playing an important role in familial migration trajectories, 'rooting' families in particular places (Ryan and Sales, 2011; Trevena et al. 2013). For a variety of reasons explored in this paper, such parents often feel unable in practice to support their children in their learning and educational and career choices (D'Angelo and Ryan, 2011).

In understanding the context for the importance of strategies to support parental engagement for migrant families, a number of observations need to be made:

- **Many migrant young people experience lower attainment:**

Disadvantages faced by some groups of vulnerable young people have well-known consequences when they leave education, both in terms of higher rates of early school leaving and lower acquisition of qualifications. A range of data sources (e.g. PISA, Eurostat, PIRLS) confirm that **immigrant children across all EU countries perform worse than those born in the receiving country and are overrepresented in figures on early school leaving** (e.g. see Borgna and Contini 2014). Of course this varies according to individual migrant characteristics, with some migrant nationalities as well as individuals performing better. In general however, migrants from less developed non-European countries have lower educational attainment, including young people from Turkish ancestry in countries including Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, of Moroccan ancestry in Belgium and the Netherlands; from Maghrebin ancestry in France, Pakistani ancestry in Denmark, Norway, and Britain; and of Caribbean ancestry in Britain (Heath, Rothon and Kilpi 2008). Other intra-European migrants often perform less well, but better than the former group, while some equal or exceed the performance of those born in the country including second generation Indians in UK and Norway (ibid).

Migrant young people who have **lower attainment and leave school early** are more likely to **experience poorer longer term integration outcomes and fewer opportunities for post-compulsory education or employment**. There is widespread evidence in most European countries of high rates of unemployment and concentration of some immigrant groups in less favourable jobs (see Eurostat 2016). Overcoming these difficulties is particularly pressing in urban areas and particularly for large European cities, where some immigrant-origin children form the majority of students (e.g. see Crul and Doomernik (2003) on Rotterdam and Amsterdam, as well as other cities such as Birmingham, Brussels and Vienna.

- **Engaging migrant parents is a policy priority:**

For many decades, the development of productive school-family-community connections has been the target of policy initiatives in Western education systems (Epstein and Sheldon 2002 on the US). Particularly with increasing accountability on schools, there has been increased attention to schools' ability to deliver

quality schooling to *all* their student body and at a European level, the importance of involving parents and involving migrant communities in schools is well recognised. The Commission's 2008 green paper *Migration and Mobility: Challenges and Opportunities for EU education systems* (European Commission 2008, 423) called for better partnerships between parents and schools as a policy response to the challenge of educational underachievement. It has also been important in attempts to tackle early school leaving, where the drop-out rates among migrant groups is much higher than among majority-born students (European Commission thematic working group 2013, see also Nouwen, Clycq and Ulicna 2015). The emphasis on parental engagement is found within European national governments' policy priorities too. Using England as an example, the Children's Plan outlined a strategy for tackling low aspirations in early and mainstream education over the next 10 years (DCSF 2007) in which the idea that parents are involved in education for the well-being and academic success of their children has been reinforced.

- **Other vulnerable families face similar challenges**

Difficulties in engaging with schools are not only problems facing immigrant families; **other subgroups are also at risk**, particularly families with lower socio-economic standing. In England for example, there is a significant gap in attainment between children in different **social classes,** with the disparity between white working class pupils and more privileged white pupils higher than any other group (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). This stems from **middle-class parents' abilities to intervene in their children's education and to 'retain their advantage'** (Alba and Holdaway 2013). Within this paper, evidence for parental engagement in addressing these broader disparities is considered, with cognizance of the differences in circumstances and needs between different parental groups.

- **National contexts and school systems across Europe:**

Finally, while this paper considers broader evidence on parental engagement across Europe, it is well recognised that there are a range of many more individual factors (e.g. human capital, language skills) and different school factors (e.g. composition of the student body) and educational systems that have implications for migrants' attainment (Dronkers and van der Velden 2012). These include the **school composition or the extent to which sorting and tracking occurs**, since school systems vary between highly stratified, moderately stratified or comprehensive. Countries such as Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland use selective systems, which sort students at the lower secondary stage into academic and vocational schooling, whereas other countries including Scandinavian countries and the UK and France use more comprehensive systems, with delayed selection until at least upper secondary school (Heath, Rothon and Kilpi 2008). These have significant effects; for example, Dronkers and de Heus (2010) show that migrants in a comprehensive educational system have higher performance levels on average than migrants in a highly stratified system.

Dronkers and Van der Velden (2012) demonstrate that there are no particular educational systems that are uniformly 'good' or 'bad' but nevertheless, they will lead to different consequences for different migrant groups. In particular, ability -grouping and tracking increases educational inequalities for all students. However, these practices might be assumed to be more detrimental to migrants' children, since **migrants' strategic knowledge about the importance of these early choices for future opportunities is less developed** than other parents (ibid.)

2. What is meant by parental engagement and what are its effects?

Having considered some background, contextual factors, the review now turns to consider parental engagement, first delineating what parental engagement is and demonstrating what role it has in supporting attainment.

1. There are a range of understandings of parental engagement

Jeynes (2003:204) notes 'parental involvement […] can be a vague term that can mean countless different things to different people'. Harriss and Goodall's study indeed exposed different understanding ranging from parents' views as offering support to students, to teachers' views of it as 'supporting the school and improving behaviour' and pupils of it as 'moral support' (2008:282). In academic research during recent years, there have been attempts to define it more thoroughly and identify which aspects of parental involvement have the greatest benefit on children. Recognising that it is an umbrella term representing a broader cluster of practices, a helpful definition refers to: **'parents' work with schools and with their children to benefit the children's educational outcomes and future success'** (Hill et al. 2004: 1491). Parental engagement encompasses a range of philosophies and practices that enable the active engagement of parents to support their children's learning. These might include a role for parents in engaging in learning in-school and at home, including:

- taking part in parent-teacher consultations, functions and school activities;
- helping pupils with homework and engaging pupils with other activities (e.g. reading, extra-curricular activities);
- having expectations of their children, taking broader interest in and communicating with their children about their learning and performance at school, using a supportive parenting style;
- offering assistance in strategizing about their academic trajectory (e.g. helping with the selection of subject choices and influencing students' beliefs about the value of school).

In summary, the literature tells us that parental engagement covers a **range of practices** from broader **parenting practices** at home, **communicating** with their children about school, communicating with school, **volunteering** in school, **assisting with learning** at home, **enabling extra-curricular activities**, being involved in **decision-making** (e.g. in parent teacher associations or on school governing boards) and **collaborating with the community** (Epstein 2001). It refers to both involvement in school (e.g. attending meetings and events, talking with teachers, involvement in governance) as well as parents' home-based involvement e.g. assisting with homework, or even just providing a quiet place for children to complete homework (Pomerantz and Moorman 2007).

2. Parental engagement plays a very significant role in student achievement

Although parental engagement covers a range of activities, and it is only one factor among other variables influencing student attainment, research demonstrates unequivocally the **powerful role it has on student achievement** (see Harriss and Goodall 2008). A wealth of scholarly research on parental engagement confirms the vital and positive role it plays in children's achievement **across all social classes and all ethnic groups** (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). The creation of strong family-school connections has been linked to improved attainment, better completion of homework, more engagement, less disruptive behaviours and more positive behaviour e.g. higher level of social skills, less truancy, absenteeism and lower drop-out rates. Meta-analyses - which combine the findings from a number of studies to prove effectiveness –

demonstrate its effect; for example, Jeynes' (2003) meta-analysis of 21 studies exploring the impact of parental involvement on the academic achievement of minority children shows that parental involvement has a positive effect on all of the academic variables considered (see also Jeynes 2005, 2007). Strong links between home and school are also significant in increasing mutual understanding, avoiding the risk of identity problems for students and overcoming limited motivation (Lea 2012). Moreover, Jeynes (2003) meta-analysis concludes that, 'parental involvement has a significant positive impact on children across race and across academic outcomes' and holds a strong potential to decrease the achievement gap between white and minority students (Jeynes 2005, in United States). An OECD study based on reviews of European PISA data also supports the conclusion that high-quality parental involvement may help reduce performance differences across socio-economic groups (Borgonovi and Montt 2012).

3. <u>The most effective interventions engage parents to be proactively involved in learning rather than just being present at school</u>

Although parental engagement covers a range of activities, recent research has aimed to explore which interventions are the most effective (Jeynes 2005). Evidence points to the fact that parental engagement must involve parents' proactive assistance in children's *learning*, not comprise simply (reactive) involvement, such as attending meetings[1] (Harris and Goodall 2008). In other words, the quality and nature of how parents support learning is the most important factor; '**simply being in the school has little effect on individual attainment** unless there are direct and explicit connections to learning' (ibid.: 3, Ho Sui-Chu and Williams 1996). Related, it is widely acknowledged that parental engagement in **home-based learning** is more effective than just involvement in school activities. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) explain the most important influence is **good parenting practices which 'spontaneously' promote pro-learning attitudes, values and aspirations**. Indeed, in exploring the influence of home-based interventions, Hoge, Smit and Crist (1997) suggest that *parental expectations* are the most important, although Zellman and Waterman (1998) maintain that high expectations work well only if maintained with a positive parenting style - otherwise pressure on the child and control of their actions can negatively affect performance (in Jeynes 2003, Pomerantz and Moorman 2007). Indeed, it is worth quoting Jeynes (2005: 262) at length when he observes how parents' creation of positive expectations and fostering supportive atmospheres for learning are significant:

> Most notably parental *expectations* and *style* each demonstrated a strong relationship with scholastic outcomes. Thus, it was not particular actions such as attending school functions, establishing household rules, and checking student homework that yielded the statistically significant effect sizes. Rather, variables that reflected a general atmosphere of involvement produced the strongest results. Parental expectations and style may create an educationally oriented ambience, which establishes an understanding of a certain level of support and standards in the child's mind.

Indeed, this conclusion is supported by the OECD PISA review, in which some forms of parental engagement, such as **reading to young children, engaging in discussions that promote critical thinking and setting a good example** are particularly beneficial (Borgonovi and Montt 2012). This underlines the view from research that parental involvement per se is not necessarily always effective, but 'consideration of the how, whom, and why of parents' involvement in children's academic lives is critical to maximising its benefits' (Pomerantz and Moorman 2007). This consideration demonstrates **the importance of quality**

[1] Hence the use of the term 'parental engagement' rather than 'involvement', reflecting this shift in understanding in the nature of home-school relations.

rather than quantity, of involvement that supports their child's autonomy rather than controlling involvement. It also recommends the use of feedback focused on the process (e.g. effort and approach) rather than focused on the person (e.g. that praises or criticises the individual). Good parental engagement involves warm and authoritative parenting styles rather than authoritarian styles, governed by positive beliefs in the children's achievement (Pomerantz and Moorman 2007).

4. **Practice is shifting away from the onus being on parents but to school-parent and broader community partnerships**

In academic studies as well as in practice, recent years have seen a broadening more away from notions of parental engagement that requires actions mainly on the part of parents, but rather to it as an endeavour that puts **schools and parents in partnership**, with both groups having power in their respective domains of home and school. In particular, studies have shown it is the **combination** of both parental and teacher support that is critical for student engagement and avoidance of trouble at school (Garcia Reid et al 2015). Thus rather than seeing teachers working 'for' or 'on behalf of' parents, there is more attention to 'maximising the synergistic influences of home and school' (Christenson and Reschley 2010: xiii). In this line of reasoning, teachers have important roles in **constructing environments that enable dialogue and which empower parents to participate.** Parental engagement is therefore as much a mutual process that also requires for teachers to develop approaches that:

- improve dialogue between home and schools to increase mutual understanding (e.g. through providing information);
- help engage parents with their children's education and empower them to do so; if necessary by equipping them with skills (e.g. improving literacy, numeracy or IT skills);
- involve collaboration with wider members of wider communities to encourage and empower parents to seek more active engagement with schools and promote their 'voice'.

Furthermore, the importance of **broader community involvement**, in addition to parental involvement, is increasingly being recognised in research and practice as significant. The research evidence points to the critical role of communities, community institutions including weekend/community schools (see Clycq, Piqueray and Timmerman 2015) and peers and significant actors outside the formal educational sphere in assisting immigrant parents and helping to improve their children's educational performance (Alba and Holdaway 2013: 261, Zhou and Li 2003). In recent years, definitions of parental involvement have broadened, particularly in urban settings to include also siblings, relatives, or even neighbours who provide child care (Christenson and Sheridan 2001). Similarly, members of an ethnic or broader community can both aid children's learning and support parents' participation and advocacy. They can **give assistance directly** by helping students with studies and offer support in interpersonal issues or give **indirect assistance by influencing attitudes** (especially through **role modelling**).

Research by Epstein and Sheldon (2002) shows that practices that create partnerships between family, school and community, 'predict an increase in daily attendance, a decrease in chronic absenteeism, or both' (2002: 308). They can also influence systemic school change and contribute to school reform, especially by strengthening the groundwork for reform, promoting the legitimacy of stakeholder groups and raising the visibility of issues (Hirota et al 2000). Within this paper, we refer therefore to parental engagement practices as part of a **broader philosophy aimed at creating continuities and a shared agenda between home, community and school around the academic, social and emotional development of young people.**

3. Factors to consider in parental engagement with schools

Research evidence is unequivocal about the positive effects of parental engagement; however, there are important caveats to be noted, especially since they are of special relevance to the *Action in Inclusion in Europe* initiative. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) point out the extent and form of parental engagement is influenced by a variety of factors, such as social class, maternal levels of education, socio-economic status, maternal psycho-health and single-parent status, as well as (to a lesser degree) ethnicity. Of particular importance here is **social class**, where the higher the social class of the family, the more likely there is to be positive parental involvement (Sui-Chu and Williams 1996). As Harriss and Goodall summarise, 'Study after study has shown that **socio-economic status (SES) mediates both parental engagement and pupil achievement**' (2008: 279).

1. Parent and family factors that influence parental engagement

The reason for the discrepancy between higher and lower class families' engagement has been explored extensively and there are a range of viewpoints. On one hand, schools define some families as '**hard to reach'** and these families may often include some working class and immigrant families. Campbell (2011) defines hard to reach groups as parents who have **low levels of engagement**, do **not attend meetings at school or respond** to school communications and exhibit **high levels of inertia** in overcoming perceived barriers to engagement. Indeed, a substantial body of research and debate around schools' connections with families from culturally diverse and working class backgrounds shows a range of *parent and family factors* that influence engagement. These include parents' life contexts (gender, ethnicity, age, class, own experiences and beliefs) and practical barriers linked to material deprivation (Hornby and Lafaele 2011). For example, parents may have:

- **Limited educational experiences** in their home country and poorer understanding of the ways that schools work. Parents often have to learn how to **'decode the system'** (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 13) without access to social networks. Limited family knowledge can be compounded by **residential segregation**, where some students at risk of exclusion are concentrated in weaker schools, which are often located in poorer neighbourhoods or inner-city suburbs (Lucey and Reay 2002);
- **Lesser knowledge of which schools to choose** (Byrne and de Tona) and understanding of the longer-term **consequences of decisions** about schools and curriculum-choice. Families who possess more of the vocabulary of teachers are positioned in the contexts of supportive cultural networks have more **'insider knowledge'** and are much better placed to strategize with regards to their child's education (Alba and Holdaway 2013, Harriss and Goodall 2008). In particular, the work of Reay (1998) demonstrates how middle-class parents in the UK secure better advantages for their children in the contemporary educational market-place. This is likely to be particularly important in systems where there is early selection of students to different ability tracks (Heckmann/NESSE 2008);
- **Limited fluency** in the dominant language and **low levels of literacy and numeracy,** affecting parents' ability to read information sent home, help their children and affecting their confidence in helping their children;
- **Differing perceptions** of invitations for involvement and **beliefs** about involvement than teachers. For example, they may not see the point of engagement if they hold beliefs of children's intelligence and ability as fixed and innate (Hornby and Lafaele 2011). There may also be tensions raised by disagreement about approaches, for example the use of physical punishment;

- Barriers around **costs and lack of time,** particularly as parents might work in low-waged sectors that involve **long and anti-social working hours**. Schools may not have enough scope to be able to fit around families' busy working and personal lives (Alba and Holdaway 2013). **Gender** values may also be significant in this regard; for example Crozier and Davies (2007) identify that among South Asian families, the role of the father as public representative of the family often mean that families do not go to parents' consultations, since work commitments interfere with their ability to attend. These issues might be compounded by **practical difficulties** in accessing transport and having childcare for younger siblings (Hornby and Lafaele 2011);
- **Psychological barriers** to engagement, arising from poor or unpleasant memories of schools (Walker and Hoover-Dempsey 2008);
- **Broader problems** facing families, including experiences of **socio-economic and physical and mental health difficulties** (ibid., Brind et al 2008) For example, socio-economic and health factors were also noted among white working class families in the UK, where some children experienced chaotic home lifestyles, inconsistent parenting and erratic discipline, substandard housing, complex family issues or parents with mental health or addiction issues (Open Society Foundations 2014). There may be difficulties providing requisite space for homework, or families may have financial barriers to providing educational resources. Sometimes there are conflicts between families and schools when parents are dissatisfied with school procedures, with staff intimidated in their dealings with some parents (see Campbell 2011).

2. <u>Broader social factors are also influential</u>

- In understanding the gap between rhetoric and reality in parental engagement, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) also urge for a consideration of broader societal, demographic, political economic and historical factors. These include:
- **The changing demographic of modern parenting** which includes working parents and lone parents, creating difficulties for many parents in having time to attend workshops in school hours (Campbell 2011, Hornby and Lafaele 2011). Families are also operating in contexts of higher stress and greater financial pressure with less extended family and community support, with greater individualism and competition (ibid.)
- The particular organisation of school as **a historically structured institution** characterised by formality, inflexibility and timetabling that are counterproductive to parent-school relationships (ibid.)
- Historically **narrow definitions of parental involvement**, with a focus for instance on fundraising and supporting the school (ibid.)

3. <u>There may be differences in the agendas, attitudes and languages of teachers and parents</u>

Research highlights a risk of focusing on issues arising from family backgrounds alone, which perpetuates a deficit model of immigrants. Rather, by considering some of the implicit cultural assumptions behind parental engagement, it shows that challenges equally arise from the potentially different agendas, attitudes and language used in the *interactions* between *parents and teachers,* which academics suggest make the school system – rather than parents - 'hard to reach' (see De Carvalho 2001). **While the language of parental engagement is often about partnership and collaboration, some argue that this can just obscure the inequalities embedded within home-school cooperation, which in practice is more**

adversarial (Reay 1998, Hornby and Lafaele 2011). In particular, some academics point to the way that parental engagement is structured in a way that favours middle-class families, who possess the same cultural capital[2] that is valued by schools and possessed by teachers (Reay 1998). Some argue that there are hierarchies of involvement within parental engagement practices, whereby certain practices (e.g. volunteering) and on-site presence within the school - those practices that are more common among middle-class families - are seen as the most desirable.

Similar problems of distance between home and school may also apply for some minority families (Hornby and Lafaele 2011). Crozier and Davies (2007) for example demonstrate in their research in the North of England that parental involvement can often be aimed at parents as a homogeneous, deracialised body, using a 'one-size fits all' approach (Crozier 2001). Here they find such expectations from teachers may inadvertently contribute to *widening*, rather than closing the gap between children achieving well and others who are faring less well. Alba and Holdaway (2013:20) make similar observations: 'Where the balance shifts in the direction of greater responsibility for families and communities, we can expect the disadvantages of immigrant-origin children to loom larger'. **Problems may arise then when schools fail to recognize the ethnic and social diversity amongst parents** (Crozier and Davies 2007). These parent-teacher factors include:

- **Teachers' understanding of some parents as 'hard to reach'**, where reticence is understood as arising from 'cultural difference' by some teachers, head teachers and educational professionals. Crozier and Davies in England (2007) explore how the limited involvement of some South Asian parents in their children's education was viewed as a parent issue, Teachers' views meant **'the parents were […] set apart and 'othered' as inadequate, deficient or at best just not able to cope.'** (ibid. 2007: 309). This picture is also found in Gillborn and Youdell's work in the UK (2000) who show that African-Caribbean parents were marginalised or ignored when raising concerns about their children's experiences at school. Theodoro's research (2008) in a Cypriot public elementary school also shows how narrow notions of parental involvement were reinforced by perceptions of the immigrant parents as disinterested, and therefore furthering immigrant families' social marginalisation.

  The explanation of 'cultural difference' has been in some ways given credence by research which stresses differences between parents who are more orientated to the wider group and community compared to teachers who hold more individualistic views (independence and self-reliance). However this approach has been criticised because of its deterministic views of culture which denies the agency of participants (Elbers and de Haan 2014). Elbers and de Haan, based on research in the Netherlands, show that participation is **more often hampered by poor language competence that make it difficult for families to make their opinions clear and promote the interests of their child.**

- Understandings of the **'appropriate role'** of parents and teachers. Working class parents' role construction and sense of personal efficacy informed by their own school experiences, may lead them to believe they must not intervene in the work of teachers and should adopt a position of **more deference to the teachers as qualified 'experts' with superior knowledge** (Crozier 1999, Harriss and Goodall 2008). There may be different beliefs about the nature of the home-school

[2] Cultural capital refers to advantages derived from cultural knowledge, taste and style (e.g. this might refer to the extent to which parents have books in the house, take their children to museums etc.) It was originally developed as a concept by the social theorist Pierre Bourdieu to help demonstrate how children's educational success reflected parents' level of education (Prieur and Savage 2013).

relationship; for working class families, Reay (1998) and Crozier (1999) demonstrate that working class parents see their relationship to school as more separate from their everyday worlds where the parent-teacher role is demarcated into a stricter division of labour around their children's education, whereas middle-class families feel more interconnected (Ibid.) Crozier and Davies (2007) explain how Bangladeshi parents in England for example see their role principally as providing a supportive home and do not see a need for school visits.

Such a view can then be confirmed by teachers holding the balance of power, whether that is where school teachers inhabit an 'expert' role or rather use a 'transplant' model, where teachers use their skills to educate parents to become educators. On the other hand, evidence on this latter model suggests it can also be helpful (for example running classes on approaches to key subjects for migrant families was identified by Byrne and de Tona (2012) in Manchester, UK as a positive intervention).

- Differences in the teaching and learning styles between school and home and misunderstandings between parents and teachers regarding what kind of knowledge is appreciated (Lea 2012). Byrne and de Tona (2012) point out that parents might experience difficulties in helping their children with homework, because ways of assisting differ. Some of the 'non-traditional' strategies used by parents from minority ethnic families varying from those used in middle-class families and are not recognised by teachers.
- **Psychological and practical barriers affecting teachers,** in particular a lack of confidence in feeling able to work with parents or fear of parental criticism or lack of knowledge of strategies, as well as lack of time, limited administrative support or minimal support and feedback from senior management (Walker and Hoover-Dempsey 2008).
- Parents feeling unwelcome at school, whereby schools are felt as even potentially hostile places (Crozier and Davies 2007).

4. <u>Children and young people themselves also influence the degree of parental engagement</u>

Finally, another important factor influencing parental engagement, but often neglected in the research, is the role of children and young people themselves. Most research on parental engagement is adult-centric and does not include the child's voice. In particular, young people may affect parental engagement by:

- **Acting as gatekeepers to school,** e.g. failing to pass on information. This may be because young people do not want to involve their parents and prefer to keep home and school separate. This is a factor explaining lower parental involvement for secondary school aged pupils who seek more independence although it is also down to the distance of the schools as often further from home, the more sophisticated curriculum, more than one teacher being involved and more full-time employment of parents (Walker and Hoover-Dempsey 2008).
- **Experiencing tensions created by homework assignments** (for example, if **outdated techniques** are used by parents) and feeling **embarrassment** at the revelation of parents' limited educational skills (Lareau and Shumar 1996).
- **Having desires to assimilate**, particularly during the middle school years, which may cause tensions with other members of the family who prefer the maintenance of cultural values (Garcia-Reid et al 2015).

- Young people's **personal circumstances affecting parental engagement**, such as learning disabilities, being gifted and talented (where parental engagement may be higher) or exhibiting behavioural issues, where parents or children may be reluctant to be involved with the school to hear about disruptive behaviour.

This factor demonstrates the relatively more easy nature of parental engagement in primary schools than in secondary schools, especially because at secondary school level, messages to parents tend to be more negative, e.g. about behaviour (see Arnot et al. 2014).

Summary

In summary, there are multiple factors to consider in improving parental engagement. While research demonstrates its advantages for educational attainment, the evidence suggests that generic expectations for parental engagement *per se* can, without appropriate attention, reinforce inequalities unless mitigating strategies are in place to overcome middle-class advantage (Crozier and Davies 2007). A prerequisite of any initiatives to increase parental engagement is a questioning of the cultural assumptions underpinning it, as well as awareness of the high demands that the practice places on socially vulnerable groups (Marschall 2006).

4. Strategies to support parental engagement among immigrant and/or vulnerable families and examples of promising practice

In light of the challenges arising in developing parental engagement with immigrant families and other vulnerable groups, this section surveys existing practices and considers evidence from research and practice about how best to encourage parental engagement. Much of the research is addressed at a generic parental body, with lesser attention to minority families specifically. However, a significant body of work by relevant networks, for example from the Sirius Network and Eurocities draw attention to a number of practice examples (a useful resource is the Sirius library http://www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/library/). These, and evidence from academic studies indicate that **strategies around communication, fostering a supportive climate and philosophy, overcoming problems of location and timing, and engaging with broader actors from the community and family are keys to success with engaging minority families.**

As some researchers have suggested, some research has tended to assume a deficit-based model with less focus on the strengths of immigrant families, such as the degree of social capital[3] possessed through strong family connections (Garcia-Reid et al 2015). Overall therefore, strategies should aim to focus as much on these **strengths**, supported by strategies that also aim to address putative deficits, such as improving command of the dominant language.

An important consideration also to bear in mind in this section is that while research on the impacts of parental engagement is strong, the **research evidence on the impact of *interventions* to encourage parental engagement is rather mixed and not yet so strong**. As Jeynes (2005: 240) notes, 'even if parental involvement effectively raises achievement, this does not necessarily mean parental involvement programs work as well'. In England, the Education Endowment Foundation's toolkit of approaches in education points out that rigorous evaluation of parental involvement interventions is limited. However, this is because

[3] Social capital refers to the resources that individuals are able to access through their social interactions, friendships and relationships (e.g. knowledge and information, assistance, financial support etc.)

existing evaluations of interventions themselves are technically weak; in other words, it is not that there is evidence that the programmes *do not* work - but rather that, due to the nature of what is being investigated, it is difficult to provide a strong evidence base of effectiveness (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). On the other hand, Jeynes (2005) shows that programs aimed at encouraging parental support (in the case of urban children) appear to relate positively to achievement.

Communication

Orientation Information: First, it is common practice for national governments to provide information to new immigrants to orientate themselves around a new school system and a variety of communication channels can be used to do so (see OECD review of migrant education, policy area 3: parent and community involvement, n.d.). According to the Eurydice network (2009), in around two thirds of the countries surveyed, **written information on the school system, functions and approaches is published in several languages of origin.** Some have developed **websites** to parents advising them, giving information on the types and management of school systems, explaining what parents need to do, how problems are dealt with, details about discipline, holidays, homework and explaining how parents can support their children's learning. A strategy used by a number of countries (OECD review, see New Zealand, Ireland, Austria, UK) is the development of information DVDs in addition to printed material, the use of websites or the use of information 'hot lines' used in Denmark to answer parents' queries.

However, as Walker and Hoover-Dempsey (2008) point out, while one-way communication of information is appropriate in some cases, **practices must allow for two-way communication and exchange.** Second therefore are strategies aiming at engaging parents in their children's learning, of which the success rests on the quality of parent-teacher interactions within schools. As the previous section shows, there are multiple opportunities for unhelpful assumptions and misunderstandings in home-school dialogue and often cooperation is only sought in situations where there is already some problem to be addressed. The aim of better communication is to avoid discrepancies in the messages and expectations of home and school. As such, schools need to develop an **outreach strategy** to inform parents and invite participation (NEA 2008).

Overcoming Language Barriers: The success of these strategies is in the first place dependent on **overcoming language barriers**. An obvious solution is the translation of information into the main home-languages of immigrant-origin students and the provision of culturally-specific information, as noted above (see also Alba and Holdaway 2013, Garcia-Reid et al 2015). The **presence of translators** at events (such as parent consultations) can also assist parents, helping them to follow and participate in events that will assist in their understanding of their children's educational experience (ibid.) Indeed, **the employment of ethnically diverse staff**, including teachers and support staff with migratory backgrounds not only aids communication but helps promote trust (Sacramento 2015 and see Sirius position paper by Baysal-Polat, Boukllouâ, Chati-Dia and Schneider 2014*).* In most European countries, the use of interpreters is encouraged but, according to Eurydice (2009) is rarely a statutory right. An alternative is **mother tongue tuition**, but in most cases this is outside of normal school hours and only (sometimes) recommended or included in the normal school timetable (e.g. in Estonia, Lithuania, Austria, Sweden and Norway, ibid.) Others are outside school hours, for example, in the ALIF project in Catalunya, children of Maghrebi parents are taught Arabic language by Maghrebi mothers to strengthen their identity and heritage, and this also aims to enable links between newly arrived families with the school setting (SIRIUS 2014a).

Other initiatives however rather reduce the priority of minority languages and **support the competence of majority language instruction**. Copenhagen for example has used **i**nitiatives aimed at supporting Danish

language instruction from early childhood, whereas mother tongue instruction has been abolished in the belief that this will lead to better immigrant integration. This initiative also encourages parents to voluntarily transfer their child to a school with lower proportion of ethnic minority children often in neighbouring districts. The OECD report on parental participation also refers to the pilot project in France *Opening schools to parents to achieve integration (Ouvrir l'école aux parents pour réussir l'intégration)*. This 120 hour voluntary and free programme, launched in 2008, includes French as a Second Language instruction for parents to encourage professional integration. It also includes guidance on values to facilitate social integration and information on the French school system including rights and responsibilities of students and parents.

Tailoring Approaches to Individuals: Studies demonstrate that schools with substantial number of migrant pupils that perform well are effective because they aim to meet the parental needs – i.e. not because they used generic types of traditional involvement but **because they adjust their practices to their diverse body of families** and have an adequate understandings of the social, economic and physical needs of migrant families (López, Scribner and Mahitivanichcha 2001). In other words, successful engagement works because approaches are **tailored to specific individual families' needs and personal contexts.** To develop these more personal relationships, schools may **supplement the formal contact** of parent councils or parents' evenings with other opportunities **for more informal contact** e.g. through social events (Campbell 2011). Other strategies include the use of classroom drop-in visits by parents, conversations and exchanges at events or in telephone calls, and more spontaneous forms of communication (Walker and Hoover-Dempsey 2008). Schools increasingly use **technology** as a means for communication e.g. a SIRIUS briefing highlights Lithuania's use of electronic home-school communication diaries in the *My School* project as a means of bridging distance between family and school and allowing for parents to have insight into their children's scores and attendance (Sacramento 2015). Crozier (1999) argues that failure to take account of differences in needs, circumstances and class differences reinforce parental perceptions of teachers as those who 'know best', reinforcing power differentials and parent's as passive, with fatalistic views of schooling.

Communication between schools and parents cannot be assumed to be straightforward but needs to build trusting relationships (Riley 2009). As was discussed previously, some parents from some minorities may not feel comfortable with teachers and will rarely initiate contact with the school (Nelson and Guerra 2009). In this case, other **auxiliary staff** – in addition to teaching staff - are well deployed in this process to **act as mediators or bridges** between home and school and to identify the support needs of their pupils, including school counsellors, psychologists etc. (Garcia-Reid et al 2015).These initiatives might also include bespoke support from **home liaison workers** (e.g. see Ireland's Home School Community Liaison scheme in Ireland) and are reinforced by invitations to attend in-school events such as 'stay and play' days for parents of younger children or 'come and see my best work' days for older children (Campbell 2011). Other examples include the Traveller Education Service (TES) in England which offers advisory services on policies to promote inclusion of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families. This organisation has a family liaison role whereby it can smooth communications or operate as a third party to begin communications and **taking the weight off either the family or the schools** (Bhopal and Myers 2009).

Teacher Training: This refers to initiatives that target teaching staff themselves, through **training that promotes diversity and awareness** among school staff. For example, in the ¨Diesterweg-Stipendium project (see page 18 this review) originating from Frankfurt/Main the main activities directed at parents and pupils are supplemented by the 'Diesterweg-Schulwerkstatt', a workshop and program that trains teachers in how to effectively include and encourage participation of families in their children's education (SIRIUS 2014a:28-29). The SIRIUS network also refers to the project '*Empowering Roma parents in supporting their children's development and education',* where in two Croatian counties, school staff in 4

schools with high numbers of Roma pupils were educated about parental engagement strategies, which included elements of **teaching about intercultural learning and education for social justice**. Similar programmes also **include families** in this teacher training – for example, SIRIUS (2015) refers to the SPICE project in Asturias which employs this strategy. Other strategies might involve the development of web-based resources e.g. the Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) based at Harvard, which offers newsletters with practical tips and new research findings on family–school relations (Walker and Hoover-Dempsey 2008, www.finenetwork.org) as well as the SIRIUS network website, a European Policy Network on the education of children and young people with a migrant background (http://www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/).

Climate and Philosophy

The climate and philosophy refers to the overall tone of partnership approaches with parents.

School as an open and welcome environment: Many initiatives aim to influence **the climate of school as a welcome environment for families**, of particular importance when parents' own experiences of school may not have been positive. Walker and Hoover-Dempsey (2008) refer to shaping the '**invitingness'** of a school, as demonstrated in the building, outreach and tone of communications to parents and community. Strategies to create a welcoming environment for parents include **developing facilities for parent to use within the school.** These might include a room for adult education/language classes, a parent resource centre, parent cafés, internet access for parents in schools, drop-in centres on site, open sessions in school on learning activities as well as personalising letters to parents (Campbell 2011, Walker and Hoover-Dempsey 2008). In particular, the creation of a parent resource centre might be used as a place in which wider strategies for successful engagement can be promoted, therefore **embedding parental involvement** in the school culture (ibid.). The Home School Community Liaison scheme in Ireland referred to previously for example holds courses on parenting skills and includes the provision of a parent room in schools, as well as regular visits by home school community liaison coordinators (OECD).

Cultural awareness, openness and tailored invitations: Other simple actions include the display or pictures and artefacts reflecting the varied and **diverse backgrounds** of the pupils in the school (ibid.) This might be supplemented by employing more **culturally relevant school practices** and developing cultural awareness in teachers and schools (see Nelson and Guerra e.g. 2009 and www.learningforward.org/publications/jsd) as well as tapping into the strengths that minority youth bring from their homes into their classrooms. Another strategy is the development of a genuine '**open-door'** policy where the head teacher or senior staff make time to see parents face-to-face immediately, which according to Bhopal and Myers (2009) pay enormous dividends for socially excluded families.

As the research demonstrates, increased parental involvement comes from parents' perceiving that their involvement is welcome, so schools have an important role to play in **increasing invitations for involvement**, making it clear that they are welcome and offering helpful and manageable ways of being involved (Walker and Hoover-Dempsey 2008). Bernard (2011) refers to the basis of educational inequality as 'indifference to difference' (Bourdieu 1966). On the other hand, schools who **tailor their actions** to meet the specific needs of students are the most successful (in this case, at preventing drop-out, ibid.) Following this line of thought, Walker and Hoover-Dempsey (2008) note that invitations for parental involvement should be tailored to fit the strengths, preferences and practical situations of individual families. Some examples include the development of **volunteering opportunities** around the school to break down barriers and employ **the hidden expertise of parents**, such as 'school grounds' working parties (Campbell 2011).

The development of a welcoming environment should spill over to strengthen existing support networks for students by putting **teachers and parents in partnership** to create an emotionally supportive atmosphere (Garcia-Reid et al 2015). This creates an 'ecological safety net' that decreases the possibilities for trouble at school and improves commitment to school.

Location and Timing

Since many of the **barriers** to migrant and socially excluded families' involvement are **practical** (e.g. about timing and convenience) **parental engagement** can be encouraged by thinking about **where and when engagement** takes place. An obvious strategy is extending the use of school and considering the timing of opportunities, e.g. the use of after-school groups, for example Walker and Hoover-Dempsey (2008) explain how **extracurricular events** (e.g. concerts, athletics events etc. offer a **'natural' incentive** for parents to come to school, which can then be used to enhance parent-teacher interactions. Events can be **targeted** at particular people, for example, Campbell (2011) refers to fathers' storytelling weeks, which might be held on Saturday mornings rather than after school.

Timing also refers to decisions about when to begin seeking parental engagement. Some programmes are **aimed at particular critical moments**, for instance, the Diesterweg Scholarships in Frankfurt/Main targets children who show promising potential for academic success to attend Saturday Academies at the point of **transitioning** from primary to secondary school (Sirius 2014). There are also examples of a range of pre-school programmes that target **pre-school children** in their home to prepare them for primary school. For example, *Opstapje* in the Netherlands is a home-visiting programme, whereby trainers (from the same ethnic group) helps parents develop their interaction with their child, support the child's capabilities and assist with Dutch language learning (OECD). Another well-known solution is the HIPPY programme (Home Instruction for Preschool Youngsters) used for 4-5 year olds across a range of countries internationally. This involves tutor visits every 2 weeks to parents by those from their own ethnic community to engage in learning and assist with child development within the child's familiar home environment (Sacramento 2015). Such initiatives build on academic research which suggests that it is more important to engage parents in their children's learning *in the home*, rather than in *school-based* activities, as the former has more impact on subsequent learning and achievement of young people (Goodall and Harriss 2008, Walker and Hoover-Dempsey 2008).

Where school is perceived as a hostile environment, the **appropriateness of school** as the location of parental engagement is particularly **questionable**. Other solutions include arranging meetings at times that are convenient for parents, as well as arranging meetings not only at school, but at places in which parents are known to feel safe and comfortable. Visits by teachers or other members of staff to **family's homes** are important in building home-school links, and these visits should be facilitated by time and support by senior staff e.g. compensation for afterschool or weekend visits (Walker and Hoover-Dempsey 2008). As mentioned previously, this may not involve purely teachers - in Amsterdam the Slotervaart initiative included the deployment of compulsory education officers to pay home visits when children are absent without clear reason, supported by broader coaching/mentoring for pupils and parents. Other strategies include the provision of **Pupil guidance centres**, in Flanders, Belgium which advise on learning, academic careers, preventative health care and psycho-social functioning and can engage parents to work jointly with a multidisciplinary team of professionals to encourage children's development.

Engaging others: Community, mentors, siblings and pupils

As was discussed earlier, research evidence demonstrates the **critical role of community institutions, relatives (including siblings) and individuals from the broader social network** to act as **role models** for

immigrant children (Alba and Holdaway 2013: 261; Zhou and Li 2003). They can aid children's learning as well as encourage advocacy and participation for parents to lead to broader systemic changes or school reform.

Empowerment: A number of promising practices are run by intermediate non-school based organisations e.g. migrant community organizations, NGOs or private foundations (see SIRIUS 2014a). These broader groups acting in collaboration with the parent, school and local authority can have many functions, for example **delivering programmes** that aim to **empower** parents to take a more active role towards the education of their children and engage with educational institutions. Some of those cited by SIRIUS include the *'Empowering Roma parents in supporting their children's development and education'* scheme in Lithuania, which involved interactive **educative workshops** bringing together teachers, Roma community representatives, parents, other family members and facilitators, to do learning activities and gain skills learned in the workshop at home. Another project is Croatia's *Schools Open to Parents* project, with workshops led by the Parents' Association *Step by Step*. Here parents are brought together in **parent councils** across a number of schools. The parents' skills are developed through workshops, on how to be involved in decision-making as well as discussions of issues around the curriculum, workplans, extra-curricular activities etc. These parent councils might overcome the problems inherent in some **more traditional structures** (such as Parent Teacher Associations) which as Walker and Hoover-Dempsey (2008) point out, can be hierarchical and exclusive. Monitoring of participation to ensure access for all, and encouragement of a broad array of families to join those structures also help.

Communication: Other community initiatives are less focussed on skills training and are more aimed at **smoothing communication** between different migrant populations and schools. For example, one community-supported initiative was an **educational campaign** directed at Turkish immigrant parents in Germany. The "Merhaba - Say Hello to the Teacher of your Child" action aimed to encourage Turkish parents to actively seek contact with their children's teachers and learn more about the educational system. During this initiative, Turkish organisations collaborated with schools and some Turkish language parents' evenings were held (Sirius 2014). Other strategies include **making contacts with parents via other established groups** (e.g. women's groups, arts groups or faith groups) to overcome the limited inclination for some parents to approach schools themselves (Council of Europe date unknown (b)).

Ambassadors and role models: Successful initiatives also make use of parents already engaged with the school as **ambassadors** for other members of the community e.g. successful students from an ethnic community serve as **mentors** for younger pupils. School leaders in Campbell's action-project (2011) employed the use of a buddy system for parents, using parents who are more familiar with the school to work with those less confident. Another example from Denmark for example is the *We Need All Youngsters (Brug for alle unge)* campaign, started by the Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration in 2002 (OECD 2009). As part of this initiative, **role models from an immigrant background** help to motivate students and help them stay on in college by sharing experiences. An evaluation showed that 50% of the targeted students have been inspired to stay on or enrol at college. This is similar to a project in Reggio Emilia, Italy, as part of the CoE SAFE initiative, where **'second generation' immigrants were used as tutors** to support young immigrants and address poor academic achievement, as well as offer intercultural mediation services to the school (CoE 2014 and see also the Traveller Education service in the UK (Bhopal and Myers 2009)).

Crul et al (2011) also refers to **the use of older siblings** in engagement with schools, to help overcome parents' lack of familiarity. In some cases, **students' relatives** can also be involved (an example of this is the *Inspire* workshops in Birmingham, UK, which brought parents, extended family members and even

neighbours to attend workshops, based on stories, puppets and games on literacy and numeracy, see Brind, Harper and Moore 2008). Another pilot project, *Luva,* was used in Helsinki, Finland, which aimed to improve pupils' grades and strengthen their written Finnish through **mentoring and counselling** in order to ensure that they can get an upper secondary education, and also recommended opening up parents' school meetings to other family members (Open Society Foundations 2013). Other strategies include the use of influential figures to promote positive messages, as seen in the case of Marcouch, the Dutch Moroccan politician, who used his position to stimulate pupils and encourage parents to attend school consultations (ref).

Case-studies of initiatives which stem from grassroots associations can be found on the SIRIUS webpage: http://www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/the-immigrant-contribution-2/ and also see Sacramento (2015). Although these are generally initiated by NGO actions, in many cases, they had a strong local partner, see below.

5. Broader considerations for successful strategies

Research and practice demonstrates that success of initiatives depends on having the right supporting structures in place. Below, some of the broader issues influencing the success of parental engagement strategies are briefly discussed.

Scale and costs: Although many of the initiatives above are considered independently, in practice, many **programmes combine a number of functions**. For instance, the Diesterweg Scholarships in Frankfurt/Main include 'Saturday Academies' for children, to have extra lessons in school subject. Yet in the same building, parents also learn about schooling in Germany, their rights as parents and how to get involved in the participatory system (ibid.). There are trips out to various parts of Frankfurt, parent cafes, individual counselling available for problem-solving and voluntary mentors to encourage parents to develop ambitious educational goals for their children. Financial support of up to 600 euros is also available to low-income families to pay for educational material and equipment.

Another important consideration when developing a programme of parental engagement is **the cost and funding implications**. Some interventions are relatively cheap, such as running parental workshops and improving communications with families (The Sutton Trust/Education Endowment Foundation 2015) whereas others, such as having a specialist community or home/school liaison teacher involve more substantial costs. This relates to **scale**, where some **solutions are individual based, whether others might be more national solutions**. In the Netherlands, the scale of programmes is ambitious. The national *Platform for Ethnic Minority Parents and Education* (Platform Allochtone Ouders en Onderwijs, PAOO) established in 2006 has local platforms in 30 municipalities. It encourages parental involvement among immigrant parents through providing information to help parents' understand the system, runs training programmes to help teachers understand cultural backgrounds of the families they work with and provides homework supervision and support mixed school initiatives to overcome segregation (Herweijer 2009).

Implementation and Sustainability: Success also depends on methods of implementation and ensuring the longer-term sustainability of practices. Initiatives work only to the extent that they have **'buy-in' and support** by head teachers and other senior staff members as well as commitment from staff at all levels (see Bhopal and Myers 2009). Strategies must also develop ways of **ensuring access to resources and funding streams**. Indeed, Bernard (2012) notes in a related discussion of measures to prevent school drop-out, that problems are often as much to do with the implementation of the programs, e.g. where there might be too few coaches, difficulties in collaboration between institutions, management of the network

and instability of teams of workers on short-term contracts, than with the programs themselves. Communication between partners and data/information-sharing between different schools and locations is fundamental.

6. Conclusions

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this review of research:

- The importance of getting parents on board and working collaboratively with schools to enhance their children's academic attainment is well-established in the research.
- In terms of parental engagement, attending school-based activities alone is not enough (Harriss and Goodall 2007). The most effective engagement is learning in the home and anything that schools can do to promote this through guidance and support on those processes is beneficial.
- Not all families find it easy to engage with schools. Immigrant parents and others experiencing social exclusion may need more assistance. The research shows that families from majority and middle-class populations are better placed to engage with schools.
- If schools do not put in place supportive strategies to mitigate some of the barriers – social, psychological, practical and historically constituted – expectations for parental engagement will have the opposite effect and widen inequalities.

The education strand for the *Action for Inclusion in Europe* initiative aimed to develop further European cities' work using some of the strategies identified to overcome the disadvantage and barriers identified in this review. These include strategies around developing family literacy, using parents as schools mentors, developing programmes for evaluating mediators, sessions on improving communication between home and school. These can be seen in the individual country reports, as well as the 'Lessons Learned paper – education'. In all cases, key to this work is the encouragement for schools to engage in critical reflection of the extent to which they differentiate their provisions to different students and parents to maximise the potential for positive parental engagement.

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