

# Chapter 5

## Between home and school: Mobilising ‘hard to reach’ White British parents to engage with their children’s education



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**Abstract** The last two decades have witnessed an increasing politicisation of parenting and the emergence of parenting support as a key element of social policy. This policyscape is governed, however, by a narrow conception of the public good. The state has delegated responsibility for children’s future outcomes to parents, extolling parenting support as the means for redressing inequality and securing social mobility. This chapter focuses on a particular variant of parenting support: the use of link workers in mobilising parents to become more engaged in their children’s education. It draws on the evaluation of a local government initiative aimed at improving educational outcomes for White British, working-class pupils by encouraging attitudinal and behavioural change amongst parents deemed ‘hard to reach’ and disengaged from education. I argue that behaviour change approaches are misguided and that improved parental engagement cannot compensate for the impact inequitable socioeconomic conditions have upon families’ lives and children’s attainment. The chapter challenges deficit constructions of White working-class parents and contests the parental determinism underpinning social policy. It calls instead for a broadened conception of the public good that accords value to all families and seeks to address the adverse socioeconomic conditions affecting parents’ lives rather than simply seeking to (re)form their character and conduct.

### Introduction

This chapter draws on dominant constructions of parents and parenting within English social policy to critically frame an intervention aiming to improve parents’ engagement in their children’s education. The last two decades have witnessed an increasing politicisation of parenting both within the United Kingdom and

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internationally (Daly 2015). Family relationships, childrearing practices, home learning environments and parental behaviours have all come under intense political scrutiny and a broad consensus has emerged that ‘good’ parenting is vital to the future prosperity of the nation (Field 2010; Allen 2011; Family and Childcare Trust 2015). This policy landscape is governed, however, by a narrow conception of the public good. Convinced of the causal importance of parenting, the state has absolved itself of responsibility for children’s future outcomes, extolling parenting support as *the* means for redressing inequality and securing social mobility. This strategic disassembling of structural impediments to families’ lives is emblematic of a neoliberal political rationality that recasts social problems as the responsibility of citizens and their communities. It also places an uneven burden on socially and economically marginalised parents, those problematically labelled ‘hard to reach,’ to meet normative parenting ideals and intensifies regulation of their lives (Gillies 2011).

I focus on a particular variant of parenting support: the use of link workers in mobilising parents to become more engaged in their children’s education. It draws on the commissioned evaluation of a local government initiative – the *Raising Achievement for White British Pupils*<sup>1</sup> project – aiming to improve educational outcomes for White British, working-class pupils by encouraging attitudinal and behavioural change amongst parents deemed ‘hard to reach’ and disengaged from education. The evaluation took place during the piloting of the project in an inner-London borough across the 2014/15 school year and utilised qualitative methods to collect data from all key stakeholders (e.g. parents, senior staff within schools, members of the local authority, and the link workers). The defining feature of the project was its use of link workers to serve as a bridge between home and school. The two link workers hired for this purpose were strategically chosen for sharing demographic characteristics fitting the profile of participating parents; that is, both were mothers from White British working-class backgrounds who had longstanding associations with the area in which the project was to be delivered. In addition to supporting parents in schools and advocating on their behalf, the link workers provided pastoral guidance and sought to enlist parents on a range of activities aimed at improving their communication skills, their effectiveness in engaging in at-home learning, and their employment prospects. As I suggest below, the link workers operate in the liminal space between home and school to foster active and responsible parent-educators. Examining their role highlights the limitations of behaviour-change as a strategy for addressing educational injustice. Whatever benefits parental engagement may hold, it cannot compensate for the impact of inequitable socioeconomic conditions upon children’s educational attainment (Hartas 2014; Reay 2017).

The chapter opens with an account of the fetishisation of parenting within contemporary social policy and situates the initiative within the wider context of the neoliberalisation of parenting (Jensen 2018). The discussion then turns to parental

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<sup>1</sup> To preserve the anonymity of participants a pseudonym has been substituted for the original title of the project.

engagement and educational inequalities; where parental engagement is understood in an extended sense as referring to both involvement with schools and engagement in at-home learning. The remaining sections focus directly on the *Raising Achievement for White British Pupils* project. I outline key details of the project and its evaluation, before considering the implications of constructing parents as 'hard to reach' and the link workers' role in encouraging parents to adopt normative conceptions of 'good', pedagogically engaged, parenting. The chapter challenges deficit constructions of White working-class parents and contests the parental determinism and parent-blame underpinning many areas of social policy (Furedi 2008; Jensen 2018). In conclusion, I argue for a broadened conception of the public good that acknowledges the worth of *all* families and seeks to address the adverse socioeconomic conditions affecting parents' lives rather than simply aiming to (re)form their character and conduct.

## The parenting policyscape

Over the last twenty years parenting has emerged as a policy fetish across the political spectrum, with parents, particularly mothers, endowed with almost supernatural powers to determine children's future outcomes, reverse social inequalities and save or imperil the nation (Lee et al. 2014). The state, of course, has long intervened in family life, but what is distinctive about the contemporary policyscape 'is the scale and breadth of state instructing and governing parenting' (Daly 2013, p. 228). Indeed, there has been striking consistency on the importance of parenting across political administrations. It was a prominent theme during (New) Labour's period in office between 1997 and 2010; as indicated in the following:

We know that parents are the major influence on a child's life. Parenting in the home has a far more significant impact on children's achievement than parents' social class or level of education. (DfES 2006, p. 4)

But it was also a significant emphasis throughout the administrations of David Cameron. First during the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition (2010–2015) and then during Cameron's brief tenure as Prime Minister in a Conservative majority government (2015–2016):

What matters most to a child's life chances is not the wealth of their upbringing but the warmth of their parenting. (Cameron 2010)

Families are the best anti-poverty measure ever invented. They are a welfare, education and counselling system all wrapped up into one. (Cameron 2016)

The politicisation of parenting has reshaped social policy, instigating a 'population-wide behaviour modification project' on a hitherto unprecedented scale (Henricson 2012, p. 30). 'Good' parenting is lauded as essential for the prosperity of the nation (Family and Childcare Trust 2015), whilst 'poor' parenting is represented as a social scourge; draining public resources, engendering disorder, and imperilling the moral

fabric of society (Cameron 2011a). This discourse is shaped by an unwavering conviction in the truth of parental determinism (Furedi 2008). Parents are positioned as *the* determining factor in children's future success and inadequate parenting is denounced as the root cause of social problems; indicating how readily parental determinism morphs into parent-blame (Jensen 2018).

Although this policy drive ostensibly addresses all parents, disadvantaged groups are subject to particularly acute scrutiny (Gillies 2011). The prevalence of the gender-neutral term 'parent' also disguises the fact that it is mothers who constitute the principal targets of parenting support (Daly 2013). Disadvantaged mothers from low-income and minority backgrounds are particularly subject to public opprobrium, often judged unfavourably against normative parenting ideals modelled on White, middle-class parenting practices (Reay 2008; Dermott 2012; Vincent 2017). Depicting disadvantaged parents as motors for the generational transmission of disadvantage further entrenches the view that 'poor' parenting constitutes a pathology requiring remedial intervention. As Janet Goodall (2019) remarks, this invidious logic equates raising children in conditions of poverty with a poverty of parenting. Solutions to this alleged crisis in parenting evidence a neo-Victorian resurgence of responsibility and moral character as bulwarks against material disadvantage (Gillies et al. 2017). For instance, a free-market think tank has recently campaigned for the expansion of parenting classes precisely on the grounds that they 'help combat the 'deficit' in character and values that lie behind many social problems' (Odone and Loughlin 2017, p. 3).

What is effaced here is the context of families' lives. The family appears as a 'black box' wherein the 'material and social context in which the mother is struggling is forgotten' (Vincent 2012). The conditions of parenting are dissembled through an overarching emphasis on parents' conduct. Parenting is uncoupled from social context, producing the fantasy of an unencumbered parent unconstrained by, and able to rise above, any adverse eventualities standing in the way of their families' future success. This fantasy is central to the neoliberalisation of parenting. It reconstitutes the family as an incubator of human capital and recasts parents' chief prerogative as the pursuit of positional advantage through maximising children's cognitive, social and emotional development (Rosen 2019). Shifting the burden of responsibility onto parents, it should be noted, is also particularly convenient in the context of a decade of drastic reductions to public expenditure under a regime of fiscal austerity (Vincent 2017). By affording parents almost miraculous powers to overcome systemic inequalities and material disadvantage, responsabilisation fetishises parents whilst simultaneously obscuring structural failings. This is utopian politics for a dystopian age.

## Parents, schools and education

The 1988 *Education Reform Act* transformed the relationship between parents, schools, and education in England, repositioning parents as active consumers in a market economy of schooling. It also increased expectations on parents to become more directly involved in their children's education; a viewpoint crystallised in New Labour's White Paper *Excellence in Schools*:

Parents are a child's first and enduring teachers. They play a crucial role in helping their children learn. Family learning is a powerful tool for reaching some of the most disadvantaged in our society. It has the potential to reinforce the role of the family and change attitudes to education, helping build strong local communities and widening participation in learning. (DfEE 1997, p. 53)

The perception that parents constitute surrogate teachers and that policy can intervene in parenting to produce positive educational outcomes for children remains dominant. The home learning environment, for instance, has been presented as 'the single biggest influence on a child's development – more important than material circumstances or parental income, occupation or education' (Allen 2011, p. 57). However, this policy drive also blurs the distinction between home and school (Gillies 2011), redefines parents' roles vis-à-vis education, in a process that has been described as the pedagogicalisation of parenting (Popkewitz 2003), and transfers responsibility for children's outcomes from educational institutions to parents (Doherty and Dooley 2018). Moreover, the reality of entrenched inequality and social immobility casts doubt upon the optimistic narrative underpinning parental engagement. There is not the space here to enter into a detailed discussion of the insufficiency of parental engagement, but two salient points warrant further consideration.

First, social class matters. Despite the conviction that '[w]hat parents do is more important than who they are' (Allen 2011, p. xiv), socioeconomic circumstances impact upon children's educational outcomes. Dimitra Hartas' (2014) secondary analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study data – a large-scale, longitudinal birth cohort study following the lives of children born in 2000–2001 – demonstrates that children's class background is a stronger predictor of educational outcomes than either parenting styles or the quality of the home learning environment. Parental engagement and the home learning environment matter, she concludes, just not in the way policy makers intend; that is, 'as mechanisms to overcome structural inequality and equalise opportunity for young children' (p. 46). For this, concerted political action directed at attenuating structural inequalities is required. Children are not raised in a vacuum. The adverse material and social contexts of family life create countervailing pressures that impact upon parents' efforts to support learning and their ability to accrue resources to maximise educational opportunities. Class background is important and parental engagement is no magic bullet automatically ensuring social advancement. Indeed, as Lee Elliot Major and Stephen Machin (2018) conclude in their withering account of social (im)mobility in twenty-first century Britain: 'it has become increasingly the case that where you come

from – who you are born to and where you are born – matters more than ever for where you are going to’ (p. 19).<sup>2</sup>

Second, education is a positional good, functioning ‘as an enormous academic sieve, sorting out the educational winners and losers in a crude and often brutal process that prioritises and rewards upper- and middle-class qualities and resources’ (Reay 2017, p. 26). In this regard parental engagement strategies are myopic, neglecting the constraints placed upon low-income groups by the educational protectionism of more affluent families. Elliot Major and Machin (2018) depict this in terms of an ‘ever-escalating educational arms race in which the poorest children are hopelessly ill-equipped to fight, and where the increasingly rich rewards go to the offspring of the social elites’ (2018, p. 87). The educational protectionism of the upper and middle classes, charted in greater detail in Chapter 7 of this volume, presents in several ways: the maintenance of educational segregation through selective schooling (Kenway et al. 2017); the careful gaming of school ‘choice’ (Ball 2003a); the monopolisation of resources and opportunities within schools (Triventi et al. 2019); the strategic cultivation of children’s capabilities as a means for securing future advantage (Vincent and Ball 2007); the increasing use of private tuition (Kirby 2016); and, the colonisation of high-status universities (Bathmaker et al. 2013). As Diane Reay (2017) and Elliot Major and Machin (2018), amongst others, have pointed out, there are clear winners and losers in the battle to secure educational advantage. Children and young people from low-income backgrounds with limited financial resources tend to be occluded from the opportunities privilege affords. Charging parental engagement with the power to redress this injustice would seem optimistic at best.

The fetishisation of parenting combined with strategic disregard for structural explanations of inequality and the advent of behaviour change as the optimal method of conducting social policy (Jones et al. 2013), has led to an inordinate emphasis on modifying parental behaviours as the key to securing positive outcomes for children. But even proponents of parental engagement have questioned the probity of this approach on the grounds that it absolves the state of any accountability for inequitable outcomes (Goodall 2019). Behaviour modification is misguided, instead policy must work to redress educational inequalities by reducing the pressures adverse socioeconomic conditions bring to bear on families’ lives (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim 2019).

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<sup>2</sup>Elliot Major and Machin’s (2018) findings, which are based on a study of intergenerational income mobility, have been contested by researchers utilising social class categories as a means of tracking social mobility. Drawing on the National Statistics Socioeconomic Classification framework, Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2019) argue, for instance, that the extent of social mobility in the UK has remained stable over time, although downward mobility has increased. However, despite these contradictory findings there is a general consensus that education alone cannot guarantee social mobility or reduce inequality. (See Chapter 7, Hutchings 2021b, for a fuller discussion of the different approaches taken by researchers to studying social mobility and the contradictory findings they have produced.)

## **The *Raising Achievement for White British Pupils* project**

Having surveyed the contemporary parenting policyscape and outlined some limitations with parental engagement as a strategy for redressing educational inequalities, the remaining sections of this chapter focus directly on the *Raising Achievement for White British Pupils* project. Conceived as a broad form of parenting support, the project was concerned with 'how to enable and encourage parents to be able to be the best parents that they can rather than bringing them in to be told what to do by schools' (senior member of the local authority). It combined an emphasis on parental engagement in education with wider family support and activities aimed at encouraging parents to (re)enter employment and education. The notable feature of the project was its use of link workers as a means of supporting families and it focused largely on transforming parental attitudes and behaviours. Of particular interest here is the positioning of low-income White British parents as 'hard to reach' or disengaged, the strategies employed by link workers to engage parents, and the changes in parents they endeavoured to effect.

Piloted in an inner-London borough during 2014/15, the project sought to improve the academic performance of White British working-class pupils by changing parents' attitudes towards education, encouraging greater participation in children's learning, and building more effective home-school relations. Despite research indicating that eligibility for free school meals constitutes a crude classificatory method which fails to account for the 'hidden poor' in society (Hobbs and Vignoles 2009) – those, for instance, who are marginally ineligible or who, for whatever reason, do not apply or avail themselves of the benefit – it was nevertheless adopted by the project organisers as a proxy for families' social class backgrounds. The focus on *White Britishness* as a key criterion for participation also proved problematic. It not only had the effect of racialising the issue of educational underachievement, as I discuss below, but also caused confusion amongst parents and schools as to whether mixed-race families were eligible.

Setting aside for the moment the project's emphasis on 'whiteness', educational underachievement amongst this cohort of pupils had long been acknowledged as a concern within the borough and the organisers concurred that more could be done to support the community. To deliver on its objectives the project employed two link workers to work closely with parents identified by schools as 'hard to reach' and disengaged. Their responsibilities included: building relationships with parents, encouraging greater use of relevant services and resources, fostering 'good' parenting, establishing constructive relations between home and schools, and providing pastoral guidance and support. They also advocated on behalf of parents in their dealings with schools and other services, helped them build skills to improve their employment prospects and encouraged them to undertake further education and/or training. To secure parents' investment and maximise participation, it was decided the link workers should come from the community themselves (i.e. be from White working-class backgrounds and live within or have historical ties to the borough)

and be based within the community rather than schools. For the same reason, it was decided that parents' participation on the project would be entirely voluntary.

The evaluation of the pilot employed qualitative methods of data collection (semi-structured interviews, observations, group interviews and focus groups) and sought to report on the effectiveness of the pilot in engaging parents; to assess the strategies employed for this purpose; and to offer recommendations to inform future planning, development, and delivery. In total, across the three phases of the pilot, 19 interviews were conducted with parents (including two focus groups); 19 interviews with school staff (including five group interviews); two group interviews with local authority staff, and five interviews with the link workers (paired and separately). Standard ethical procedures were followed throughout. To preserve participants' anonymity pseudonyms have been used throughout, including for the title of the project, and the identity of the local authority delivering the project has not been disclosed.

## Constructing 'hard to reach' parents

The project was clearly motivated by a desire to improve outcomes for White British families and sensitivity was shown towards the challenges the community faced. However, in concentrating on what parents do rather than on socioeconomic constraints, it bolsters the view that an inadequate home learning environment is the principal cause of educational underachievement and risks reinforcing deficit understandings of low-income White British parents.

The perception that home cultures obstruct educational achievement permeates politics. In a recent interview, for example, Angela Rayner (the Labour opposition spokesperson on educational matters in England and someone who has herself derived considerable political capital from trading on her working-class roots), derided the White working class for a culture of low aspirations, fecklessness and resistance to education:

They have not been able to adapt. Culturally, we are not telling them that they need to learn and they need to aspire. They are under the impression that they don't need to push themselves, in the way that disadvantaged groups had to before ... I think we need to do much more about the culture of White working class in this country. (Rayner, cited in Nelson 2018)

Representations of White working-class communities as anachronistic and unable to adapt to societal change are prominent in public discourse (Lawler 2012). They are discursive accompaniments of 'a new spatialisation of government' in neoliberal polities, wherein 'community' is instituted as a technology of government and social issues 'are problematized *in terms* of features of communities and their strengths, cultures, pathologies' (Rose 1999, p. 136; original emphasis). The designation 'White working class' suggests a homogenous culture distinct from mainstream society. It also undermines cross-cultural solidarities by racialising working-class identity; ascribing a problematic 'hyper-whiteness' to the working



class that is counterposed to the 'ordinary', acceptable and cosmopolitan whiteness of the middle classes (Lawler 2012). Middle-class imaginaries of cultural decay, moral decline, economic impotence and nativist racism coalesce in a figure of pathological whiteness producing and produced by middle-class disgust (Lawler 2005). Accentuating the whiteness of the White working classes has the double effect of obscuring economic inequality and pathologising working-class culture as a site for necessary intervention. Benevolent intentions notwithstanding, the danger with initiatives like *Raising Achievement* is that educational underachievement transmutes into a problem with the White working classes themselves; confirming perceptions of cultural deficit whilst simultaneously shielding the system from criticism.

Constructing White working-class parents as 'hard to reach' contributes to this process. The term is prominent in social policy, functioning as a 'dividing practice' (Foucault 2002, p. 326) separating mainstream society from its 'others' (see Kakos et al. 2016). It conveys the sense that 'hard to reach' populations constitute a problem requiring remedial intervention (Osgood et al. 2013). Discourses of 'hard to reach-ness' establish the normative core of society and problematise its peripheries, reinforcing social hierarchies via a spiralling logic of marginalisation and (re)integration through which deviant populations are encouraged, nudged or compelled to accommodate mainstream norms. Nikolas Rose (1999) argues that government, understood here as strategic, calculated action to shape individual and collective conduct, is made possible 'only through the discursive mechanisms that represent the domain to be governed as an intelligible field' (1999, p. 33). Nomenclature such as 'hard to reach' carries out this discursive work. The White working classes, as 'hard to reach,' are defined and made visible, and through their visibility become subject to efforts to better 'mobilize the forces and entities thus revealed' (1999, p. 33).

In terms of *Raising Achievement*, parents were primarily recruited through school referrals. Under the instruction of the local authority, schools selected families according to identity-based criteria, children's educational performance and parents' perceived lack of engagement. But as a conferred identity 'hard to reach' possesses a stickiness which fastens it to particular parents and makes it hold. It attaches to White working-class bodies, for instance, but slides off others. As one of the head teachers in the study quipped, 'We've got disengaged millionaires' children and there's no project for them.' White working-class parents are tautologously constructed as 'hard to reach' simply by virtue of their being White and working class. One way in which parents were positioned as 'hard to reach' concerned their limited use of community resources:

This group don't use what's available in the area; they don't use the children's centres as much as they could. And they don't use the homework club and all the different resources that are there. So, part of it was actually having the resources working in partnership with each other and the schools. (Project Organiser)

However, parents' own accounts paint a more complex picture of disengagement and challenge the presumption that it arises from a lack of knowledge, enthusiasm

or interest. Instead, it throws light on external factors inhibiting engagement, including the relative inaccessibility of services themselves (Crozier and Davies 2007).

On first inspection there appeared some consensus that the local area lacked resources for families. Carla complained that, 'for young children there's nothing for them here. It's very hard, you know, for teenagers, or any, you know, children round here. Because there's nothing for them I don't think.' But further probing revealed that the vast majority of parents were in fact aware of a considerable range of resources: after school and homework clubs; community centres, children's centres, tenants' associations, and so on. However, their use of these resources was restricted by financial constraints, safety concerns and feelings of disenfranchisement and alienation. Qualifying her earlier claim, for instance, Carla indicated that costs could be prohibitive. Abbi similarly bemoaned the fact that some activities were accessible only to those with sufficient financial wherewithal. Parents were also perturbed by crime in the area and this coloured their perception of community provision. Abbi refused to allow her children to attend local youth clubs as there had been shootings in the area and she worried that 'all the kids that go there carry knives.' Alice indicated she would avoid particular after-school clubs and play centres based on the perception that 'a lot of rough children go there.'

Respondents' accounts also revealed elements of racial segregation within the locale. The perception that some resources were the preserve of other ethnic groups contributed to parents' sense that White British families were being underserved and provoked feelings of disenfranchisement and alienation, which in turn impacted upon their desire to exploit these resources. The local homework club, in particular, was singled out as being inhospitable:

I think it [homework club] is open to everyone but it's dominated by a lot of Somalis and to go in there, I'm going to be honest, I feel out of place. So, it's uncomfortable. So straight away it's like I'd rather be at home doing my research on the internet and be able to give some information back to my children rather than sit there, looking in books. Everyone looking at you and saying what's she doing here? (Alex, Parent)

Sentiments like this were not uncommon. However, parents were conflicted about how to acknowledge the reality of racial divisions without appearing racist themselves. This was also evident in parents' ambivalence towards the official labelling of the project as being 'for' White parents. Whilst they welcomed the targeted allocation of resources, many nevertheless felt uncomfortable with its potential connotations. The tensions in parents' accounts suggest a sensitivity to wider societal discourses that frame the White working class in terms of 'an unreflexive, axiomatically racist, whiteness' (Lawler 2012, p. 410). Efforts to mitigate the appearance of prejudice were counterbalanced, however, by parents' aggrievement at the preferential treatment they believe had been afforded to minority ethnic groups (Hewitt 2005; Thomas and Sanderson 2013).

Focalising attention on race and whiteness to the relative exclusion of social class risks inflaming existing tensions regarding the distribution of resources. The decision to remove explicit reference to social class from the title of the project gave parents the misguided impression that *all* White British pupils are struggling in

schools, irrespective of their socioeconomic status, and diverted attention away from the barriers affecting low-income families across different ethnic backgrounds. This is not to diminish the persistence of race inequalities in education (Gillborn et al. 2012), but to suggest, rather, that accentuating whiteness as a determining factor of underachievement masks the class inequalities faced by other ethnic groups (Sveinsson 2009).

The preceding account suggests participating parents are misdescribed as 'hard to reach,' inasmuch as their access to and engagement with community resources was constrained by factors outside their control. Indeed, it would be more apt to describe services themselves as 'hard to reach' for particular groups (Crozier and Davies 2007; Osgood et al. 2013). To its credit, *Raising Achievement* showed some appreciation of the barriers faced by parents, particularly concerning engagement with schools. Hence, alongside working directly with parents, link workers also encouraged schools to devise strategies for better accommodating their needs. Nevertheless, positioning *parents* as 'hard to reach' firmly steered the emphasis towards changing parental behaviours as a means of resolving educational underachievement.

## Engaging 'hard to reach' parents

The central concern driving *Raising Achievement* was how to get parents *as a community* more engaged with their children's education. Mobilising the community to address educational underachievement and changing attitudes and behaviours towards education were thus the principal focus of link worker activities. However, since participation was voluntary, it was first necessary to secure parents' interest and investment in the project. This was accomplished by cultivating parents' trust (Fretwell et al. 2018).

As Emma Wainwright and Elodie Marandet (2013) observe, building rapport is an essential element of effective parenting support. The link workers employed various techniques to establish this rapport, including capitalising on what Alison Howland et al. (2006, p. 63) refer to as 'community connectedness':

I'll be honest with you, I think I can relate to them really well because I could be one of them, I'm working class, I'm White, I'm a single mum. So, I can really relate to them in that way, and I think that makes a massive difference for the trust issues. (Denise, Link Worker)

Link workers allayed parents' unease by emphasising their independence and distancing themselves from institutions that were a source of anxiety, such as schools and social services. They also based their operation in places familiar to parents. In this regard, the initiative functioned as a form of community learning, utilising spaces within the local vicinity as pedagogical sites. This combination of factors helped establish link workers as representatives of the community capable of serving as 'cultural brokers' between home and school (Martinez-Cosio and Martinez Iannacone 2007).

Like the Home-Start volunteers in Jenny Fisher et al.'s (2019) study, link workers operate in the 'liminal spaces of parenting support' (p. 250), occupying a threshold position between a professional and a friend. They fostered friendly relations with parents by providing holistic care and support that extended beyond a focus on learning within the home or assistance in engaging with schools. Parents were offered a safe, non-judgemental platform where they could discuss personal issues affecting their lives, vent their frustrations and 'let off some steam' (Yvonne, Link Worker). Most importantly, they tended to avoid pressurising parents, relying instead upon their interpersonal skills and amiability as a means of recruiting and engaging parents; maintaining, as Denise put it, 'a happy upbeat sort of way about you to keep them going'. I have argued elsewhere that this friendly approach is contrived in the sense that it is deliberately pursued as a means of making parents more receptive to the link workers' agenda (Fretwell et al. 2018). Friendship in this regard serves as essential groundwork for subsequent efforts to mould the character and conduct of parents and enables power to be exercised in a 'supportive' way (Wainwright and Marandet 2013).

Despite their positioning as 'hard to reach,' the link workers had considerable success in engaging parents:

A lot of the schools are saying...To give an [example], one school we've been given the worst engaged parents of all, and yet they are engaging with us. We've earned their trust which I think...They're so untrusting with authority in any way shape or form, and to us to just walk in someone's house that they've never met before, they've only spoken to on the phone... (Denise, Link Worker)

Several parents reported undertaking pedagogical work within the home and all were enthusiastic about the project and the impact it might have upon their children's education: 'I'm hoping that it will help my son, you know, achieve more and build up his confidence. And that's all I want because that's what every parent wants – the best for their child' (Carla, Parent). Nevertheless, as Denise's comment above implies, parents faced barriers in engaging with schools. Distrust and poor communication were singled out as prominent issues. Abbi described her relationship with school as extremely negative and characterised by a lack of trust, something she explicitly linked to the perceived judgemental treatment she received as a young single mother from a working-class background. Other parents reported similar experiences. Alex, for instance, depicted her children's school as 'not very welcoming,' remarking that 'soon they will be asking you to make an appointment to pick up your child from the school gate. That's how bad it's got up there'. For Alex, the inhospitality of the school engendered distrust: 'It just feels like there's something to hide, the school has something to hide. That's how it feels to me.' Although not all parents were affected by these issues and some reported positive relationships with schools, they were common across the sample. Again, this suggests that the nomenclature 'hard to reach' simplifies the complex reality of parental engagement and deflects attention away from institutional barriers.

Establishing friendly relations enabled the link workers to enlist parents on a range of different activities designed to enhance their knowledge and skills. They

also facilitated book clubs and social events. Participation in these activities and events fostered a sense of community, affording parents new attachments and a peer-support network. As Wainwright and Marandet (2017) observe, targeted initiatives can forge a sense of community and belonging which participants themselves find valuable, and this aspect of the project was singled out as being amongst its key strengths:

And as a group they've just become really supportive of each other and that's been one of my favourite things to see out of this whole project actually is how this group of mums, a couple of whom knew each other, the rest of whom didn't, have really formed this bond. (Yvonne, Link Worker)

This was confirmed by parents: 'we've all got to know each other, it's like, in a weird sense it's like a little family, a separate little family.' Encouraging communal bonds had the effect, moreover, of mobilising parents to police one another's participation to ensure that everyone availed themselves of the opportunity to develop their skills:

Like when one of them doesn't come, the other ones will give them a hard time. Like one of them wasn't going to go on the residential and the others were all giving them grief 'why aren't you coming?' 'What do you mean you're going...' – to wherever she was going to go – 'No. You're coming on this learning weekend' kind of thing. (Yvonne, Link Worker)

Individual and collective responsibility are bound together here in an ethico-politics that nurtures self-government and activates parents' obligations to themselves and their community (Rose 1999). Parents are encouraged by the link workers to improve their skills and they encourage each other so that together they might better serve the community's needs. These comments attest to the success that link workers had in engaging parents and in forging communal bonds. The following section develops this by turning attention to the changes in parental attitudes and behaviours that link workers sought to effect by trading on the power of friendship.

## Changing 'hard to reach' parents

Link workers deploy friendly power to mobilise parents to become better parent-educators. As Hartas (2014) indicates, a simple logic underpins this endeavour: 'parenting knowledge leads to attitudinal change, then to behaviour change and finally to outcomes for children' (p. 107). Creating 'good,' pedagogically engaged parents involves instilling desirable attitudes, behaviours and dispositions. A key focus for the link workers was thus encouraging parents to adopt new habits and to comport themselves in ways that would facilitate more constructive dialogue with schools. There was an overriding perception, for instance, that parents' demeanour was antagonistic and counter-productive:

They don't always know how to get their point across succinctly and calmly, which is what we're helping them with. And, so it can often be a time issue, the staff don't necessarily have loads of time to listen to someone ranting for ages and seemingly not having a point.

And I think as a parent, certain kind of parent you can get yourself a bad reputation of being like: ‘Oh, that troublemaker mum that just comes in and shouts really inappropriately.’ So, then the school aren’t going to make the time to see you when they know what’s coming, which is why working with them on their communication skills is really important. (Yvonne, Link Worker)

Link workers challenged parents’ behaviour, attempting to instigate the kind of culture-change often advocated at the level of policy (Paterson 2011; Family and Childcare Trust 2015). As Denise put it, ‘We’re quite blunt with them, quite honest with them.’

There are echoes here of parent-blame. Parents are implicated as obstructions to, if not causes of, children’s underachievement. This chimes with the tendency within neoliberalism to reframe social problems as problems of ethical conduct concerning the way that ‘problem’ groups comport themselves (Rose 1999). Within this context, the conduct of parents appears as both problem and solution:

They’re learning to control their emotions ... and they also realise now, you know, how important it is as well for their kids to get a good education. Some of them are really supporting them with their homework as they didn’t do before. (Denise, Link Worker)

The language here is as condemnatory as it is celebratory. It confirms the belief that ‘bad’ parenting hinders children’s educational development and condemns parents’ pre-intervention character and conduct. In celebrating the emergence of parental self-government, moreover, it suggests that becoming a ‘good’ parent is a matter of taming and training working-class parents to constrain their impulsiveness and become more reflexive (Fretwell et al. 2018). Parents, in other words, are schooled in responsibility.

Efforts to instil responsible self-disciplined agency in parents are framed within neoliberal imaginaries of ‘good’ parenting which reconceive intimate family relationships as capital investments (Rosen 2019). Parents are encouraged to expend energy, time, resources on the family so children can reap future dividends (Vincent and Maxwell 2016). For parents in the study this meant developing capabilities and skills that would establish them as positive role models for their children:

The whole aspiration side ... of this project was if they’d got no role models within their family who care about learning or who are working then that’s part of the problem. Whereas if these mums are now working and doing loads of extra learning with their kids at home then it can make a difference ... You want the kids to be seeing that in their parents and that’s what the mums say isn’t it now; they feel that their kids see them as being a good role model and they’re going to college and learning things and reading and all those things and modelling that to their children. (Yvonne, Link Worker)

Through nudging parents to (re)enter employment and undertake further education and training the link workers play a role in producing active, aspirational citizens personally responsible for the well-being of themselves, their families and their community (Rose and Miller 2008; Raco 2009). Parents investment in themselves is simultaneously an investment in the children’s future. The home is thereby transformed into a space of human capital development; a site in which the capabilities of parents and children are activated and developed in equal measure.

Viewed critically, *Raising Achievement* exemplifies the neoliberalisation of parenting and the displacement of economic assistance in favour of behaviour modification. Yet it is important to recognise that parents themselves derived considerable benefit from their participation. Parents welcomed the investment in their community and roundly praised the link workers for their dedication. They valued the opportunity to acquire new skills and appreciated gaining confidence in supporting learning within the home. Parents also reported feeling empowered by the link workers and better equipped to engage with institutions and their representatives:

I do speak up now and I think that's all due to confidence building with the group and through the parent support through the group as well. (Alex, Parent)

They're not doing things for you; they're increasing the things that you're already good at and making you feel like you can tackle these things. It's situations whether it be school, health, education, work, they're not telling you what to do; it's about working with you rather than for you. (Lily, Parent)

Whilst programmes of empowerment apply normative pressures on citizens to align themselves with governmental aspirations and objectives (Rose and Miller 2008; Dean 2010), it would be a mistake to neglect the positive impact such programmes can have on participant's lives. Policy initiatives working with targeted populations can be enabling, improving participants' lives even as they work to consolidate existing power regimes (Wainwright and Marandet 2017).

The enabling dimensions of the project complicate the critique of parenting support as a vehicle for the diffusion of neoliberal rationalities of government. As responsible citizens, parents bear the weight of educational underachievement, but in being mobilised to take this burden upon themselves also derive considerable benefit from their participation. For all its commendable features, however, *Raising Achievement* feeds into and reinforces deficit constructions of White working-class parenting cultures. It is what parents do, how they conduct themselves and how they raise their children that are singled out as the critical hinge upon which children's future outcomes rest. Addressing underachievement thus means changing parents both individually and as a community: changing their attitudes, practices and behaviours; changing the way they conduct themselves; changing their cultures. Educational achievement is a complex phenomenon affected by an array of factors, including, importantly, socioeconomic circumstances, but the myopic privileging of parental engagement occludes this complexity, substituting it with simplistic reductions that ultimately serve to absolve the system of responsibility through the very project of seeking to solve parents (Goodall 2019).

As a species of informal, community learning the initiative engaged local spaces and places as sites of transformational parent pedagogy. The social justice implications of doing so are ambiguous, though. On one hand, parents found the use of the local area reassuring and the link workers were well-situated in the locale to provide ongoing and ad-hoc support. However, on the other, their very proximity to parents also meant that the link workers could exercise benign surveillance ensuring that parents had limited scope for evading their tutelary supervision and presented opportunities for coercing their participation. As I argue elsewhere, these

entanglements of care and control are a central feature of link worker-parent interactions (Fretwell 2020). Operating within and through the community thus complicates programme delivery. It is both of benefit to parents and yet also constrains their autonomy.

## Conclusion

*Raising Achievement* was well-received and helped parents develop confidence, skills and networks of peer support, but as a solution to persistent educational underachievement within low-income White British communities it is misguided. The exclusive emphasis on what parents do, on their attitudes, practices and behaviours, positions parents as causally responsible for children's educational achievement and precludes serious consideration of the structural barriers and impediments impacting upon family life. This skewed focus is indicative of the power and pervasiveness of parental determinism. Politically expedient sleight of hand conjures away the adverse and inequitable conditions in which low-income parents raise their children, summoning instead the figure of an unencumbered parent invested with near-magical properties for determining the family's destiny. Within this context the problem of educational underachievement is recast as a problem with the community itself and the pursuit of social justice transmutes into a technical concern with mobilising responsible parent-educators. For all their dedication and support, or, more precisely, through their dedication and support, the link workers serve as agents of this process. Exercising friendly power, they address the alleged parenting deficit within the community by inducing parents to become self-governing and undertake the necessary work upon themselves that will transform them into 'good' parents. Focusing on parents' attitudes and behaviours also unwittingly reinforces deficit constructions of White working-class parents. As I have argued, participating parents were misdescribed as 'hard to reach;' rather, their accounts indicate that factors beyond their control limited engagement with schools and community resources. These findings caution against the use of such stigmatising language and suggest that it may be more appropriate to describe services themselves as 'hard to reach' (Crozier and Davies 2007; Osgood et al. 2013). The racialising of educational underachievement in *Raising Achievement* is doubly unfortunate insofar as it also undermines possibilities for fostering cross-cultural solidarities that could unite the local area rather than inflame tensions between different ethnic groups.

The challenge for the researcher in cases like this is of bringing critical analysis to bear whilst doing justice to the experiences of service-users themselves. Despite its stigmatising and pathologising implications, parents clearly valued the project and felt it was having a positive impact upon their lives. Although discomfiting, projects like *Raising Achievement* highlight the complexities and contradictions within the parenting support agenda. Making visible these contradictions is an essential step in the pursuit of more socially just policy solutions to problems like educational underachievement. Whilst it would clearly be unfeasible to expect a



small-scale project of this nature to address wider structural inequalities that rightly require attention from central government, it nevertheless represents something of a missed opportunity, especially given parents' receptiveness to the project. Rather than racialising the issue of educational underachievement or focusing on changing parenting cultures, the public good might have been better served by mobilising parents to become active representatives of the community engaged in campaigning for the right to a more equal share of social wealth. An alternative approach along these lines could incorporate the following strategies: first, helping establish cross-cultural solidarities by educating parents about the extent of class-based educational inequalities; second, creating platforms for parents to work together across cultural boundaries where they can explore possibilities for undertaking concerted political action; and, third, training parents to become community activists prepared to defend their rights and interests and suitably equipped to campaign for social and political change. This alternative would avoid stigmatising parents whilst simultaneously mobilising them to challenge the systemic injustices masked by neoliberal responsabilisation and help shift the locus of responsibility for children's future outcomes back to the state. Parental engagement need not be limited to what happens pedagogically within the home or relationships between home and school, engaging with the politics of education is of equal import. This chapter has highlighted some of the complexities and contradictions of policy initiatives aimed at serving the public good. In particular, it is instructive for thinking through the unintended effects of initiatives targeting specific populations which can subvert the original aims by further marginalising participants and reinforcing existing societal divisions. In this regard, more farsighted conceptions of the public good are required that contribute to creating a coherent and cohesive sense of publicness.

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