The responsible parent and networks of support: a case study of school engagement in a challenging environment

Michael Wyness, Centre for Education Studies, University of Warwick

Abstract: Research, policy and practice on education in recent years has focused attention on the mediating role that parents play in children's schooling. Parents have been constructed as responsible agents; as consumers, investors and partners in performance oriented educational project. Much of the literature has looked at parent-school relations from the vantage point of parents, particularly parents in disadvantaged areas. Less has been written on how parent-school relations look from a school's perspective. In this paper we draw on data from a case study English school in a socio-economically deprived area and explore the nature of the construct 'responsible parent' from the perspectives of teaching staff. We utilise data from semi-structured interviews with teaching staff in one case study school locate on the outskirts of a English city. Through the data we outline teachers' conceptions of parents and an emerging network of engagement incorporating parents as part of a broader social and education project in school. We argue that a dominant construct, the responsible parent, has resonances with the ways that teachers conceptualise parents. At the same time, the case study school inhabits a dual institutional space: it is captured within a neo-liberal discourse on responsible parent as a key conduit for an outcomes oriented education project. It also goes beyond the narrow confines of formal educational structures in offering 'challenging' parents social and emotional support in connecting with their children and their schooling.

Key words: responsible parent, engagement network, deprivation, case study

Introduction

Parents have become an increasingly significant frame of reference for education policy and practice within the UK and other affluent countries (Luet 2017; Ng and Yuen 2015; Wainwright and Marandet 2017) 'Engagement', 'involvement' and 'partnership' are frequently referred to by policy makers in identifying the heightened 'educational' role of parents vis-à-vis the school (Wainwright and Marandet 2017). Moreover, research on home-school relations has focused on the role of parents in mediating between the origins of socio-economic disadvantage and future school success (Vincent 2017). In these terms parents are constructed as 'responsible' agents. In this paper we critically examine the 'responsible parent' in one 'case study' school in an area of socio-economic deprivation. While much of the research has focused on the difficulties working class parents are perceived to have engaging with the construct of 'responsibility', we shift the empirical focus and examine the ways in which the school and teachers engage with parents. Drawing on interview data from teaching staff we analyse the meaning and relevance of the 'responsible parent', and examine the ways in which the school supports, challenges and engages with working class parents on a routine basis.

In the first section we discuss the construct 'responsible parent' with reference to political and institutional agendas that in recent years have sharpened the role of parents in terms of children's schooling. We outline key literature on the heightening of the educational role of the parent. We also refer to more critical literature that places the 'responsible parent' at variance with social and economic contexts within which many parents find themselves. In part two we discuss the methodology of our case study approach. In part three our data analysis focuses on the conceptions that teachers have of the parents they work with and the structuring of the school around a network of engagement with parents. In effect, we are exploring the different ways that teachers enact, apply and challenge the concept the

responsible parent. In the final section we offer a discussion of how the case study school is positioned within an increasingly competitive educational environment.

Constructing the responsible parent

In many Western societies home-school relations are shaped by 3 inter-related agendas which offer shifting conceptions of parents' relations with schools. What emerges from these agendas is the construct the 'responsible parent'.

Neo-liberal agenda

In political and economic terms the concept of responsibility is articulated within a neo-liberal agenda focusing on the parent as an individual consumer and investor. In some ways the former is a precursor to the latter. In various English speaking countries in the latter decades of the 20th century there has been a shift towards challenging the role of the state as the arbiter of services for families (Parton 2014). A key feature of this trend was the marketization of Western education systems, with parents viewed as having responsibilities as consumers, with a capacity to make informed choices about their children's schooling (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole 2013). There is also a global move towards greater accountability in school. Schools and teachers are judged in terms of outcomes: publically available evidence of these outcomes is supposed to strengthen parents' roles as informed consumers (Ball 2003).

This shift in positioning of parents did not take place within a moral or social vacuum. Parents are expected to make appropriate educational choices due to their overlapping roles as 'investor' and 'consumer'. The idea of the responsible parent is connected to the idea that parents take a long-term developmental view of their children's life-chances. In human

capital terms the child is viewed as a future citizen and worker; the right investment in the early stages of a child's life is seen to have a crucial bearing on the child's future (Becker 1993). Parents' choices at strategic points in their children's development are viewed as crucial in ensuring that children are oriented to achieving in terms of educational outcomes. Doherty and Dooley (2018) make this point in their analysis of the increasing global demand among middle class families for private tutoring. While state schooling for most parents in Western societies is still free, the emphasis on markets and investment pushes parents into the economic market place in search of an edge within the highly competitive education world of outcomes. The parent as an educational consumer is being 'nudged' to take on more educational responsibility by paying for additional private tuition. This arguably, puts children in a more competitive position in terms of school outcomes.

School Improvement agenda

The focus here is on constructing the responsible parent within a narrower agenda concerned with school processes and outcomes (Gunter 2012). Internal issues relating to leadership, ethos and teacher accountability have become central as policy has targeted the capacity of individual schools rather than the structure of the education system. As part of this 'improvement' agenda there is an emphasis on parental investments articulated in terms of the engagement and involvement parents have with improving school based processes and outcomes. There is, for example, considerable research now on the extent to which parents are incorporated into the schools as partners with varying degrees of engagement (Luet 2017; Fenton et al 2017; Goodall 2014). Goodall et al (2014) discuss the inclusive nature of parents' involvement in their children's schooling in relation to levels of agency. The latter is associated with parental engagement, parents are in a stronger position to share if not influence school and teachers' agendas. The idea of parental involvement, on the other hand,

assumes that the agenda is set by the school, with parents being invited to support teachers in various ways. While parental engagement assumes that links with the school can only benefit children's learning, the lesser version, 'involvement' is about how schools can co-opt parents into school based activities and initiatives.

Policy in various countries focuses on this lesser form of engagement (Goodall 2014). UK government policy from the end of the 20th century underpins the educational role that parents play. Early 'New Labour' policy focused on education as a joint responsibility between schools and parents with significant state investment in early years' education. Parents were expected to not only engage with the teachers and the curriculum, they were expected to actively 'educate' their children within the early years in the home as a preparation for nursery and compulsory schooling. A series of initiatives were also set up to encourage parents to work alongside teachers in improving children's educational capacities, particularly, in literacy and numeracy. In 2013 a government backed organisation, the *Early Intervention Foundation,* was set up to explore what were referred to as 'inter-generational cycles of dysfunction'. Among other things, policies were to be directed to support parents in poverty as they engage with their children's schooling in the early years to reduce the gap in outcomes between poor and affluent parents (EIF 2013). There was also some continuity with later Conservative governments, for example, attempts to introduce universal parenting classes in underpinning parental involvement in their schooling (Vincent 2017).

Parental responsibility agenda

A third agenda explicitly focuses on the concept of the responsible parent in a broader social policy sense (Dahlstedt and Fejes 2014). Various realms of policy in England and Wales invoke the 'responsible parent' in terms of parental obligations to protect their children against 'environments low in warmth and high in criticism' (DoH 1995, p. 19). Parents were

also culpable by failing to control their delinquent children (1998 crime and Disorder Act). In educational terms parental responsibility becomes a means of regulating parents at a distance, a form of policy that shifts from reinforcing the powers of parents to highlighting the obligations that parents have towards ensuring their children conform to behavioural and educational standards (Riots Communities and Victims Panel 2012). The responsible parent here is invoked in more punitive terms with parents viewed as culpable for their children's misbehavior and truancy in school (Wyness 2014). Media reporting on truancy intermittently reminds parents of their legal responsibilities to ensure their children attend school regularly: 'Parents fined £24m for children's truancy and term time holidays' (BBC News 15th March 2018). More recent statements from the chief inspector of schools in England and Wales suggest that parents should take more responsibility for basic aspects of children's development including 'toilet training' as well as doing more to counter their children's obesity and bad behavior. 'Parents "must not abdicate duties" to teachers, says Ofsted' (*BBC News*, 3rd December 2018).

The concept of the responsible parent is an integral feature of all 3 agendas. An emphasis on parental engagement and involvement implies that there are pressures, duties and expectations placed on parents as responsible agents for their children's schooling. Parental responsibility can be associated with an ideological shift towards the parent as an informed individual consumer where the state has to take account of the choices, decisions and rights of parents within a number of different fields. At the same time parents are opened up to greater public scrutiny with responsibility also conceived in terms of duties and obligations (Wyness 2014; Goodall 2019).

Implications of the Responsible Parent

These parent agendas are important in part because they privilege ideas of social mobility and advancement. Despite underlying socio-economic inequalities parents are viewed as agents who are capable of reversing inequality (Vincent 2017, p. 543). In one sense, parents are marginalised from taking advantage of these roles and responsibilities. In another sense, these same roles and responsibilities are argued to mitigate their marginalisation. Children's life-chances are enhanced if parents conform more closely to the neo-liberal idea of investing in their children through greater involvement. An emphasis on parents who 'buck the trend' in projecting their children along these individualised trajectories with limited economic, social and cultural resources, reinforces the idea that the individual parent is both morally and causally responsible for their children's futures (Blanden 2006).

The building up of parents as responsible informed consumers with a capacity to support their children's schooling, not only shifts focus away from these underlying inequalities, it targets 'errant' parents that are viewed as not conforming to these models of parenthood. All three agendas generate conceptions of parents as responsible education agents working alongside schools with children's welfare and wellbeing overriding focal points. At the same time these agendas imply that parents are not always able to take an individualised and marketized perspective on their children's present and future dispositions. In some ways the promotion of the responsible parent has political and institutional potency as media and political narratives capture a widening group of 'marginal' parents unwilling and unable to invest in their children. These narratives focus on the reticence of parents to take advantage of market freedoms in a way that is deemed to be responsible. Walters and Woodward (2007, p. 6) refer to neo-liberal states reinforcing 'poor' parents' marginal status by viewing their 'needs as secondary to their responsibilities'. Parenting

orders were introduced in the UK in the early 2000s as part of a process of rendering parents more responsible for their children's actions. Educational forms of these orders were administered to parents whose children persistently truanted. We might argue here that in the process of being 'responsibilised' parents are also being pathologised. Luet (2017) refers to this as a new-deficit discourse. Despite the rhetoric of greater parental (consumer) choice, each of these agendas generate a normative model that highlights the institutional power of schools and policy makers in constructing individualised and marketised models of parenthood as normative constructs. In other words, structural forces present the involved 'responsible parent' as a standard set of expectations, a construct generated through policy and professional practice in schools. This leads to forms of misrecognition, with parents unable to approximate to these expectations; schools viewing working class parents' relations with schools as abnormal and deviant.

By implication parents' relationships with their children are also viewed as inadequate. Luet (2017) focuses on a small urban population of African American families when referring to this as the misrecognition of institutional power for normative taken for granted values and practices. What is viewed as normal by schools and teachers are in effect imposed on parents within local communities as often alien sets of standards and practices.

While much of the literature has focused on policy expectations about parents engaging with schools and the appropriateness of normalising these expectations, our focus in this paper is on how schools connect with parents. In this paper we shift the empirical focus away from the roles of parents with respect to their children's schooling towards the schools' engagement with the parents. We want to explore what the responsible parent might mean from a teaching and school based vantage point. Our analysis is based on data from a project that centres on what it might mean to reach out to and engage with parents. Critical research on schools' conceptions of parents focuses on the power the school has to construct parental

consent (Ng and Waikman 2015). Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011) refer to the way that teaching staff are actively trying to alter parents' aspirations for their children in socio-economically deprived areas in England. It is not enough for parents to want their children to be happy; parental involvement according to the head teachers is premised on the idea that parents need to be more ambitious for their children in terms of academic success. Another critical theme within the literature on home-school relations is the inadequacies of schools' responses in engaging with parents who do not conform to the individualised notion of the responsible parent. Luet (2017) argues that US schools rarely recognise the unequal distribution of resources among parents. Teachers and school managers according to Luet (2017) tended to marginalise responses from poor, migrant and ethnic minority parents. The discourse on parental responsibility is particularly potent here with teachers' responses to working class and ethnic minority parents framed in terms of regulated forms of 'involvement'.

In this paper we explore the response of one school, Harold Lane, to this discourse on parental responsibility in terms of teachers' assumptions of and routine practices with working class parents. We focus on two research themes that emerge from our research questions. First, we examine the ways in which teaching staff conceptualise parents. Second, we outline a routinized framework of expectations and practices in working with parents through the emergence of a network of engagement. This network consists of three features, a stratum of teachers that mediate between parents and the school; a range of 'wellbeing' group work within school that intermittently incorporates local parents and a multi-agency dimension that connects the school with other agencies and organisations when working with parents. Drawing on our earlier discussion of the construct the 'responsible parent', we go on and discuss the nature of home-school relations at Harold Lane in broader more conceptual

terms. Before turning to the data analysis we discuss the methodological features of the research.

Methodology

The data is taken from a case study, exploring the social and emotional character of one secondary school and the implications this has for relations with the local community. Harold Lane, is a secondary schooled based in a central English city within an area of considerable socio-economic deprivation. Our research was a small case study offering an in-depth analysis of the social and emotional dimensions of schooling from the perspectives of teachers, managers, pupils and parents. While these perspectives incorporate disparate understandings and interests, we take a more 'ecological' stance in that these differing standpoints are incorporated within the school as a single unit of analysis (Star and Griesemer 1989). Hence, we view the school as offering us an 'explanatory interpretive case study', where the focus is on generating new concepts from the one instance (Merriman 1988). Our case offers a degree of ontological openness: rather than educational processes with a narrow emphasis on attainment and achievement, our emphasis is on the school generating 'concentric relational spaces', with the school spilling out into the local community, creating more dialogical networks of communication incorporating parents and various agencies (Downes 2013).

We work within the interpretivist tradition in our analysis: the nature of schooling can be better understood if we take account of the meaning invested in events and interactions by participants within the school (May 2001). In doing so our analysis reveals the relationships and routines within Harold Lane school. As with all case studies we are limited in what we can say about how other schools engage with parents. We are not able to advance our claims

beyond the sprawling networks that incorporate Harold Lane, despite our contention that schools in deprived areas are likely to confront similar challenges (Wood and Warin 2014). What we can claim is that our approach allows us to propose new ideas and concepts around practices and policies relating to the way that this one school engages with parents It permits us to generate a model that both corroborates and challenges expectations and assumptions about schooling in a working class area. As the focus of this paper is the school's engagement with parents we will focus mainly on the data from 15 teachers and 3 members of the school management team. The sample includes subject teachers, those involved with various support centres within the school and engagement teachers (to be discussed later). We followed BERA (2013) ethical conventions as well as discussing the study with each participants. We gave out a participation sheet to all respondents and the ethics sheets were completed offering informed consent. We changed the name and location of the school as well as anonymizing the teachers.

Parents: challenging context, challenging conceptions

Harold Lane is a relatively small secondary school of 715 pupils, located in an area of socio-economic deprivation on the outskirts of the city. 40% of the pupils are designated as multiply deprived and just under half (48%) of the children are on the pupil premium and entitled to free schools. This is significantly higher than the national average of 12.4% in secondary schools (DfE 2018). Half of all pupils are from ethnic minorities and around a third have English as a second language. Moreover, the school takes in children from refugee and migrant families and has a number of travelling Romany children with intermittent

school attendance. The school also regularly takes in children who have been excluded from other schools.

Although all teachers and senior managers referred to the improving reputation of the school, the school has been viewed negatively within the city. As one English teacher stated

> I think our reputation is improving but I think it does have a bad press. Years ago it wasn't as tight knit as it is now. But I would say it doesn't have a particularly good reputation. Other students from other schools, if they find out you are from Harold Lane, they go 'oh that's a crap school, you're not going to get any GCSEs'. As far as LA (Local Authority) goes, as awful as it sounds, it doesn't have a particularly good reputation either.

To some extent, this local conception of the school is reflected in the conceptions that teachers have of the parents. The idea of parental involvement in their children's schooling suggests a subordinate and supportive educational role for parents, one nevertheless, that has been extended in recent years. It was difficult to get a sense of the proportions of parents who posed challenges for teaching staff. Several referred to supportive and 'involved' parents. However, given the predominance of teachers in the sample who worked closely with parents, there was a strong sense that they routinely came into contact with parents with major issues affecting their ability to engage with the school. There was a pervasive view among the teachers interviewed that in challenging barriers to learning, the parents themselves were a considerable barrier to their children's learning. A number of adjectives were drawn on by the teachers to describe these challenges. Table 1 is necessarily selective but illustrates the ways that teachers frame the difficulties that children have learning in terms of seeing parents as barriers to their learning.

Table 1   Teachers' Descriptions of Parents

Notions of responsibility are an implicit feature of teachers' conceptions of the parents with

which they regularly work. Given the sometimes critical nature of teachers' descriptions of

parents, there is only a limited sense in which these conceptions of responsibility connect

with the school improvement agenda discussed earlier. Despite the formal legal relationship

that parents have with their children, and the responsibility agenda that highlights the

proprietorial interests of parents in their children's wellbeing, the concept of responsibility

for children is dispersed across the school's network of engagement.

Network of Engagement

School structures have become more hierarchical in recent years. Neo-liberal conceptions of

accountability, risk and measureable outcomes shape a more performance oriented operation

within schools, tightening up lines of management and regulation (Lindqvist et al 2009;

Fielding 2006). In most schools within England this is accentuated by issues of parental

involvement. The parental responsibility agenda connects with this structure. Pupils are

formally regulated in a hierarchical sense: individualised trajectories are constructed for them

with parents co-opted as consumers, supporters and investors as children carefully follow a

prescribed school career. Within this framework parents are adjuncts with progressively more

responsibilities to support their children's schools. Harold Lane is captured within this

discourse of responsibility and accountability.

For some teachers and senior managers within the school this hierarchical structure generates reassurance, purpose and practical support as teachers take on progressively more responsibilities as the school has to deal with broader social and emotional issues. At the same time the school also challenges this hierarchical structure with its emphasis on more horizontal forms of engagement; generating a sprawling network of social engagement with parents, agencies and other members of the community (Durlak et al 2011). There are clearly formal issues relating to safeguarding: schools are now part of formal structures that incorporate children, parents and various welfare agencies. But parents become a focal point here with the school adopting a more relational approach to the children's learning. The head is under pressure to improve the learning of children 'who come to us already on an underperforming trajectory'. At the same time there is an important emotional and relational dimension to the school:

> We are trying to create a community that is supportive, inclusive and kind. I use the word kindness quite a lot; if you don't create the emotional context for kids to learn …they have got to feel safe and comfortable (Head teacher).

A recurring theme in the interviews with all staff that has become a school mantra, is the idea that the school is in the business of 'challenging barriers to children's learning'. There is a general agreement among staff that parents are a critical focus for school staff, and that supporting parents is an integral feature of the work undertaken at Harold Lane. The assistant head summarised this in imperative terms.

> sometimes our parents will say 'oh, leave us alone'. No, we are not leaving you alone. I think it is the most important thing because you know what, yes, they are being

educated and there are problems. And they are not going to get educated if there are

problems at home. And we have got to sort that and then it will all fit in place. So, we

have got to get into the homes working with families, particularly in areas like this.

Teaching staff were quite explicit when describing the parents as *challenging*. However,

the key aim of Harold Lane was to provide a warm and supportive environment in order to

maximise children's chances of engaging with their learning; we can repeat the mantra,

'tackling barriers to learning'. The focus was the pupil rather than the parent. There was some

awareness of broader structural issues, such as poverty and unemployment. In an important

sense teachers felt that many of the parents were *challenged* as well as challenging. In

advising and shaping the roles that parents were expected to play in taking responsibility for

their children's wellbeing', a network of parental engagement emerged. There were three key

features of this network: a stratum of Engagement Teachers (ET) providing a number of

important mediating links between the school and parents; the development of support groups

in school that sometimes incorporate parents and the role of a multi-agency approach, which

extended this network into other professional spheres. Each in different ways strengthened

the capacity of the school to reach out to parents.

Engagement Teachers

In one sense the employment of ETs connects strongly with the responsibility agenda. ETs

were unqualified members of the teaching staff, employed by the head teacher to help

improve the school's links with parents and in the process, encourage parents to take more

responsibility for their children's learning. 15 ETs were employed by the school, and several

of the subject teachers interviewed had formerly been ETs. The ETs had 3 sets of

responsibilities: to act as cover for absent subject teachers; as mentors for children with social and learning issues and as mediators between the school, the family and various supportive 'external' agencies. The latter parental role was critical within the engagement network.

As part of their parental role the ETs had to monitor pupil attendance. The school offered language support and a range of specialist assistance for children with additional learning and developmental needs. Despite substantial SEN work within the school, children's problems were viewed as being predominantly 'social' in nature. Supporting parents was a way of helping kids to engage with the school and this was seen as a social rather than cognitive issue.

> One of the really successful things about this work is that you separate out which kids have a significant special educational need, something diagnosable, and which are kids not making enough progress for a variety of reasons. We would have had kids in the past on the SEN register who were two years behind in their reading age. The reason they're two years behind is because their attendance was only 50%. They haven't really got a special need – they need to be at school more (Head teacher).

Much of the work undertaken by ETS involved working alongside parents. While ETs were highly critical of some of the parents, some were reticent to approach them directly about their alleged parenting credentials.

> The worst thing to do is to tell the parent 'you're not a good parent' and we are going to tell them what to do. Because they'll be through the door quickly followed by a slam. And we've lost them…So we do it a different way. We will talk about the

child's behaviour. They will say 'he's the same at home'. 'So, let's look at that, let's look at why, let's look at what is going on'.

There is a more subtle approach here. Without explicitly stating any 'norms' of parental, practice the teachers were suggesting strategies for working with children in school that would have the net effect of improving parental practice within the home. TEs here were modeling what they felt were appropriate ways of engaging with children.

ETs adopted a number of strategies in supporting parents. Pupil absenteeism was viewed as a major barrier to learning. Ofsted reports highlighted the way that school management was tackling entrenched low levels of school attendance among pupils. This often meant reaching out to parents by picking children from home and bringing them into school. ETs were regularly involved in picking up students from home, where there had been a history of absenteeism. The improvement of children's learning in school was premised on the idea that that children attended school regularly. As one ET mentioned: 'I go out and pick them up, see the family…put them on a personalised timetable…Put them onto six week plans. We do absolutely anything to get children into school' (ET 4). Sometimes these home visits are unplanned:

> there have been times when students haven't come into school and parents haven't phoned in, so we have just gone out and knocked on the door: 'Oh, how is he doing?' Which is good as it shows the school's idea that we care so much. I think it is better to be proactive (ET 8)

In maintaining this network of engagement much of the work that the ETs undertake with parents is routine. In some cases it is working alongside parents in tackling problems and issues that directly affect the children and their families. Various teachers referred to homelessness and other housing issues, unemployment and chronic physical and mental ill-health. Teachers had a strong sense of the broader structures that inhibited parents. In other instances, teachers had to take on some of the parental responsibilities relinquished by parents themselves. One ET reflected on her work with parents:

> It makes it challenging when parents at home are not engaged with their children and then you have sort of got the emotional attachment there you know. You kind of take on a motherly role. You have to teach the children skills to depend on their own, you know; to rely on their own to wake up in the morning and to tell them to go and get some breakfast; to come into school. Maybe to have a wash, to put the washing machine on for themselves; to wash their clothes. That is the part I find hard when parents aren't engaged.

Finally, there was an element of firefighting, where teachers on occasion had to 'extinguish' highly charged emotional confrontations with parents. Teachers and managers have had to deal with distressed and angry parents who had come into the school. One ET refers to the emotional wellbeing of some parents:

> some (parents) are shouting and screaming at me, and that is what their children do. I have one mum who screams at me all the time. I don't take it personally because she

will ring me and say she is okay. She has got a lot on her plate. She was in here the other day sobbing her heart out.

Here there were often attempts to make sense of various confrontations with parents, but there was clearly a sense that emotional and on occasion physical confrontations were in breach of parents' responsibilities as role models and moral guardians. This was brought out by the head.

> With members of the community the default position is often to argue, to attack, to challenge, often without the ability to sort of reason things through. It is a fight or flight scenario most of the time, but I think they are living on the edge of emotions all the time. So, when a parent comes into school and shouts at me, they are only replicating the way they shout at their kids or shout at somebody who pulls out in front of them in a car. I don't think I am seeing a different dimension to parents' behavior, but, obviously, the damage has been done in the model they give to their kids (Head teacher)

Group work

A second dimension of the engagement network is the school resembling Donzelot's (1980) conception of the social, in its generation of a local network of support and various attempts to regulate children and their parents' lifestyles. There are elements of a 'psy complex' in the way that there is considerable group based and therapeutic support within the school. This has had the effect of drawing parents and various agencies within the school. The development of support groups was ostensibly set up for children with social and emotional

concerns. There were a number of groups, focusing on children's emotions through the 'wellbeing group'; their sense of self with the 'self-esteem group'; and the pupils' social capacities through 'friendship' groups. There were also importantly *ad hoc* groups set up that were attended by parents. One history teacher who had formerly been an ET referred to a Family SEAL group (Social and Emotional Learning), a variant on the national initiative to improve children's emotional wellbeing and learning (Humphrey et al 2008). Parents were invited into the school to take part in group sessions to improve the management of their emotions and provide them with more appropriate role models for their children.

> We have family SEAL. It helped them (parents) with bringing up their children and things, especially behavioural management. We used to tell them that they needed help and suggested methods they can use in the house to kind of discipline them and things like that. (History teacher 3)

Multi-agency approach

An important feature of this network of support was an all-embracing multi-agency approach: the school had developed strong links with social services, mental health services, community workers and Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB). This multi-agency approach was part of the *Every Child Matters* initiative set up by a previous Labour government in the mid 2000s. A legacy of this at Harold Lane was the various links that engagement teachers had with external services. We can see a conscious attempt at constructing the responsible parents through the establishing of more formal contractual relations. Parents here became the focal point at meetings involving teachers, parents and other professionals from outside the school. Here there were effectively two approaches: a more formal set of procedures for engaging with parents who had come to the attention of various agencies for safeguarding reasons.

Social Services, educational welfare and National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) were prominent partners here developing more contractual relations with parents. There were also ad hoc and less formal processes of support for parents, particularly those in economic adversity: poverty and homelessness were critical frames of reference for teachers when working with parents.

Teaching staff were often involved in various disparate 'emergency' situations including homelessness and emotional breakdowns. Several teachers referred to the work that they had undertaken with CAB around how to support parents in financial difficulties. Three of the teachers had been trained to work with CAB in being able to offer parents advice when they find themselves without any income or becoming homeless.

> We had a lady who was suffering from depression. We got her citizen's advice. We did something for her, rather just go 'Oh Yeah' (ET 9)

> If a parent is worried about something and distressed we can refer them and get them an appointment straight away (with CAB) (ET 10)

Outcomes, Origins and Responsibilities

The school is not excluded from the pressures to perform. While teachers interviewed seemed to be more preoccupied with the emotional, physical and social wellbeing of children within the school, there were intermittent references to exam anxiety and there was some awareness that older pupils were under pressure to perform in exam settings. Yet there is little sense that Harold Lane is simply bringing parents in line in order to improve school outcomes.

Performance suggests test results: children are projected along a trajectory located in schools, managed by educational professionals, with parental involvement refining children's performance. While the neo-liberal agenda dominates in terms of bureaucratic and political pressures on the school, various strategies have been developed by the school to cope with broader economic and social pressures on children and their families. The concept of school performance when it is used by teachers has a much broader definition focusing on children's emotional and social wellbeing.

In some respects Harold Lane focused on origins rather than outcomes. While the dominant parental agendas presuppose an emphasis on destinations rather than socio-economic backgrounds,, the prevailing critique of these agendas focuses on the relationship between origins and outcomes, with the former still determining the latter (Luet 2017). However, 'the responsible parent' can be viewed as a dominant construct legitimating the narrative that parents can help buck the trend and break this deterministic relationship (Vincent 2017; Ng and Waikman 2015). There was limited sociological critique from within Harold Lane. At the same time, there was an acute awareness of 'origins' in two particular forms. First there was a localised sensitivity to the way that socio-economic factors shaped the nature of parenting, which underpinned children's capacity to thrive in school. Poverty and homelessness were important reference points for teachers when discussing the challenges faced by children and their families. Secondly, these factors were often viewed as an obstacle to 'origins', in terms of children's 'starting points', their ability to attend school. The development of a network of social and emotional support at Harold Lane that extends into the local community connects with the need to engage with parents whose children are competing for high grades. Nevertheless, there is much more active involvement in ensuring that children are in a position to participate as well as compete in school. At Harold Lane, the issue of children's 'presence' in school was as much an issue as their 'performance'. One of

the notable public successes of the school in recent years according to inspection reports was the improvement in attendance. Teachers were engaging with parents at a pretty fundamental level here in ensuring children are in a position to compete and perform in school. As one teacher stresses

> What the school tries to achieve is to become a community…Obviously as a school we have targets that we have got to meet. We have exam grades that we have got to get. But we can't focus on that because as you know, if a child can't learn in the classroom, there's loads of other stuff going on in the emotional world. They just won't focus. It's just a barrier. Who wants to hear about geography when you haven't got anywhere to live that night. That's what we are sometimes up against (Individualised Learning manager).

In some ways the local socio-economic context of the school, brings into question the relevance of the responsibility agenda. While staff were well aware of the major economic and social challenges faced by many of the parents, their experiences of these challenges were normalised within the engagement network. Poverty, homelessness and unemployment were major issues for some of the children and their parents. The group work, mentoring, the work of the engagement teachers and a broader ethos of 'kindness' generated routines and practices within the network mitigating and softening the social and emotional effects of these challenges. There was an element of judgement being made by the teachers: some of them were often highly critical of parents. However, the punitive element of 'parental responsibility' was rarely invoked. Only two teachers mentioned parenting 'orders': in both cases formal legal work undertaken with parents was preventative: the engagement network was sometimes articulated as an early warning system.

One of the key features of the neo-liberal conception of parental responsibility was the idea that parents' involvement with their schooling was based on the idea that children were an economic investment in the future. There is a sense in which our data connects with this idea of parental responsibility. While much of the work of the teachers was to work through fundamental economic and health related challenges to children's learning, teachers' conceptions of parents focused on their inability to support children's social and educational development. An important theme here was parents alleged inability to see children as social and moral investments in the future. If we refer back to teachers' conceptions of parents as 'inadequate and inappropriate', children in some households had grown up too early and thus missed out on appropriate investments made by parents as they develop. As one teacher stated 'children are often treated like adults'.

Conclusion

Despite the neo-liberal agenda of autonomous individual parents choosing and investing in their children's futures, Harold Lane resembles Donzelot's (1980) concept of the social, where children's broader wellbeing as well as their education, is surveilled or 'policed' through the close links that the school has with parents. There is a 'deficit' discourse among teachers when discussing their engagement with parents. Teachers condemn the practices of parents, through an assessment of pupil behaviour and attitude, but on occasion this critique of parents is a direct consequence of encounters with parents in school. The highly emotional responses of both pupils and parents are often foregrounded when teachers reflect on the nature of 'eventful' interactions. At the same time this deficit is normally articulated in terms of encouraging or persuading parents to do better (Devine and Cockburn 2018). There is an attempt to connect with parents at a level that Fielding (2006) refers to as 'human

flourishing'. The development of working relationships with parents are vital: 'kindness' is a central value and ongoing dialogue across a network of engagement is crucial. Contracts and overt levels of control are occasionally invoked, - this is unavoidable given the emphasis on safeguarding and risk assessment (Lindqvist et al 2009). There were occasions when this was felt by teachers and parents to be intruding in family as a 'private' realm (Wyness 2014). However, the jagged edges of formal authority and penality are absent throughout most of the work that teachers undertake with parents.

While we visited the school on several occasions in order to collect our data, we accept that we never fully understood, the work that the school undertook in trying to connect with parents living in highly adverse sets of circumstances. We have reported elsewhere on the school from a parental and pupil perspective (Wyness and Lang 2016) We would like to have interviewed more teachers and spent more time immersed within the network of engagement. Moreover, despite several teachers telling us that Harold Lane was unique in terms of the engagement teachers and the nature of the network of engagement, we cannot extrapolate from our data whether the school was typical of other schools with similar social geographies. Anecdotal local evidence suggests that the engagement network singled the school out as unique in reaching out to a community of parents. Nevertheless, literature on economic and social structures within capitalist societies identify families on the social margins who have limited links with dominant educational agenda and parental agendas. Our paper highlights the capacity of one 'marginal' school to respond to parents experiencing economic and social adversities in creative ways.

References

Ball, S. (2003) The teacher's soul and the terrors of Performativity, *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215-228.

Becker, G. (1993) *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Special Reference to Education*, 3rd edition, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).

Blanden, J. (2006) Bucking the trend': What enables those who are disadvantaged in childhood to succeed later in life? HMSO: Working Paper, 31, Department of Work and Pensions.

Dahlstedt, M. and A. Fejes (2014). Family makeover: Coaching, confession and parental responsibilisation. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 22(2): 169-188.

Department for Education (DfE) (2018) *Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics January 2018,*

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719226/Schools_Pupils_and_their_Characteristics_2018_Main_Text.pdf consulted March 2019

Devine, D. and Cockburn, T. (2018) Theorizing children's social citizenship: New welfare states and inter-generational justice, *Childhood*, 25(2), 142-157

Doherty, C. and Dooley, K. (2018) Responsibilising Parents: the Nudge towards Shadow Tutoring, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 39(4), 551-566.

Donzelot, J. (1980) *The Policing of Families*, (London, Hutchinson).

Downes, P. (2013). Developing a framework and agenda for students' voices in the school system across Europe: From diametric to concentric relational spaces for early school leaving prevention. *European Journal of Education*, 48(3), 346-362.

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011) The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions', *Child Development*, 82(1), 405–432.

Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) (2013) https://www.eif.org.uk/ consulted 15.3.19

Fenton, P., Ocasio-Stoutenberg, L. and Harry, B. (2017) The Power of Parental Engagement: Socio-cultural Considerations in the Quest for Equity, *Theory into Practice*, 56 (3), 214-225.

Fielding, M. (2006) Leadership, radical student engagement and the necessity of person-centred education, *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 9(4), 299-313.

Goodall, J. and Montgomery, M. (2014) Parental Involvement to Parental Engagement: A Continuum, *Educational Review*, 66(4), 399-410.

Goodall, J. (2019). Parental engagement and deficit discourses: absolving the system and solving parents. *Educational Review: 1-13*.

Gunter, H. (2012) *Leadership and the Reform of Education*, (Bristol, Policy Press).

Holloway, S. and Pimlott-Wilson H. (2011) The politics of aspiration: neo-liberal education policy, 'low' parental aspirations, and primary school Extended Services in disadvantaged communities, *Children's Geographies*, 9(1), 79-94

Humphrey, N. Kalambouka, A. Bolton, J. and Lendrum, A. (2008) *Primary social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL),* (London, DCSF).

Lindqvist, P., Nordanger, U-K and Landahl, J. (2009) Insurance and Assurance: teachers' strategies in the regimes of risk and audit, *European Educational Research Journal,* 8(4), 508-59.

Luet, K. (2017) Disengaging Parents in Urban Schooling, *Educational Policy*, 31(5), 674-702

Merriam, S. (1988) *Case Study Research in Education*, (San Francisco, Josey-Bass).

Ng, S. and Yuen, W. (2015) The Micro-Politics of Parental Involvement in School Education in Hong Kong: Ethnocentrism, Utilitarianism or Policy Rhetoric! *Educational Review*, 67(2), 253-271.

Ó Breacháin, A., O'Toole (2013) L., 'Pedagogy or politics? Cyclical trends in literacy and numeracy in Ireland and beyond', *Irish Educational S*tudies, 32(4), 401-419.

Parton, N. (2014) *The Politics of Child Protection: Contemporary Developments and Future Directions*, (Basingstoke, Harmondsworth).

Riots Communities and Victims Panel (2012). *After the riots.* (London, Riots Communities and Victims Panel).

Star and S. and Griesemer, J. (1989) Institutional Ecology: 'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology 1907-39, *Social Studies*, 19, 387- 420.

Vincent, C. (2017) 'The Children have only one Education and you have to have to make sure it is a good one': Parenting and Parent-School Relations in a Neo-Liberal Age, *Gender and Education*, 29(5), 541-557.

Wainwright, E. and Marandet, E. (2017) Education, Parenting and Family: The Social Geographies of Family Learning, *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(2), 213-229.

Walters, R. and Woodward, R. (2007) Punishing ''Poor' Parents: 'Respect', 'Responsibility' and Parenting Orders in Scotland, *Youth Justice*, 7(1), 5-20.

Wood, P. and Warin, J. (2014) Social and emotional aspects of learning: Complementing, compensating and countering parental practices, *British Educational Research Journal*, 40(6), 937-95.

Wyness, M. (2014) Children, family and the State: revisiting public and private realms, *Sociology*, 48 (1), 59-74.

Wyness, M. and Lang, P. (2016) The Social and Emotional Dimensions of Schooling; a Case Study in Challenging the 'Barriers to Learning', *British Educational Research Journal,* 42 (6). 1041-1055