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Introduction

This book explores one of the most imperative challenges in the field of education – how to form relationships with parents who encounter difficulties engaging with their children’s school. Although this is undoubtedly a daunting task, it is a necessary one to assist children’s learning and development. There are encouraging indications that the approaches currently adopted by schools to enhance collaboration with parents are becoming increasingly effective. A recent survey by the Office for Standards in Education found that all participating schools valued the involvement of parents and carers, and the majority of them were rated by inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education as good or outstanding at involving parents (Office for Standards in Education, 2007). Furthermore, research in the United Kingdom on parents’ perspectives of their involvement in education has indicated that their viewpoints are broadly positive and that there has been a recent rise in parents’ perceived level of involvement. Peters et al. (2008) sought parental views during a telephone survey and found that the proportion of parents who reported feeling very involved in their child’s school life had significantly increased over the last few years: from 29% in 2001, 38% in 2004, to 51% in 2007. Furthermore, it was found that more parents were likely to regard

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their child's education as primarily their responsibility (28%). This marks a change from previous years, when parents tended to view education as the school's responsibility.

Despite these encouraging indications that parents generally feel more involved in their child's school life than in the past, the difficulties and complexities that many schools face when attempting to develop effective relationships with parents can be profound. Carvalho (2001) argues that the relationship between schools and parents is often characterized by intrinsic tensions and mutual feelings of suspicion and hostility. This viewpoint is echoed in Jackson and Remillard's (2005) concern that rather than viewing parents as a source of support, schools can at times see some parents as deficits to children and as 'problems to overcome', particularly parents from low-income communities. The need to engage with parents, who for a variety of reasons might experience difficulties in accessing schools and who might be termed 'hard to reach', is undoubtedly one of the most demanding issues facing teachers in today's schools.

It should be acknowledged at the outset that the importance of schools and professionals developing productive relationships with parents has been recognized for some time. This field, traditionally referred to as 'parental involvement', was identified in the United Kingdom as an important matter for educationists in the Plowden report *Children and Their Primary Schools* (Department for Education and Science, 1967), and has since achieved increasing prominence as a priority in education policy. The Plowden report comprised a major review of primary education. It highlighted the importance of placing the child at the centre of educational practice and emphasized the key role that parents played in supporting children's learning. Aspects of this report now seem quaint and dated. For example, in Chapter 4 of the report, 'Participation by parents', there is an account of an interview with one of the participants who recommended that parents should 'know their children's teachers at least as well as they know the milkman'. However, considering that this document was written half a century ago, many of the recommendations and observations seem remarkably prescient; for example, strong support is expressed for the development of 'community schools' that provide after-school services for children, their parents and members of the locality. Furthermore, there was recognition that schools need to adopt flexibility and determination to engage some groups of parents – a theme that resonates strongly with current thinking: 'However many and

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pressing the invitations from school, some parents will not respond, and amongst them will be some of those whose children most need help. Should they be sought out? It would be a policy of despair to do nothing about them' (Department for Education and Science, 1967, section 113).

A decade after the Plowden report, another influential government publication was launched that later came to be regarded as a milestone in education policy making in the United Kingdom: *The report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People*, or the *Warnock Report* (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1978). This review of provision for children with educational and other difficulties is now seen as a watershed in the development of contemporary perspectives and attitudes to children with special needs and their families. A full chapter is devoted to parental involvement, in which there is a great emphasis on the need for the relationship between professionals and parents to be one of partnership: '... the successful education of children with special educational needs is dependent upon the full involvement of their parent; indeed, unless the parents are seen as equal partners in the educational process the purpose of our report will be frustrated' (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1978, p. 150).

Within 20 years of the publication of the Warnock report, parental involvement in education in the United Kingdom was recognized as a core element of effective education for all children (not just those with special needs) and was attracting increasing attention from the government. Funding was secured for the 'Parental Involvement in Children's Education' (PICE) team, which produced a number of influential research reports and other publications, for example *Involving Parents, Raising Achievement* (Bastiani and White, 2003). Politicians became increasingly interested in parents' contribution to education, and at the 2000 Labour Party Conference, David Blunkett (then minister for education) announced, 'Education is a partnership in which parents have a critical role. We want them to engage much more in the education of their children than in the past. Their children need it. It can make a huge difference.' David Blunkett's words point to one of the key reasons why parents' involvement in education is now internationally viewed as a priority by governments. The 'huge difference' that David Blunkett is referring to is the potential for parents to improve children's academic achievement, and this has become an enduring theme in education policy in recent years.

Parental involvement in children's learning

Ever since the introduction of the National Curriculum in the United Kingdom during the 1990s, there has been a very strong emphasis on raising academic attainment within schools by focusing on the curriculum and teaching methods. However, interest amongst researchers and policy makers has started to shift to factors outside school that might contribute to improvements in learning, and it is increasingly being acknowledged that the support provided at home by parents and other family members can also play a crucial role in how well children perform at school. The theme of schools engaging with parents in order to improve children's learning and development has become a priority within UK educational policy, and the strength of the government's conviction that this is an important initiative is indicated in the Standards Site web page on parental involvement, where it is asserted that children will be much more likely to view school positively and be receptive to learning if they see that their parents are enthusiastic about education. It is also proposed that engaging with parents is therefore 'one of the most vital parts of providing children with an excellent education' (www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/parentalinvolvement).

The UK government's view that good parenting is essential for children's development is also evident in *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003c). In this landmark publication, the government acknowledges that parents' relationship with their children has a profound impact on their development: 'The bond between the child and their parents is the most crucial influence on a child's life. Parenting has a strong impact on a child's educational development, behaviour and mental health' (Department for Education and Skills, 2003c, p. 39). This point has been eloquently discussed by Lochrie (2004) in her report on the place of family learning. Lochrie argues that the education of children has for too long ignored the pivotal role played by children's parents and other family members. She suggests that the most effective means of helping children to learn and develop is through a continuous, respectful interchange with parents. Lochrie's proposal that professionals need to engage with parents in order to support them in their care of children is a theme that permeates UK government policy. In a statement that epitomizes the extent to which support for parents is seen as a means for enhancing

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children's learning and development and that engagement with parents is an imperative aspect of policy and practice, the government declares that supporting parents and carers lies at the heart of its approach to improving children's lives (Department for Education and Skills, 2003c). A core set of UK government plans for supporting parents is set out in *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003c), and these range from the development of universal services for all families to the provision of more specialist support, targeted at families considered to have particular needs. The *Every Child Matters* proposals include the following:

- **Extending universal services such as family learning programmes.** Such initiatives include the government's *Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy: A Guide for Extended Schools* which can be downloaded from the government's Teachernet website (www.teachernet.gov.uk). The aim of such materials is to help parents engage in their children's development and provide opportunities to increase family involvement in learning. For a full discussion of parent education programmes, see Nicola McGrath's chapter 'Engaging the hardest to reach parents in parenting-skills programmes', in Pomerantz et al. (2007).
- **Providing specialist parenting support.** In addition to services open to all parents, the UK government has identified a need for a range of tailor-made help and support for specific groups, for example home visiting programmes for some families with very young children.
- **Ensuring better communication between parents and schools.** This initiative involves creating more opportunities for families (especially fathers) to become more closely involved with events in school through parents' associations and school governors.
- **Developing parent education programmes.** It is intended that these are targeted at the parents of younger children aged 5–8 years, and may involve weekly sessions where parents are trained to use behaviour management techniques.

It is worth noting that whilst *Every Child Matters* addresses the needs of children in England, both the Welsh Assembly government

and the Scottish government have expressed interest in this policy development. It is evident that some of the core principles that underpin the approach being adopted in England have been given similar prominence in policies developed in these countries. In the National Assembly for Wales' (2000) *Children and Young People: A Framework for Partnership*, the fundamental importance of the role played by parents is recognized. As with policy in England, it is acknowledged that whilst all parents need some help with the challenges of bringing up children, '... attention to the most deprived areas, where frequently the formal and informal support networks are at their weakest, is particularly beneficial in reducing disadvantage in later life' (Welsh Assembly, 2004, p. 33). Furthermore, in the Welsh Assembly's policy priorities for 2001–2010, set out in *The Learning Country* (National Assembly for Wales, 2001), the emphasis on support for families echoes that found in *Every Child Matters*: 'We aim to give every child a flying start. We seek to plant ambition and high expectation early on. We wish to support parents to enable this to happen' (National Assembly for Wales, 2001, p. 15).

The Scottish Executive (2007) in its publication *Reaching Out to Families* (www.scotland.gov.uk) presents a refreshingly positive introduction to good practice on parental involvement in Scottish schools. This document sets out key messages on building relationships with families, with a strong, unifying theme that partnership grows when parents feel respected and valued. There is also an emphasis on the importance of viewing partnership as a two-way process, which means that schools have much to learn from parents in the same way as parents have much to learn from schools; see Box 1.1 for a summary of these principles.

Box 1.1 Core principles taken from *Reaching Out to Families* (Scottish Executive, 2007).

Both school staff and parents need to see the benefit of communication

When school staff have an awareness of family background, they can find it easier to understand the issues children may be experiencing at home. Parents who recognize that professionals in

school respect them and value their own views are more likely to trust professionals.

All staff are active participants in a whole school approach

Each member of staff will have current insight into the needs of the child and family – it is important to allow parents to connect with staff with whom they feel most comfortable.

Staff who understand parents' concerns and circumstances will find it easier to build relationships

Most parents will experience difficulties in their parenting at one time or another. Family circumstances can change suddenly and dramatically, whilst for some families, conflict, fragility or pressure may be more sustained.

Draw on resources within communities and families

We know that children do better when their parents support their learning. Schools may tap into community resources and other council services to draw support, for example family learning projects, specialist support and services dedicated to specific communities or identity issues.

Parents will respond to staff who show care for their children

Some parents will remember their own negative experiences of school and feel that these are replayed or reinforced when their children experience difficulties. It is important to state clearly at the beginning of a meeting that the staff have the interests of the child as their central concern and that they therefore share the same viewpoint as the parent.

Support all staff to support children better

Staff who address complex and emotive issues with families will themselves require support in order to be confident in their role, for example from senior management or peers.

The above themes have been endorsed in Scotland by the publication of *Getting It Right for Every Child* (www.scotland.gov.uk/gettingitright), a national programme that aims to incorporate new thinking and best practice for all professionals working with young people, parents and carers. A prominent feature of the approach is the building of solutions with and around children and their families in order to support a positive shift in culture, systems

and practice. The model encourages practitioners to plot well-being indicators and to identify resilience and protective factors in order to make constructive plans for all children.

The Scottish Executive's key principles present a positive and constructive framework for developing relationships with parents. This is in contrast to aspects of policy in England in which a more coercive note is introduced for some parents described as hard to reach, and in which there is a focus not only on parents' needs but also on parents' responsibilities. The emphasis on parents' responsibilities has become a strongly endorsed topic in UK policy, for example: 'Some parents will be harder to engage and their problems may be more entrenched. When persisting truanting or anti-social behaviour is condoned by parents, compulsory action may be needed to ensure parents meet their responsibilities' (Department for Education and Skills, 2003c, p. 43). Crozier and Reay (2005) have expressed concern about such compulsory action, and suggest that the UK government may be adopting approaches that will not lead to equitable participation for some parents: '... [the] Government has never, seemingly, been convinced that parents were pulling their weight with respect to their children's education ... we have the Anti-Social Behaviour Act (2003), to cover extended absences and truancy. In addition, we saw the introduction of parenting classes both on a voluntary basis and as a punishment for such putative misdemeanours' (Crozier and Reay, 2005, p. ix). Concerns about pressures on parents to meet their responsibilities are addressed in more detail in Chapter 6.

Parental engagement and raising standards

As mentioned above, the UK government's encouragement to schools to engage with parents stems in large part from a belief that parental involvement raises academic attainment in schools. The evidence for a link between parental involvement and educational achievement comes from a variety of sources. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) conducted a wide-ranging review of the literature on the effect of parental involvement on children's achievement and adjustment, and examined two discrete sets of literature. One encompassed the process of **spontaneously occurring** parental involvement and its impact on children's educational outcomes. The second body of literature

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focused on evaluations of **interventions** designed to enhance parental involvement. Desforges' review indicates that spontaneous parental involvement is diverse and multifaceted and might include parents modelling constructive social and educational values, parent-child discussions, parents' contact with schools to share information and parents' participation in school events. Unsurprisingly, it emerged that the level and type of spontaneous parental involvement is influenced by social background factors such as mothers' own level of education, single-parent status, and the availability of material resources in the home. Another factor found to have an impact on involvement was parents' perception of their role and how confident they felt about involvement. There were indications that parental involvement diminishes as children grow older, and there is some evidence that the extent of parental engagement can be influenced by the child taking an active mediating role. Desforges notes that parenting seems to make an impact indirectly through moulding the child's self-concept as a learner and through the setting of high expectations. As for interventions to promote parental involvement, Desforges concludes that many of the evaluations of interventions are methodologically weak and that it is therefore not possible to draw firm conclusions about their efficacy in terms of influencing pupil achievement.

One of the most important findings from Desforges' review of research is that children's academic achievement and adjustment are significantly influenced by spontaneous 'at-home good parenting'. This is defined as the provision of a settled and secure home environment, an atmosphere where learning and enquiry are stimulated, plenty of parent-child conversations, parents upholding positive social and educational principles and high aspirations regarding personal fulfilment. Desforges claims that the impact of parental involvement on primary age children is very substantial – that it is greater than the impact of differences between schools, and that this occurs in families across the full range of social backgrounds and ethnic groups. A similar conclusion is reached by a research team at the University of Warwick, which has recently published a report on engaging parents in raising achievement (Harris and Goodall, 2007). These authors conclude that parental engagement is a powerful mechanism for raising student achievement in schools. Interestingly, in a similar vein to Desforges, these authors emphasized that parents have the greatest influence on the achievement

of pupils through supporting their learning **in the home environment** rather than through more formal involvement in school activities.

It is worth noting that the evidence for the existence of a causal link between parental involvement and a rise in children's achievement has been questioned by some researchers. Mattingly et al. (2002) conducted a review of American studies on parent involvement programmes and considered whether such interventions are an effective means of improving student learning and other outcomes. The authors came to the same conclusion as Desforges and Abouchaar (2003): they were critical of the studies' research designs and other aspects of methodology, and concluded that the evidence for the efficacy of such programmes is lacking. Although we need to be cautious about general claims concerning parental involvement interventions and children's achievement at school, this does not mean that such initiatives are not effective – it just means that we do not yet have the evidence to prove the point. This is an exciting time to develop school-home projects, and, in later chapters, there will be discussion of a range of innovative and creative programmes that have led to improvements in children's and young people's learning, in parents' sense of self-efficacy, and in a range of other positive outcomes.

Social deprivation and 'Hard to Reach' Parents

As noted in the previous section, there is evidence that parents increasingly feel involved with their children's schools. However, in spite of the general high quality of home-school relations, many schools experience difficulties in engaging **all** parents. Barriers to parental involvement may be particularly marked in areas characterized by deprivation. In a wide-ranging review of schools in economically disadvantaged areas, Muijs et al. (2004) comment that such schools often have levels of performance that do not match national averages and may not be well positioned to encourage parents to be strongly involved in their children's education. A key challenge for teachers working in schools in disadvantaged areas is to recognize and value the diversity represented in the families they serve, for there is a danger that school policies for involving parents can be based on

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notions of ‘model’ families and may not take full account of cultural, linguistic and other barriers to involvement (Carpentier and Lall, 2005).

These issues are increasingly acknowledged by policy makers in the United Kingdom. The government’s report *Support for Parents: Best Start for Children* (Department for Education and Skills, 2005b) asserts that as some parents have greater needs and face greater challenges than others, it is important to provide more support for those who need it most. There is an acknowledgment of the importance of targeting families living in the most disadvantaged areas, and to put in place preventive strategies to tackle so-called ‘cycles of deprivation’ in order to prevent an intergenerational transmission of difficulties. In its publication *Aiming High for Children: Support for Families* (Department for Education and Skills, 2007), there is a similarly strong focus on the need for service providers to make themselves more accessible to vulnerable or excluded groups, including ‘hard to reach’ parents. Building resilience in children is viewed as a priority, and it is suggested that effective parenting is a key protective factor in the development of such resilience. In this document, the government again emphasizes that schools and other public services need to reach out to families who need them most, and the extended schools programme from the *Every Child Matters* agenda is viewed as a key initiative to achieve this goal.

The acknowledgement that collaboration with parents may be particularly difficult in areas characterized by deprivation chimes with a feature of medical service delivery that has become known as the inverse care law. First described by Julian Tudor Hart (1971), the inverse care law declares that the availability of good medical care tends to vary inversely with the needs of the population served, and that those living in poorer areas with greater health needs are apt to receive worse medical provision. In other words, those who need health care most are least likely to receive it. It is probable that the inverse care law is not confined to medical practice and may be a feature of a range of services, including education. An indication that such a process may be in operation comes from the work of a number of researchers who have noted that parental involvement is strongly influenced by social background factors and that engagement with schools tends to be much lower amongst groups living in deprived conditions (e.g. Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Parents living in areas marked by social deprivation and who are viewed as ‘hard to reach’ are

typically those who might gain most from closer collaboration with schools.

However, terminology in this field can be problematic, and descriptors such as 'hard to reach' and 'difficult to engage' have started to be criticized. There is apprehension that such expressions can lead to deficit-centred ways of viewing some groups. Barton et al. (2004) investigated parental involvement in urban schools located in areas of high poverty in the United States and explored parents' perspectives about their engagement with education. These authors are critical of the predominance of deficit models in the literature, and the way that parents tend to be portrayed in research studies as 'subjects' to be controlled, lacking in agency and power.

RESEARCH QUOTATION

'Deficit models for understanding parents and education position parents as subjects to be manipulated . . . They neither take into account the networks of individuals and resources that frame participation in scope, focus, and purpose, nor the unique experiences that frame the parents' beliefs and forge parental capital.'

Barton et al., 2004, p. 4

A similar concern about deficit approaches to families has been raised in the United Kingdom by Dyson and Robson (1999). They reviewed over 300 publications on the effectiveness and effects of school–family–community links. A key critique highlighted by these authors is that parental engagement initiatives may undermine or overlook families' practices and values, and may impose school values on communities, thereby marginalizing some families even further. Evidence that deficit-centred perspectives may still influence aspects of professional practice comes from the work of Schmidt Neven (2008). She conducted research with a range of professionals working with children and families and found that they often adopted a predominantly pathological outlook - parents tend to be blamed for their children's problems. A general concern is that schools and other agencies may overlook the diversity and richness that typify groups from different backgrounds, and terminology such as 'hard to reach' may subtly contribute to such deficit-centred outlooks.

Another problem with the term ‘hard to reach’ is that a focus on family-related deficits diverts attention from an examination of structural and other barriers that some families experience when trying to become involved in education. As mentioned above, there is currently interest amongst both researchers and policy makers in the United Kingdom regarding the concept of resilience in children and young people. Conventionally, resilience has been considered as a characteristic or trait that is an individual-related aspect of personality. Recent research exploring the development of psychological well-being and resilience highlights the need not only to examine *individual* factors such as personal skills and attitudes, but also the importance of studying *external* factors that act as protective processes for children and young people (such as reducing bullying in schools) (Roffey et al., 2008). It is encouraging that there is a focus not only on individuals’ coping skills but also on social-environmental factors. The point is that where there are difficulties – children struggling to develop resilience, or parents finding it hard to engage with schools – it is important that there is scrutiny of structural/societal barriers that might be playing a part, not just factors operating at the individual level.

Overarching theoretical approach

This is an appropriate place to present a set of ideas that form the foundation for much of the focus of this book. This underpinning comprises two theoretical stances, which together provide a conceptual framework that will help to stitch together a range of different initiatives and research projects that are discussed in later chapters.

The first underlying construct is **sociocultural theory**. This framework for understanding human development and learning draws extensively on the work of Lev Vygotsky, who emphasized the social, interactive nature of children’s development and the importance of social contexts for learning. Vygotsky’s theories highlighted the part played by more knowledgeable others in directly supporting the learning process, and he argued that parents and carers, older or more experienced children, teachers and other adults play very important roles in supporting and scaffolding children’s learning. For Vygotsky, the quality of support provided by more competent others is crucial.

Rogoff has developed this conception of learning as a collaborative enterprise, proposing that children's development can be viewed as a form of 'guided participation', where the child or young person stays close to a trusted guide, pays attention to the guide's actions, joins in whenever possible, and responds to any coaching that is offered (Rogoff, 1991). The implications for practitioners, researchers and parents that flow from this conceptualization include the following:

- Children's development cannot be separated from the contexts in which it occurs.
- It is important to understand children and families in authentic home or school settings, accepting that conditions and environments in which people live, play and work are often unpredictable, sometimes fraught, always complex.
- A key challenge for researchers working in these social contexts is to find ways of capturing relevant data without oversimplifying, bearing in mind how intricate, typically, are the dynamics of family or classroom and interactions between the two.
- Children's development tends to stem from 'guided participation'. Effective learning often occurs when adults scaffold children's thinking and learning in social contexts, focusing on joint problem-solving, and where adults both at home and at school have an important role, especially if they work together.
- Values are generally passed from generation to generation, and cultural differences between families are inevitable. Teachers and other professionals need to be wary when engaging with specific cultural contexts of jumping to conclusions about the inherence or hegemony of certain values, and open to others' ways of conducting their lives and bringing up children – ways that may seem unfamiliar and strange.

The professionals who developed the research projects presented in this book recognize that learning is much more than the didactic transmission of information, more than the mere conveyance of knowledge from adult to child. All these initiatives reflect elements of sociocultural theory, underlining the crucial role played by teachers, family members and others in scaffolding children's and young people's learning.

The second key theoretical stance that underpins this book is the notion of **social capital**. This is one of the most powerful conceptual

foundations for understanding differences between families' capacity to become engaged in their children's education. It is worth noting that the concept of social capital has been interpreted in alternative ways by different writers, and there is not always consensus about what this term means. Ball (2003) has expressed concern about the lack of clarity in terminology in this field, commenting that differing kinds of social capital have been proposed, and that, at times, these proposed forms overlap and seem similar. However, in his book *Bowling Alone* (2000), Robert Putnam presents an authoritative account of the decline of community activity in US society which includes a detailed examination of the notion of social capital. In Putnam's analysis, social capital refers to the connections and social relations that individuals develop – contacts that result in mutual support and co-operation, making our lives more productive and providing benefits that promote our personal interests. These social linkages might span a continuum – from neighbourliness and membership of informal networks such as a walking group to the professional connections we develop at work and membership of more formal associations such as a ten-pin bowling league.

Putnam makes an important distinction between **bonding** and **bridging** social capital. Bonding social capital is inward looking, tends to lead to exclusivity, and results in tight-knit groups characterized by sameness and uniformity. Examples might include a church-based reading group for women, or contacts made at a stylish country club. Bridging networks, on the other hand, are more inclusive, tend to be outward looking and involve heterogeneous groupings of people from diverse social contexts. Bridging contacts are often loose-knit and comprise 'weak' ties and relationships (Ball, 2003). Such contacts can provide important opportunities for individuals seeking information or advancement. Examples of bridging social capital might include the civil rights movement in the United States, the form of connections that are developed in the United Kingdom by parents in primary schools when waiting for their children in the playground, or a wide network of contacts and potential contacts that some families develop (e.g. through acquaintances of relatives). The important point here is that both forms of social capital, bonding and bridging, can provide families with advantages. As the old adage has it, what matters most is not **what** you know but **who** you know. For parents who might be unsure about how the education system works, being able to contact a relative or friend who is a teacher or education professional may

provide valuable information about how to approach staff at their child's school.

A third form of social capital has been proposed, and this is the notion of **cultural** capital, developed by Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist. Bourdieu was interested in why educational outcomes for children from different families can vary so dramatically. He argued that these variations are to a large extent explained in terms of differing levels of cultural capital, which includes the values and outlooks that we pick up from our background and culture, bequeathed to us usually by our families through a process of socialization. Cultural capital may be embodied in a certain way of speaking, or may be reflected in our educational experiences and qualifications. Of course, all children have cultural experiences, but some cultural experiences (e.g. exposure to certain linguistic structures and familiarity with certain learning opportunities) may be more 'valuable' than others as they mesh in more closely with schools' curricula and teaching methods. Lareau (2000) provides an astute analysis of the mechanisms whereby social background can provide a pervasive and powerful advantage for some children. She argues that cultural experiences in children's homes differentially facilitate children's adjustment to school and academic achievement, and this process **transforms** aspects of family life or cultural resources into cultural capital. This mechanism results in children from poorer backgrounds being differentially disadvantaged, as their cultural resources may be of less value to the school. Some parents will deliberately put their cultural capital to use by coaching their children at home, ensuring that their children succeed in school tests, contributing to the process whereby social advantage is passed from generation to generation. Such parents' educational experiences and successes may help them to approach teachers with more confidence and self-belief. In contrast, although parents from poorer backgrounds share middle-class parents' aspirations and want their children to do well at school, they may lack confidence in this area.

RESEARCH QUOTATION

'The working-class parents Lareau interviewed believed that they should leave academic matters to their children's teachers. Often intimidated by teachers' professional authority, these parents fear teaching their children the wrong things or instructing them in the wrong way. They see home and school as separate spheres.'

Wrigley, 2000, p. viii

As with sociocultural theory, important implications for teachers and other professionals working with parents flow from the concept of social capital theory:

- It is likely that parents will work through any difficulties they may encounter more effectively when their reserves of social capital are high and linkages to other groups are facilitated. Such connections should contribute to the quick flow of information and guidance through the maze of provision available from Local Authorities. Parents' social capital (e.g. the connections they have established and the resulting knowledge and insights they acquire) will necessitate the development of flexible services that change with parents' needs over time.
- Bonding social capital and cultural capital are arguably the most powerful factors in explaining many of the differences between diverse families' engagement with education and their capacity for overcoming challenges and obstacles. These processes result in some families being markedly disadvantaged when engaging with schools and when providing support for their children's education. Parents whose own educational experiences are limited may face considerable difficulties when approaching schools. Their sense of self-confidence in educational matters may be low, and they may have fewer resources upon which to draw in terms of know-how and social contacts.

The constructs of social and cultural capital are particularly helpful in understanding why some parents might come to be viewed as hard to reach, and some of the projects presented in this book have a deliberate focus on enhancing or building on families' social or cultural capital. The above theoretical framework will be revisited in later chapters, and will provide threads of continuity across initiatives that have been developed by different professionals from different contexts working with diverse family groups.

Concluding comments and organization of the book

The importance of parents' involvement in education has been increasingly recognized in the United Kingdom since the 1960s. Currently, there is strong support for parental involvement in England,

Wales and Scotland partly because of the conviction that this will lead to improved learning outcomes for children and young people. It is increasingly recognized that deficit models that imply that there is something 'wrong' with certain families are unhelpful for establishing trusting partnerships between professionals and parents.

The remainder of this book is organized in the following manner. In Chapter 2, various characterizations of 'hard to reach' parents will be discussed, and there will be an exploration of reasons why some parents seem to find it so challenging to engage with schools. The next three chapters proceed from macro to micro issues in the field of parental engagement: Chapter 3 considers international studies on school-home links; Chapter 4 presents promising practice from the United Kingdom; and Chapter 5 presents a more finely focused analysis of small-scale initiatives that have involved home visiting as a means of engaging with parents. Aspects of parental involvement initiatives can be controversial and have attracted criticism within the academic community, particularly debates surrounding the conceptualization of parents being 'hard to reach' – Chapter 6 examines some of the core concerns that have been voiced. The book concludes with commentary in Chapter 7 on lessons learned and how schools can make themselves more open and approachable to parents.