



Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

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FUTURES
PROMOTING INNOVATION

Parent power

A primary school in central London is leading the way in involving parents in shaping their children's curriculum

School

Argyle Primary School,
London Borough of Camden

Innovation

Involving parents in the curriculum

An outside toilet is not the most obvious source of inspiration, but it turned out to be the catalyst for major change at Argyle Primary School in the heart of London's King's Cross.

The school's deputy headteacher, Helen Adams, was sitting at the back of a year 2 classroom listening to children talking about how the rooms in houses had changed over the past hundred years. As usual, the same few children were doing all the talking, and Helen was trying to think of ways of increasing the engagement of everyone in the class.

Then the discussion switched to the change from outside to inside toilets and suddenly the entire class was animated – everyone had an opinion or an experience they wanted to get across. Although most of the children at Argyle were born in the UK, a large proportion of them have families overseas – particularly Bangladesh and Somalia – and remember seeing or using an outside toilet on extended trips to visit relatives.

Making learning real

For Helen, it was a breakthrough moment. 'In the next staff meeting we discussed the session and realised what



Parents at Argyle Primary are invited to attend half-termly curriculum planning meetings

we had to do to make children feel more involved with the curriculum – we needed things that would capitalise on their own experiences.'

Staff at Argyle had been trying for some time to engage their classes with curriculum planning, but the children found it hard to verbalise what they wanted and needed. With a new determination to discover what would interest and inspire their pupils, the teachers decided that the answer lay with involving parents much more in their children's learning.

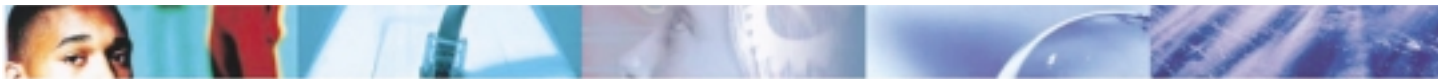
The school had already put a great deal of effort into developing relationships with parents through over 20 different initiatives. It arranges courses for parents, including computer classes and literacy and numeracy programmes on site, and parents are heavily involved in events like family fun days. However,

parental involvement was not having the hoped-for effect on children's achievement. Staff at Argyle decided that what was needed was a real two-way dialogue with parents about the curriculum.

Shared planning meetings

Teachers in the nursery, reception and year 1 classes now invite parents into the school for a meeting every half-term. They explain the topics coming up and ask the parents for any useful information and input. For a recent topic about the King's Cross area, the teachers – who do not live locally – asked the parents what their children find interesting about where they live. When doing work on famous people, the parents were asked to name





Parents work together to make a concept map of different topics

famous people from their own cultures and communities. The parents work in small groups to make a concept map of each topic, brainstorming ideas around the central theme, thinking about what their children already know and what they would be interested in knowing, and suggesting different activities. Year 1 teacher Katherine Hill reports that 'the concept maps help to demonstrate to parents how we teach thinking to pupils, rather than just facts'.

By taking on board parents' suggestions, the school now offers a curriculum that truly reflects the needs and interests of the children. A recent topic on Islam is a case in point. In many schools, work on a particular religion would look at things like festivals and how and where people worship. However, because so many of

the children at Argyle are from Muslim backgrounds, they already knew more than their teachers about the subject. As a result, parents suggested that the teachers could focus on codes of conduct and appropriate behaviour inside a mosque.

Measuring the difference

With the clear goal of raising children's engagement in the curriculum through parental involvement, Argyle has been monitoring progress since before the joint planning sessions started. Helen Adams developed a baseline by observing and recording levels of pupil-to-pupil interaction, analysing which children were getting involved, the type

of interaction and the gender balance. This was used to measure the increase in pupil-to-pupil interaction and the number of children who take part in whole-class discussions.

The teachers have noticed a difference in their own work as well. Their discussions with parents are inspiring them to leave behind traditional topics and lessons and to focus on things that are more relevant to the children. For example, King's Cross is currently undergoing a lot of building and redevelopment, some of which – such as the renovations of St Pancras Station and the redevelopment of the Brunswick Centre – are of historical as well as architectural significance. The school works with parents to actively seek opportunities for children to have an input in decision making in their local area.

The dynamics of the school have also changed. Parents no longer feel that teachers are superior, and the teachers talk positively about empowering parents to make an effective contribution. School now has a place in family life for both parents and children, and home-school relations are better and more tangible. Parents are engaged and interested in what their children are learning and leave the planning sessions buzzing with excitement. The ideas they suggest tend to be hands-on and interactive, often involving objects that their children bring in from home. As a result, the children feel represented and valued, and levels of engagement in lessons have improved considerably.

All in all, Argyle is leading the way in developing meaningful parental involvement in the curriculum.

Thinking points

- How well do you think you and other teachers at your school understand your pupils' lives? In what ways do you engage pupils in their learning by making lessons as relevant as possible?
- Do parents have any involvement in shaping the curriculum at your school? Could half-termly planning meetings like those at Argyle work well in your particular context?
- Can you see any potential problems in encouraging parents to have more of a say in what their pupils learn? How could you overcome these?



Parental involvement in the curriculum has helped to increase children's engagement in lessons