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## ENGAGING EFFECTIVELY WITH BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC PARENTS IN CHILDREN'S AND PARENTAL SERVICES

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*James Page and Dr. Gill Whitting (GHK Consulting)  
Carl Mclean (ETHNOS)*

### Introduction

GHK and ETHNOS were commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills<sup>1</sup> to undertake a research project to explore how children's and parental services can engage effectively with black and minority ethnic (BME)<sup>2</sup> parents.

### Method

There were two key phases in this research: a literature review and qualitative fieldwork undertaken in ten case study settings.

The literature review involved identifying research, programme evaluations and other publications (e.g. practitioner publications) containing significant findings relating to engaging minority ethnic parents in service provision. The literature was assessed in terms of relevance and the robustness of research. This was intended to identify the most relevant documents that practitioners and policy-makers could refer to in relation to engaging minority ethnic parents.

This phase of research was undertaken in discussion with a number of staff at the DCSF involved in children's and parental services and a small number of individuals that had been involved in producing some of the literature that was reviewed (including senior staff in the National Evaluation of Sure Start, at the Race Equality Foundation and OfSTED). This helped to ensure that all relevant literature was taken into consideration.

A long list of examples of good practice from across children's and parental services were identified primarily through the literature review. In order to ensure identification of good practice was as rigorous as possible, only instances of good practice which already had some external recognition (e.g. through OfSTED assessments or external evaluations) were included. The final sample was also intended to cover a diverse range of contexts of service provision.

In May and June 2007 a team of researchers from GHK and ETHNOS then undertook semi-structured interviews in each of the ten sites with a mix of senior managers, delivery staff and minority ethnic parents. In some instances parents did not speak any English and researchers communicated in languages including Urdu, Punjabi and Mirpuri.

<sup>1</sup> The DfES became the Department for Children, Schools and Families in June 2007 and will be referred to as the DCSF throughout the remainder of the report.

<sup>2</sup> During this research it was found that the term 'Black and minority ethnic' (or BME) was an unhelpful label both for service providers (in terms of lumping together all non-White British people) and people from a minority ethnic background who disliked being labelled as 'BME'. While the DCSF is in the process of changing the terminology it uses, the original title of the research project has been retained as the term is still widely recognised by practitioners. However, except for quotations from other sources, the term is not used in the remainder of this report.

## Key findings

Five key themes around engaging with minority ethnic parents emerged from the literature review:

- **Recognising diversity within and across minority ethnic groups:** Individuals from within and across different minority ethnic communities should not be viewed as part of larger homogeneous groups that can be labelled or stereotyped. The label 'BME' was found to be unhelpful where service providers come to see all minority ethnic groups as being a single group. There is evidence that values and attitudes (particularly towards education) vary widely across different minority ethnic groups. The starting point for engaging minority ethnic parents is to recognise this inherent diversity and to tailor services appropriately (in contrast to taking a 'colour blind' approach).
- **Challenging racism and promoting different cultures:** Services need to tackle negative perceptions associated with minority ethnic groups and to actively promote the diversity of cultures among the families of service users. There is evidence that staff in children's and parental services tend to make assumptions about minority ethnic parents on the basis of their background, which tend to be unfairly judgemental. In terms of parenting programmes, culturally specific programmes which strengthen cultural identity and aim to raise parents' confidence in their cultural heritage were found to be important in improving attendance.
- **Addressing barriers:** Minority ethnic parents are likely to be disproportionately affected by barriers such as lack of time, distance to travel and cost. In addition, some minority ethnic parents face significant barriers where language needs exist. As a result, services should consider affordability (where relevant), times of service provision, location (where possible), and ensuring that information is communicated in a number of languages. Some services, such as Sure Start and some multi-ethnic schools, provide language classes for parents. Other ways of facilitating engagement included undertaking outreach, schools implementing effective home-school liaison and providing interpreters for parents.
- **Culturally appropriate services:** This can represent a dilemma for service providers in terms of whether targeted (culturally specific)

provision is required alongside or instead of mainstream (universal) services. There is no single answer to this, except in the cases where targeted provision is essential (such as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes). While targeted services may be more culturally tailored, there is also a danger that where services are not sufficiently integrated with other mainstream services they may become compartmentalised and minority ethnic parents have less involvement with other families.

- **Empowering minority ethnic parents:** A substantial amount of evidence shows that minority ethnic parents are keen to be involved in the services they access, and particularly in decision-making. While Sure Start is based around such involvement, minority ethnic parents' involvement tended to be limited in practice. However, there were instances in which minority ethnic parents had been recruited in innovative roles such as volunteer ambassadors to the community. Schools can effectively involve minority ethnic parents through, for example, setting up parent councils, parent groups and networks and linking with community organisations (such as religious or musical groups).

Whilst each case study is individual in terms of the type of service provision, whether it is targeted or universal, where it is located and which minority ethnic communities are being engaged, each of these issues was apparent in a number of case studies. As a result, there was significant continuity between the findings from previous research and from the qualitative fieldwork conducted for this project.

In addition to this, there were several consistent findings from across the case study examples both in how to engage effectively with minority ethnic parents and the remaining barriers to this.

Key factors in successfully engaging with minority ethnic parents include:

- **Taking a holistic approach:** Addressing all the major issues facing families, rather than just those which are directly relevant to each individual service helped to develop strong, trusting relationships with parents which facilitated close engagement.
- **Dedicated resources:** Having a member of staff dedicated to parental engagement allowed

services to provide a regular point of access and someone who can act as an advocate for them. A location specifically for parents to use provides a non-threatening space in which parents can meet each other and raise issues.

- **Recruiting from local communities:** Staff recruited from local communities helped to undercut negative perceptions among some parents of a 'them and us' view of services. In these case studies professional staff (such as teachers and health professionals) were not ethnically matched to local communities. Rather, minority ethnic parents were employed to undertake outreach and build relationships with other parents, acting as a bridge between services and communities.
- **Building social capital:** Helping parents to meet each other helped to reduce feelings of isolation and a lack of confidence. Often parents talking together helped to create a mini community of engagement around a service.

There are also several areas of challenge to further improving engagement with minority ethnic parents which have emerged from this research. These include:

- **Fathers:** Virtually all of the case studies found engaging with fathers more challenging than engaging with mothers. The reasons for this were a mix of practical issues (such as limited time due to being the main breadwinner) and cultural attitudes in which gender roles are clearly defined and raising children is delineated as being a predominantly female activity.
- **Limited resources:** Voluntary and community sector providers all expressed concerns about the damaging effect of limited and uncertain funding. Mainstream public service providers (such as schools and the Children's Centre) sometimes found it difficult to fund additional activities related to engaging with parents.
- **New communities:** New communities (including refugee and asylum seekers) are more likely than established minority ethnic groups to have a limited understanding of public services, lack confidence in accessing them, have restricted social networks of support and face severe language barriers. Services found engagement difficult due to a lack of staff from these communities with informal links to other parents and a lack of staff able to speak the same language.

- **Measuring effectiveness:** None of the case studies had monitoring data specifically on engagement with minority ethnic parents which had been effectively benchmarked or used comparatively against other similar providers. This illustrates the difficulty of providing objective measures of effective engagement with parents.

## Conclusions

From both the literature review and the qualitative fieldwork, it is clear that there is no single and objective method of measuring effective engagement with minority ethnic parents. This is not a criticism of the service providers that we visited but a reflection of the difficulty in quantifying this. Indeed, when asked what lessons staff had learnt and would share with other practitioners in similar positions, these centred around 'soft' issues such as treating parents as equals and respecting different cultural backgrounds. There is a great deal that can be learnt from sharing good practice. However, if parental engagement is to become a national priority then it is essential to find robust ways of measuring and validating how effectively this is being undertaken.

Finally, it is clear from the literature review and from the sample of good practice examples identified, that there is an important gap in the existing research relating to engaging with minority ethnic parents in children's and parental services in rural areas. This is an area which would benefit from further research in the future.

## Additional Information

*Copies of the full report (DCSF-RR013) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.*

*Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".*

*Copies of this Research Brief (DCSF-RB013) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at [www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/)*

*Further information about this research can be obtained from Sarah Baker, 6D, DCSF, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.*

*Email: [sarah.baker@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:sarah.baker@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk)*

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