The Purpose of Parents: School Personnel Perceptions of the Role of Parents in Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The argument for the importance of a parent's engagement with their child's learning over parental involvement with their child's school has been shown to be valuable in research literature. This study, conducted in England prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic, therefore aimed to understand how school leaders and their staff understand parental engagement, parental involvement, and the role they believe parents should play in the education of their children. Whilst not expecting schools to know and utilize the language used in research literature, the findings suggest a lack of delineation between practices attributed to parental engagement and involvement by Goodall and Montgomery (2014). It also appears that in some schools, a focus remains on encouraging parents to support school policy, rather than empowering parents to support the shaping of school policy and supporting them to engage with their child's education at home. An argument can therefore be made for increasing the availability of research literature in schools and the importance of educating school staff about the value of parents and the role they can play inside and outside formal education.

Key Words: family–school partnership, parental engagement, collaboration, co-construction

Introduction

The association between parental engagement and a child's academic success is now well established (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Sylva et al., 2003). Research has shown parental engagement with a child's learning has a positive effect on their educational achievement (Goodall, 2018d; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Morgan, 2017). Further to this, it has been shown that the greater the extent of parental engagement with learning, the greater the effect on levels of achievement (Cotton & Wikelund, 2001, cited in Uludag, 2008). In addition, effective partnerships between home and school can support the development of a parent's own knowledge, which is likely to increase when they are involved in the education of their child (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Subsequently, this can act to improve a parent's ability to support their child's learning. While a transfer of knowledge from schools to parents can be beneficial, it is equally important to be aware of the benefits that a transfer of knowledge about the child from parents to school can have. Parents possess an in-depth knowledge of their child (Department for Education, 2001; Warren et al., 2009) which, if transmitted to the school in mutually supportive ways, can improve the school's understanding of the child's needs. With such clear benefits to all those involved, home–school partnership should be something that is nurtured and valued to ensure the best possible outcomes for pupils.

Parental engagement with children's learning differs from parental involvement in school-based activities. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) distinguish parental *engagement*, the participation of parents in their children's academic learning, from parental *involvement*, namely the taking part in an activity arranged by the child's school. This is described as a continuum, on which parental interactions may slide and not a simple pathway for schools to follow in order to move from involvement to engagement (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). While Harris and Goodall (2008) suggest that parental involvement in school-based activities is of little benefit to a child's learning, Goodall (2018d) does later suggest that involvement with schools can act as a precursor to increased engagement levels of parents with their child's learning. It is important that schools and parents understand the distinction and develop ways of promoting parent's engagement in their child's learning, which may not necessarily be through involvement in school-based activities.

The purpose, therefore, of this research was to gather the thoughts of Senior Leaders[1] and other school staff within the county of Gloucestershire, England, focusing on the value placed on family–school partnerships, their understandings of what may constitute parental involvement and engagement, and what they expect from parents. The following review of literature focuses on four

main topics: the purpose of family–school partnerships and the link to internal school policy; the value placed on parents and the clarity with which their role in education is communicated; the working relationship between school and home; and, lastly, it considers who is responsible for developing family–school partnerships. Next the method section sets out how the data was collected through interviews and focus groups and goes on to detail the process of data analysis with a focus on the development of the themes. In the "findings and discussion" section, the key findings emerging from the analysis are delivered and links are made to the literature covered in the review. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the attitudes of schools towards parents and considers how relationships could be improved moving forward.

Literature Review

Purpose and Policy

School leaders play a crucial role in the development and actualization of effective and inclusive family–school partnership (Kim, 2009). Auerbach (2012) states that "if it's not the principal leading the charge…then it's not going to happen" (p. 3). It is clear that if the principal does not value parents and treat them as equals (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014) and does not believe true partnership can be achieved, such a charge will not occur (Henderson et al., 2007). If the attitude of the leader/s in schools is positive in this regard, it is then their role to create a culture that values parents and to instill such beliefs in their staff. This will subsequently lead to a positive whole school approach (Barker & Harris, 2020). In an Australian study, Povey et al. (2016) found that 90% of principals responding to their survey stated that they make attempts to involve staff and/or parents when making decisions on school matters. It further revealed, however, that only 35% expected parental involvement in governance issues. The same study found that although the majority of principles expected parental involvement at parents evening (98%) and in supporting home learning (97%), only a small minority (9%) expected their involvement in designing the curriculum. Anastasiou and Pappagianni (2020) produced some similar findings from a Greek survey of parents, teachers, and principals. Their study revealed that parents wanted to be involved in decision making; however, teachers were reluctant for parents to have "great influence" on educational issues. It may not be surprising, then, that when Dr. Janet Goodall speaks to schools about engaging parents, they predominantly ask for advice on getting parents into school (Goodall, 2018d). Goodall (2018d) also states that the thoughts of parents in relation to the education of their children are often not valued. This is despite the potential value of a parent's expertise in relation to

their particular child (de Oliveira Lima & Kuusisto, 2019) and the benefits that can come from a parent engaging with their child's learning (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). A number of studies have reported school expectations focusing on parents supporting the school, whether this be in relation to behavior (Crozier, 2016; Forsberg, 2007; Harris & Goodall, 2008) or teachers more generally (Crozier, 1999). Barker and Harris (2020), however, are clear that parental engagement should not be solely about supporting the school but ensuring the academic success of the pupils.

In the interests of full and co-operative partnership and with a focus on the learning of pupils, Goodall (2015) suggests embedding parental engagement throughout school policy. She further argues that parents should be included in the learning and teaching strategies of schools, a move which underlines the value placed on the knowledge parents have of their children. Ross and Burger (2009, cited in Riehl, 2012) also support the inclusion of parents in school decision making, citing the empowering nature of such involvement, as do Okeke (2014) in relation to curriculum matters and Morgan (2017) with regards to school improvement planning.

Parental Value and Clarity of Purpose

Failing to listen to parents can leave them feeling undervalued and preached to. It may also lead to schools failing to understand the needs of their parent body, with relationships between parents and schools often being based solely on the needs of the school (Warren et al., 2009). It appears that parental involvement often involves a "one-way" flow of information disseminated from school to home (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Engagement should, however, be a "bidirectional interaction" (Boulanger, 2019). This effective, two-way communication will only occur, though, if parents feel valued (Day, 2013).

A lack of clarity around the expectations that schools hold (Crozier, 1999) may prevent parents from fully understanding their role and the opportunities available to them, with Bachman and colleagues (2021) stating such a lack of common understanding can lead to a breakdown in trust between parents and school staff. Oostdam and Hooge (2013) describe "blurred roles" between home and school with the responsibility for a child's upbringing and education, once clearly delineated, now a shared responsibility of home and school. Without some clarity, parents may not fully understand where their responsibility for their child's education lies in the eyes of the school. Also of importance is clarity around the terms used in relation to working with parents and what they are understood to mean (Young et al., 2013). Parents are unlikely to hold the same understanding of terms such as involvement (Young et al., 2013). Neither will their expectations as to their responsibilities in relation to

the education and learning of their child/ren align with the schools (Oostdam & Hooge, 2013). Clarity, therefore, relating to the terms used and what this means for parents is required to encourage them to engage (Kim, 2009).

Although Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) referenced a number of studies suggesting that parents increasingly view themselves as responsible for their children's education, the belief held in schools still appears to focus on the importance of bringing parents in rather than increasing engagement in learning at home (Goodall, 2018b). Whilst current research literature highlights the value of the information parents have to transfer to schools about their children (de Oliveira Lima & Kuusisto, 2019), the research does not seem to be filtering to school staff (Goodall, 2018b). Such a transfer from home to school is much more likely to be possible on a regular basis in primary education, where teachers have a single class of about 30 pupils throughout the year, than in secondary education. However, parents could be afforded opportunities to feed such knowledge into secondary school staff at events such as parents evenings. With parents seeming to be continually kept at a distance from the learning systems in place in schools, Goodall (2018b) argues for a change to the foundational beliefs of schooling, advocating for families and schools working in close partnership—a partnership based on "authentic interactions" focused on the learning of the child (de Oliveira Lima & Kuusisto, 2019). Developing clarity around terms and expectations, therefore, should involve the parents themselves (Oostdam & Hooge, 2013).

Working With Parents

In order to develop successful partnerships, a joint view is required, involving the school and parents (Anastasiou & Pappagianni, 2020). Teachers can, however, be fearful of the involvement of parents due to concerns about the sharing of power (Warren et al., 2009) and the potential impact that true partnership working may have on their professional autonomy (Gonzalez & Jackson, 2013). When communicated, parent dissatisfaction can challenge the educator as the professional and lead to conflict between educator and parent (Lasater, 2016). These concerns must be overcome to ensure schools move from a position of "doing to and for families to co-creating with them" (Barker & Harris, 2020, p. 26), which allows collective productivity for the benefit of the child (Warren et al., 2009). Whilst it may not have been the norm for schools to involve parents as an educational partner in the learning processes involving their child (Oostdam & Hooge, 2013), Goodall (2018d) argues that school staff should be aware of the educational activities taking place at home. Although this may seem unrealistic for the majority of children when it comes to secondary education, it may be possible for specific groups of students such

as those with additional needs who may receive greater individualized attention at school. In addition, parents need knowledge of the learning occurring in school in order for the learner to be fully supported at home (Goodall, 2018d).

Responsibility for Engagement

While Crozier and Davies (2007) suggest that educational policy and the discourse around parental involvement lays the responsibility for initiating involvement between home and school with parents, it could be argued that it appears to sit with schools. As is the case in the U.S., parents in the U.K. have no legal responsibility to engage with schools. In comparison, schools have regulatory responsibilities that the U.K. Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services, and Skills (OfSTED) place on them. Similarly, U.S. Title I schools mandate parent and family engagement via the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015); teaching professionals in each country also have set teaching standards (Department for Education, 2013) with which to abide. Literature tends to support the view that the onus is on schools (Hands, 2012; Gonzalez & Jackson, 2013; Goodall, 2015) with some research focusing on the importance of the principal (or Head Teacher) taking a leading role (Auerbach, 2012). Principals are seen, in particular, as responsible for making school staff both visible and available, thereby setting the tone for the rest of their school (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014).

Moreover, de Bruine et al. (2018) highlight the control that schools hold over the opportunities that parents have to collaborate with their child's school. This argument is supported by Boulanger (2019) who states that schools guide the interaction between parent and school. While a counterargument can be made, focusing on the parent's ability to resist collaboration with the school and therefore own some control, the focus of current literature is unsurprisingly focused on strategies for schools to develop relationships with parents, rather than parents with schools.

Methods

The chosen data collection methods were qualitative, focusing on rich data about the experiences of staff in educational settings. The settings involved were five secondary schools and one further education college (post 16 setting, prior to university) and were self-selecting from 11 institutions in a predetermined geographical area. They are among the schools with the greatest numbers of students from areas where the proportion of families deemed to be socially disadvantaged (i.e., lower parental employment, housing instability, more likely to suffer from health conditions) are highest and the progression to higher

education is lowest. The data collected aimed to explore how school staff understood their relationship with parents, what they felt the purpose was of engaging with parents, and where the responsibility for such engagement lies.

Data Collection

Staff Interviews

Six semi-structured interviews (ranging from 30–55 minutes) were carried out with a senior member of staff at each of the participating institutions in order to gain an understanding of the individual school context, school policies, and current direction with regards to parental engagement. The senior staff member held either a Head or Deputy Head (Principal / Deputy Principal) role, with the exception being the further education college where the interviewee's role focused on student support. This provided insight into the strategic view of each institution's position on how they currently work to engage parents and how they saw things developing in the future. Interviewees were self-selecting, thereby ensuring buy-in and interest in the topic. The initial topics for discussion involved their understanding of the terms parental engagement and parental involvement, whether their expectations of parents was clear and how they knew parents understood it, and whether they felt the onus was on the school to develop relationships with parents.

Staff Focus Groups

Five staff focus groups (ranging from 38–52 minutes) were utilized in order to encourage discussion, stimulate new ideas (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015), and provide opportunities for meaning making within the group. A focus group with staff at the sixth institution failed to materialize. The researchers were able to gain a wider view of the experiences of school staff in relation to parental engagement and gather *collective* rather than simply *individual* understandings of parental engagement. The staff involved differed in their levels of experience and understanding of issues around parental engagement. Some had a greater amount of contact with parents than others and differed in the reasons they may need or wish to communicate and interact with parents.

Senior members of staff from the participating institutions invited individual colleagues to be involved. This was achieved through a combination of identifying particular colleagues with knowledge of or direct experience of engaging with parents, as well as asking for volunteers interested in taking part. Roles included, but were not limited to, administrative staff, teachers, attendance and welfare officers, and Heads of Year.[2] Each focus group comprised between two to seven staff members in order to maximize the opportunity for varied input, while not being too difficult to control or encourage meaningful

interaction among the participants. The focus group of two was unusually low due to staff illness on the day of the focus group. The same topic guide used in the interviews was utilized for the focus groups.

Analysis

Thematic analysis of the interviews and focus groups followed the analytic hierarchy set out by Ritchie et al. (2003a). An initial data management process involved the careful transcription and rereading of the transcripts by the interviewer which enabled a greater familiarity with the data to be established. The subsequent development of emergent themes and subthemes then occurred, taking note of the reoccurring nature of the data and relevance to the aim of the research (Bryman, 2016). The transcriptions were then reread and the data assigned to the subthemes. Once all the data had been assigned to subthemes, it was synthesized into a table which allowed the data to be viewed clearly in its individual context and across the interviews and focus groups. A search was then conducted for patterns across the different interviews and focus groups, with a subsequent explanation for such patterns sought and accounted for.

Themes

Four themes align with the data that is particularly pertinent to the questions set out in the literature. Firstly, "School staffs' understanding of parental involvement and parental engagement" included valuable data on how school personnel understood and used the various terms used in schools relating to the relationships between themselves and families. "Reasons for a desire for involvement and engagement" brought together data about the reasons school staff had for engaging with parents, both focusing on benefits to the school, as well as to the family and child. As a theme, "Views on engagement levels" collated response data on both perceived under- and over-engagement of parents, as well as how families' involvement with school has changed over time. Data coded to the "Expectations" theme was focused on the expectations that schools have of parents, as well as the expectations that they believe families have of them.

Four further themes emerged from the data, providing some useful supplementary information, though they are not the focus of this particular paper. The data however did inform the researcher about the relationships schools have with families and how these are formed, or perhaps not formed. "Barriers for engagement" and "Strategies for engagement" included data that gave some insight into why the schools felt some parents were not engaged with the school in particular and how they made attempts to develop closer relationships with parents. The "Community" theme included school's views on their

role in the wider community and a perceived breakdown in the school community. Finally, an "Other" theme was utilized to include any data not fitting in the main themes. (See Appendix for themes/subthemes.)

Findings and Discussion

The presentation of the school-based interviews and focus groups are combined here as the themes used during analysis were the same and doing so allows the consideration of the responses of school staff across the board, in unison.[3] While the term "parent" was used throughout the interviews and focus groups, it was nonetheless acknowledged when queried that its use was inclusive of others in a caring role. These findings are divided into a number of key foci that emerged from the analysis process and are presented in order of both importance to the research and prevalence in the data. Themes one and two are presented together due to the crossover in the data.

Theme 1: Schools Understanding of Parental Involvement and Parental Engagement / Theme 2: Reasons for a Desire for Involvement and Engagement

Understandings of Involvement / Engagement

It was apparent from both the senior management interviews and the staff focus groups that further developing ways to engage with and encourage the involvement of the families of their pupils was an area of increasing importance to the participating educational institutions. This was exemplified by comments focusing on getting parents into the school earlier on and more often (I2), making the school reception more open and engaging (I6), and being clearer about the intended purpose of opportunities for parents to come on site (FG2). Discussions around the importance of parents engaging with their child's learning, while less apparent, were nonetheless understood and—for some, particularly among senior management—foregrounded: "So the main thing is to understand and support their children's learning…our dialogue with parents, you know, for the main, is about teaching and learning, or should be" (I4).

The value that this engagement with learning offers was also made clear in one particular focus group (FG3) when a respondent argued that the child "gets a better deal" when parents are supporting the child's learning at home. For others, although acknowledged and indeed in some instances highlighted as a reason for their interest in working with parents (I4, I6), there was nonetheless on the whole much greater emphasis on parental involvement than on an engagement with young people's learning (I2, I3, I5). In these instances,

the importance of parents supporting the school was foregrounded: "I would say the priority is getting them to back the school, whatever it is" (I2). In part, this can be attributed to an understanding of the terms used by participants to denote engagement. They very often lacked clarity in scope or definition, were often used interchangeably, and in the main referred to actions relating to the school as opposed to pupil learning. This came across particularly in the staff focus groups.

Auerbach (2012) previously highlighted the importance of the role of the principal in driving family–school partnerships in school, and Baker and Harris (2020) acknowledged the impact this has on developing a positive whole school approach. This study, however, did find that, although in some cases such as I3 the senior staff member interviewed focused on parents supporting the school, those staff involved in FG3 were more broad in their understanding of involving parents. They spoke about the areas in which they believe they need to involve parents which were "partnerships, teaching and learning, cultural capital, and careers." While the word "partnerships" is broad, the staff discussing the benefits of involving parents in teaching and learning and issues around cultural capital were progressive. This highlighted the value of involving a variety of staff in planning the development of family–school partnerships.

Reasons for Contact

Unsurprisingly, all the schools involved mentioned behavior as a cause for contacting parents, and it often appeared that contact regarding negative behavior was the main reason for communication between home and school, directly evidenced in I3, I4, and FG5. Due to the nature of this type of contact, it can often lead to disagreements between parents and the school, which take up further resources and can damage relationships. "Head of English… she spent three hours writing emails to a group of three parents to do with an incident that happened in class where they didn't like the sanction that was taken" (F5). Such damage to relationships can be particularly harmful to partnerships with parents from disadvantaged backgrounds, as they often face greater barriers to forming relationships with school staff (Povey et al., 2016). This is likely to be a particular issue for one of the schools whose interviewee stated: "It is probably those more disadvantaged parents we have more contact with or try to have more contact with because we have got more issues with those children" (I2).

Whilst a number of the staff indicated that contact is made, when possible, to discuss pupil success, the senior leader in I6 did highlight that human nature means contact is made with parents when something goes wrong. Although school rules may not seem unreasonable (I2), a number of the participants felt that parents often failed to support them or, at times, the discipline procedures

(I2, I3, FG5). This was highlighted particularly in I4 when the interviewee made a link between parent and child behavior, saying, "you see where it comes from…where parents don't support the school."

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Continuing Professional Development (CPD), whilst constrained by issues of time and funding, is likely to be required by staff in schools (Barker & Harris, 2020). While all participants from the institutions involved advised that parental engagement is important to them, increasingly so in some cases, and that it is seen to be a responsibility of all staff in the schools involved, representatives of two of the institutions specifically pointed out that staff had not been provided with CPD in this area. These findings echo those of Stormshak et al. (2016) and Goodall (2018c) who reported a lack of training opportunities for teachers in relation to family–school partnerships. Numerous staff involved in the focus groups believed that training opportunities would be beneficial, with a participant in FG3 stating, "unquestionably" when asked about whether it would be useful, and a colleague saying they thought "a lot of staff could benefit from it, myself included." Day (2013) would support this, having stated that all staff should receive sufficient training to be effective in building relationships with parents. Further, Jung and Sheldon (2020) highlight the importance of training for school leaders to ensure they understand the importance of transformative and collaborative partnerships and are able to ensure the school culture and structures are sufficiently in place to allow these partnerships to flourish. Unfortunately, we cannot be sure whether CPD has been made available in any of the institutions, as the subject did not always arise.

Theme 3: Views on Engagement Levels

Tensions and Concerns

Participants across the board reported a lack of involvement from parents, especially in relation to lower than desired turn out at meetings such as parents evening and consultation events (similar to open house nights and parent–teacher conferences in the U.S.). There was however no consensus as to whether this was an increasing phenomenon or whether parental involvement had held at the same rate over recent years. Two participants reported the cancellation of school social events including fetes[4] (I3) and concerts (FG4) due to a lack of interest from parents.

While participants from all involved institutions were keen to increase their parental engagement, it became apparent that concerns existed around the levels of engagement that should be taking place. Several participants pointed out that there may be an optimum point after which it is possible to tip into

"over-engagement." These concerns can be summarized in the following statement: "You get too much parental engagement which then means they can become a nuisance because they are telling you how to do your job" (FG2).

These types of concerns were reported by the majority of participants across all institutions involved in the research. Such concerns included an increase in unrealistic expectations about the availability of staff, a consistent questioning of school staff, and a modelling of negative behaviors that may impact on the way the child behaves at school. Boulanger (2019) highlights the already increasing demands on teachers, including that of engaging with parents more widely, which can increase feelings of overload. This points to the need for co-constructed understandings of what can be expected from school staff as well as parents, with Lasater (2019) previously finding trusting partnerships require schools to fulfill the expectations parents hold of them. These expectations, as highlighted in FG5, can go beyond the pastoral care of the child, extending to that of the parents: "We have got a lot of parents that need support, guidance, and some parenting advice."

Whilst the discussion focused on the expectations parents hold of the school's role in the education of the child and not its relationship with the parents, the interviewee in I6 acknowledged the need for parents to have a clear understanding of what they can expect from the school. It was pointed out that often the only time teachers hear from some parents is when they want to complain (I3), which is interesting given the acknowledgement that schools often contact parents due to their child's poor behavior. Concerns were raised by school staff that through the very act of encouraging greater levels of dialogue between parents and school staff, the amount of negative communication may increase. An alternate perspective, however, came from a staff member in FG3 who acknowledged the benefits of regular communication, stating "once you have got the parents on board, you do find a difference in the students." In addition, one interviewee (I5) was open about a belief that their school could benefit from taking an institutional approach that places greater value on listening to the needs of parents and responding accordingly. Nonetheless, it is apparent that it can be difficult for parents to know how much is too much, with the senior leader in I4 evidencing this by stating: "There is a fine line, isn't there, between them feeling comfortable to come in, share, and support, but also respecting the authority of the sanctions of the school."

Insufficient Resources

The main issue that staff felt held them back from developing relationships with parents was a lack of time and resources, as evidenced in FG3: "I mean, there is less and less staff." This stood out for participants as key in three of the six interviews and three of the five focus groups. The majority of responses here

focused on the time staff have to commit to engaging parents and the lack of funds available to secure more time for staff to do this. It was also made clear that this lack of resources can have a negative effect on families, including the pupils: "Back to the time and resources again, and you've just moved onto either the more 'worthy' kid or just the next crisis, really" (FG3).

While most of the comments highlighted the issues without focusing on how the time or funds would be spent, the interviewee in I5 suggested, "It would be quite nice if we had the time and money, I suppose, to offer some classes here where they actually benefit themselves and support for their kids in school." Investing in parents may encourage them to feel valued and supported by school staff, an experience not found in Graham-Clay's study (2005) where parents were reportedly overwhelmed and lacked support.

One particular area of positivity was the current availability of support for parents, aimed at helping them support their child either academically or non-academically, or the desire to provide such opportunities. Such support for the home learning environment, Goodall (2018a) argues, is integral to schooling and therefore also school leadership. Whilst at times these discussions appeared to point towards a deficit view of parents, indicating the need to steer parents (FG2) or commenting on the need for parenting advice (FG5), on the whole, staff understood the valuable role played by parents and aimed to enhance this (I6, I1, FG1, I4, FG4, I5, FG5).

Theme 4: Expectations

Home–School Agreements

The emphasis often placed on parents playing a supportive role was reflected in the use of home–school agreements (similar to a school–family compact in the U.S.). It was notable that those institutions advocating a focus on parental engagement with a young person's learning (I4, I6) did not use such agreements:

> Ultimately it is a piece of paper. It is not a legal document. You can have those standard expectations that people have that they need to just look through and read, but it is also, that face-to-face dialogue is probably more powerful than just a piece of paper that they will sign and doesn't necessarily hold up much weight. (I6)

Of the institutions that do make use of home–school agreements, the majority offer some form of consultation with parents. It appears, however, that none of the institutions involve parents in the decision-making process relating to the expectations they hold (outside of parental involvement in the governing body[5]). So, while representatives of six of the seven institutions believe they

clearly communicate the expectations they hold of parents, Ross and Burger's (2009, cited in Riehl, 2012) work would suggest that involving them in the process of developing the expectations would be extremely empowering. It would also enable interesting dialogue to take place regarding the expectations school staff can fairly hold of the parents and what parents can expect from school staff. In addition, it would ensure that school staff know that at least some of their parent body understand the expectations. When asked specifically whether the documentation provided to parents was accessible, the senior leader in I2 stated: "Probably not is the answer to that…there are going to be some parents who are not going to be able to access it or read it."

While they went on to confirm that opportunities for discussions are available to those who do not understand the content, it is likely that those parents would be the ones who are least likely to have the confidence to engage with school staff. The interviewee in I4 felt that the understanding of parents was clear through the actions of pupils; however, another (I6) was uncertain about how they would know if parents held an understanding of the expectations set by school leaders and felt it was something worth exploring further.

Responsibility for Engagement

In contrast to Crozier and Davies' (2007) beliefs about the responsibility for engagement being placed with parents, the institutions involved in this study overwhelmingly felt that the responsibility actually lies with them. One interviewee (I6) stated, "It does fall to the school to be the instigator for building those relationships…it is just part of education at school." This reflects the modern role of the school, which includes a wider remit than simply teaching their pupils. Some of the interviewees were extremely positive about their position of responsibility, advising that school staff need to develop trust in order to build relationships (I5) and have an obligation to ensure they are sufficiently skilled to understand the cultures and environments of the parents of their pupils (I1). There is also a widely held expectation within institutions that all staff are required to play a role in the development and maintenance of relationships with parents (I1, FG4, FG5, I6).

Some of the staff involved in this research did acknowledge that the responsibility to develop working relationships must be a shared one (FG3, FG4). Numerous staff members also felt the need for parents to be available to communicate with the school (FG2, FG3, I5, FG5). In addition, being openly communicative rather than just ensuring availability was often seen as a minimum expectation of parents (FG2, FG3, FG5) with a clear need for schools to be updated when contact details change or issues arise at home. When discussing the importance of having the correct details on file as part of the wider conversation about responsibility, one focus group (FG3) participant

stated, "We can't keep accepting the blame and responsibility." This reflects the frustrations school staff may experience and the need for open, two-way communication, which, as stated by Bachman et al. (2021), is vital for the development of collective trust.

Overall, it was apparent that participants across the board understood the importance and value of developing strong home–school relationships from their involvement in the research. This was further supported by the numerous positive comments about parents such as "they have a really important part, parents…to do with confidence and aspiration" (FG1), and "the biggest people in their lives are their parents, so they are a valuable and important part" (I6). In addition, the importance of strong relationships to pupils was highlighted well by a participant in FG5 when commenting on the fallout of negative relationships, stating: "Ultimately the child will suffer because I think the child then feels very pulled, and their loyalties will always fall with the parents."

Through taking the responsibility and making early contact with parents, school staff can set the stage for stage for greater collaboration, as discussed by Graham-Clay (2005). The value of this early involvement was recognized in I2 where the senior leader highlighted the need to bring parents in to school earlier, believing that if they did so, the parents would be more likely to return.

Conclusion

In summing up the findings it appears that, in at least some settings, the longstanding emphasis placed on parental involvement has led to a focus on parental support for the school with a concomitant lack of focus on empowering or at the very least encouraging parents themselves to engage with and encourage learning in the home. Goodall (2018d) argues that focusing on parents as supporters of the school keeps them in a passive role. Such a role fails to recognize the value that parents can offer to both the school and its representatives and to their young people. An equal focus on both involvement and engagement is required that could enable inroads into engaging all parents and the subsequent benefits this can bring.

There are reasons to also suggest that a lack of clear direction from the leadership within schools in relation to the purpose and educational value of parent engagement may be acting to hinder the development of close family–school partnership. A lack of clarity around definitions, as defined and used in school, can lead to a conflating of purpose of the relationship between parent and school with that of the importance of a parent's involvement with the child's learning. This can make it harder for school staff to differentiate what it is they are trying to achieve going forward. It may therefore be advantageous for

institutions to develop a well-defined understanding of the differences between involving parents in school and engaging them with their child's education and be clear in communicating this when working in partnership with parents.

Concerns were raised about the levels of engagement that should be taking place, not least in respect of increased engagement potentially leading to unrealistic expectations and the potential for an increase in the amount of negative communication. It is arguable, however, that once the communication channels are established, attention can then be focused on the development of relationships in a more productive and positive way. These relationships, if developed collaboratively and focused on co-constructed and agreed upon understandings of engagement, will support not only the learning environment in school, but also benefit the learning taking place at home.

Endnotes

[1]Staff that are part of the management team and who hold responsibility for one or more areas of provision, such as Special Educational Needs.

[2]A teacher with responsibility for the pastoral care for the students in a specific year group.

[3]When discussing the interviews and focus groups, the codes I (Interview) and FG (Focus Group), with a number attached, will be used to differentiate between them.

[4]A school-based event, often as a fundraising opportunity for the school, involving entertainment stalls and the sale of food and donated items.

[5]U.K. Governing Body – Similar to U.S. school boards but at an individual school level.

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Appendix. Topic Guide from Interviews and Focus Groups

1. Understanding of Parental Involvement/Parental Engagement
    - 1.1 Open Avenues of Communication
    - 1.2 Partnerships with Parents
    - 1.3 Active Involvement in Child's Education
    - 1.4 Differentiation of Terms
    - 1.5 Deficit View
    - 1.6 Awareness of Diversity of Families
    - 1.7 Other

2. Reasons for desire for Involvement/Engagement
    - 2.1 Supportive Role
    - 2.11 Child's Learning
    - 2.12 Parents
    - 2.2 Behavioral
    - 2.3 Pastoral
    - 2.4 Academic Performance
    - 2.5 Other

3. Views on Engagement Levels
    - 3.1 Lack of Engagement
    - 3.2 Over Engagement
    - 3.3 Difference in Engagement Between Levels of Education
    - 3.4 Changes Over Time
    - 3.5 Other

4. Expectations
    - 4.1 School expectations of parents
    - 4.2 School perceptions of parents' expectations of them
    - 4.3 School expectations of themselves
    - 4.4 Other

5. Barriers to Engagement
    - 5.1 Explicit Barriers for Schools
    - 5.2 Non-explicit Barriers for Schools
    - 5.3 Explicit Barriers for Parents
    - 5.4 Non-explicit Barriers for Parents
    - 5.5 Other Barriers

6. Strategies
    - 6.1 Current Strategies
    - 6.2 Potential Strategies
    - 6.3 Other

7. Community
    - 7.1 School as active member of the community
    - 7.2 Decline of community engagement
    - 7.3 Further possibilities for school in the community
    - 7.4 View of school in the community
    - 7.5 School undertaking multi-agency role
    - 7.6 Other

8. Other
    - 8.1 Family Demographic
    - 8.2 Gender Differences
    - 8.3 Negative Publicity