

## Research Report DCSF-RW004

# Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement Do Parents Know They Matter?

**A research project commissioned  
by the Specialist Schools and  
Academies Trust**

*Professor Alma Harris and Dr Janet Goodall*

*University of Warwick*

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## 1. Executive summary

- Parental engagement is a powerful lever for raising achievement in schools. Where parents and teachers work together to improve learning, the gains in achievement are significant.
- Parents have the greatest influence on the achievement of young people through supporting their learning in the home rather than supporting activities in the school. It is their support of learning within the home environment that makes the maximum difference to achievement.
- Many schools involve parents in school-based or school related activities. This constitutes parental involvement rather than parental engagement. Parental involvement can encompass a whole range of activities with or within the school. Where these activities are not directly connected to learning they have little impact on pupil achievement.
- Parental engagement is heavily linked to socio-economic status, as well as parental experience of education. Parents of certain ethnic and social groups are less likely to engage with the school. Schools that offer bespoke forms of support to these parents (i.e. literacy classes, parenting skill support) are more likely to engage them in their children's learning.
- Parental engagement is positively influenced by the child's level of attainment: the higher the level of attainment, the more parents get involved.
- Parental engagement is viewed as a 'good thing' by teachers, parents and students although interpretations of the term vary. Parents view parental engagement as offering support to students while teachers tend to view it as a means to improved behaviour. Students view parental engagement as being primarily about moral support and interest in their progress.
- Schools that successfully engage parents in learning, consistently reinforce the fact that 'parents matter'. They develop a two way relationship with parents based on mutual trust, respect and a commitment to improving learning outcomes.
- Parents who are viewed as 'hard to reach' often see the school a 'hard to reach'. Where schools have made concerted efforts to engage the 'hard to reach' parents'

evidence shows that the effect on pupil learning and behaviour is positive. The research shows a consistent relationship between increasing parental engagement (particularly of hard to reach parents) and improved attendance, behaviour and student achievement.

- Schools face certain barriers in engaging parents. These include practical issues such as lack of time, language barriers, child care issues and practical skills such as literacy issues and the ability to understand and negotiate the school system.
- The ERPA project has been an important catalyst for innovation and change in schools. It has encouraged schools to prioritise parental engagement and has provided them with the impetus to trial innovative approaches to working with parents.
- Schools in the EPRA project are now more aware of the importance of sustaining parental engagement and they recognise that linking parental engagement to learning is the key to securing improved pupil achievement.
- In EPRA schools located in more challenging areas, the engagement of parents was a central influence upon positive learning and behavioural outcomes.
- The EPRA network of schools is a powerful platform for enhancing and extending the work on parental engagement and raising achievement.

## 1.1. Introduction

"It's time to start thinking about parents as tools for learning" Deputy Head Teacher, School V

"We've placed learning and teaching at the centre of what we do in school. To increase parental engagement and parents in the life of the school I felt was one of the key strands that would impact on that" Head Teacher, School C

On 25th October 2005, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) published the Schools White Paper "Higher Standards, Better Schools for All - More Choice for Parents and Students". This White Paper placed parents firmly at the centre of the drive to raise standards by putting an increasing emphasis upon their involvement in the education system. Underpinning this policy is the central tennet that parental engagement makes a *significant* difference to the educational outcomes of young people and that parents have a key role to play in raising educational standards. It also reinforces that the more involved and engaged parents are in the education of their children the more likely their children are to succeed.

This position was reiterated in the publication 'Every Parent Matters' (Department for Education and Skills 2007). This document emphasises the importance of parental engagement in securing higher standards and improved educational performance. Schools are increasingly conscious of the role which can be played by parents in raising achievement, not least because of the emphasis placed on parental report in OfSTED inspections.

While parental engagement is widely understood to be vital for the achievement of students, it is also acknowledged, that we need to know much most about effective means of engaging parents in learning, particularly those parents who are 'hard to reach'. The research evidence is consistent, in demonstrating that families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life. When schools, families and community work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer and like school more.



This research project focused on the relationship between parental engagement and raising achievement. The research was part of a larger developmental project, led by the 'Specialist Schools and Academies Trust' in conjunction with the 'Association of School and College Leaders'. The developmental project was focused on engaging parents in learning. The "Engaging Parents to Raise Achievement" (EPRA)<sup>1</sup> project was funded by the 'Department for Education and Skills' and was intended to trial new ways of engaging parents in schools, particularly those parents seen as 'hard to reach'. The EPRA project funded innovative work in more than a hundred secondary schools, across England. All of the projects focused on one or more of the following strands:

- Supporting parents to help their children learn
- Personalising provision for parents themselves as learners,
- Intelligent reporting ("ireporting"),
- Enhancing pastoral care.

A particular focus of the research project was the issue of engaging 'hard to reach' parents. The project explored the extent to which engaging 'hard to reach' parents had a positive affect on pupil achievement and behaviour.

The 'Institute of Education' at the University of Warwick was commissioned to carry out an independent research project with a subset of EPRA schools. The aim of this project was to explore the relationship between different forms of parental engagement and achievement. The research focused on the ways in which the different types of interventions and innovations with parents, resulting from the EPRA project, were beginning to influence student achievement.

Clearly, as a one year research project it was not possible to correlate student achievement to the various activities undertaken by the schools. However the research team did have access to performance data and value added data on all of the schools within the research sample and those schools in the wider ERPA project. This data allowed us to identify and

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<sup>1</sup> More information can be found at:

<http://www.schoolsnetwork.org.uk/raisingachievement/engagingparents/default.aspx>

analyse any changes in patterns of performance, behaviour and attendance across more than 100 schools. Using this data the research team were able to plot trends and changes in performance and to superimpose these on the qualitative case study data. This meant that we could identify differences in performance, behaviour and attendance and seek explanations for these differences within the qualitative data.

In addition, there were a range of qualitative and quantitative measures and indicators used within the project that mapped the different type of activity undertaken by schools against changes attitude, behaviour and orientation to learning. The research team scrutinised the quantitative and qualitative data to look for patterns to either confirm or dismiss any positive relationship between parental engagement and raised achievement. The team looked particularly at the data related to those parents considered 'hard to reach' and the data from those schools located in more challenging circumstances.

The data showed that there was a positive relationship between increased parental engagement, particularly in the case of 'hard to reach parents', and positive learning outcomes.

## 2. The Research

The aims of the EPRA research project were as follows:

*To provide the necessary stimulus to those schools engaging with the parental agenda to encourage innovation, deepen current practice and facilitate the sharing of highly effective strategies. The aim is to identify and develop the practice in a number of showcase schools across a diverse range of social, cultural and regional backgrounds. In particular we would wish to include a significant number of schools who are trying interesting ideas in otherwise challenging circumstances.*

*In addition, the SSAT and SHA wish to commission independent research which seeks to identify and validate the most effective practice, ultimately consolidating the wealth of 'good' practice into replicable models which schools can personalise for their needs/contexts.*

The EPRA project was launched in March of 2006 and the research focused on its four main themes:

- Supporting parents to help their children learn
- Personalising provision for parents as learners
- IReporting
- Enhancing pastoral care

Schools were required to submit bids for financial support under at least two of the themes. Schools could also submit proposals for a number of integrated projects directly related to parental engagement.

At the two EPRA National Launch Conferences, schools were introduced to the aims of the project and invite to bid for funding for their own developmental projects aimed at engaging parents in learning. Detailed information was given to participants about the bidding process, and a time scale was imposed. Schools were invited to bid for up to £10,000 for their developmental work however few schools received this entire amount. Overall, 104 schools receiving funding.

The selection of the schools in the EPRA project was based on a number of criteria:

- o *Impact:* projects were assessed for the possibility of impact on parental engagement
- o *Sustainability:* projects were selected which had the possibility of continuing as appropriate after the end of SSAT funding.

- o *Range of schools*: selection ensured a good range of schools were included in the project: urban/rural, high/low SES, range of specialisms, large/small
- o *Range of projects*: selection ensured a range of projects from those using cutting edge technology to those using more traditional methods in innovative ways
- o *Range of EPRA strands*: all projects covered at least one strand; selection ensured all strands were well covered in the wider sample.
- o *Practicality*: projects selected were deemed to be practical within budget
- o *Funding*: projects selected were those not easily supported by other school funds

From the 104 schools selected, a sub-set of schools were chosen to be involved in the research component. The research team selected the schools to ensure a broad and diverse range of projects and schools were represented. The research collected was designed to collect qualitative data about the impact of the various initiatives and developments on learning and achievement. As an independent study, the research also sought to highlight innovative and interesting practice in schools.

### **3. Methodology**

The research project explored the relationship between parental engagement and raised achievement within the EPRA project. A qualitative design was adopted as this was considered the most appropriate methodology for a study of this kind. A literature review was used to frame the study and to inform the design of research instruments. An illuminative case study approach was adopted as the main source of data collection.

#### **3.1. Case Studies**

Case studies provide a thick description of data (Shkedi 1998) based on the interplay between respondent, researcher, and the case study situation itself. Case study is explanation building research - wherein one begins with a theory and then tests that theory against what one finds in the field (Robson 1993). "Case study" is used in this report to mean two different but interrelated data capture processes.

The first type of case study was produced by each school in the larger EPRA project, chronicling the progress of that project in each school. These developmental case studies written by the ERPA schools contributed additional contextual data to the research project. They also provided a more detailed and retrospective view of the developmental work in each school. (Illustrative case studies will be found in Appendix 2). These studies are discussed in chapter 5. The second type of case study was that constructed by the researchers from the sample 30 (and then 20) schools involved in the research study. These case studies are discussed in Chapter 6.

Schools were provided with a basic template for the creation of their EPRA case studies. Schools used the template to suit their own situations: some used it as a document throughout the project, keeping it updated as a means of measuring and checking progress, others produced it entirely from new at the end of the project. The template required schools to comment on the following areas: the key aims/objectives of the project(s) they undertook; key activities as related to the four themes of the EPRA project; outcomes and impact; challenges; thoughts for the future/tips for other schools.

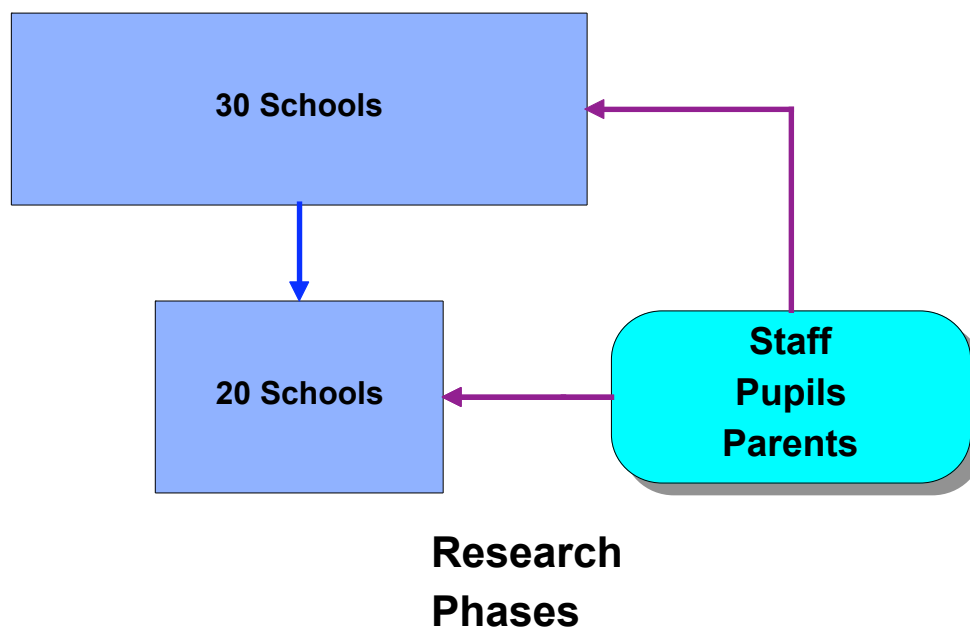
Schools were selected for the research study from the larger EPRA sample on two main criteria: type of project(s) and the strand(s) (supporting parents to help their children learn,

personalising provision for parents as learners, (Reporting and enhancing pastoral care). EPRA required schools to work toward improving practice in one or more of the strands. Schools in the sample were also selected to ensure that there was a broad geographical spread of and a good mix of urban and rural schools. Other factors were taken into account to ensure a diverse range of schools (e.g. number on roll, SES, BME percentages).

The research was carried out in two phases. The first phase included 30 schools, chosen from the schools funded by the SSAT. After the first round of interviews, 20 schools were selected from the initial 30 to enter the second phase of interviews. These schools were selected because they were the most innovative and had extended their work on parental engagement. In both phases, groups of staff, parents and students were interviewed. The schools in the research phase of the project included 29 comprehensive schools, and one grammar school; all but one school were mixed gender. 18 schools covered the 11 - 16 age range, while the remainder covered the 11 - 18. 24 schools were in urban settings, with 6 in rural situations. Schools ranged from small (just over 180 on roll) to very large (over 1800 on roll). The percentage of BME students in schools ranged from zero to 81%.

All of the case studies involved semi structured interviews with a cross section of respondents including teachers, parents, support staff and students: 95 members of school staff, 81 parents, 124 students, and 14 others (including governors and members of outside agencies working with schools); there were 314 respondents in total; 79 hours of interviews were recorded.

**Figure 1. Research Phases**



Schools were asked to provide access to a cross section and range of respondents, including members of senior management (and the head teacher if appropriate), teachers, classroom assistants plus any other members of staff who might be involved in projects. A detailed break down of respondent groups is located in Appendix 1.

Throughout the project an emphasis was placed upon parent and student voice (Freeman 1998). Schools provided access to students throughout the secondary age who had a wide range of experience within the school. Respondents included head boys/girls, students who were involved in student councils, as well as students on report or at risk of exclusion or involved in behavioural intervention programmes. The parents interviewed also were a diverse group who had children at different ages and stages within the schools. Parents of children who had been temporarily excluded were interviewed as well as parents whose children were in behavioural intervention programmes. One foster parent was included in the parental interviews.

The figure below outlines the various strands the 30 case study schools were focussing upon:

**Figure 2. EPRA Strands in Case Study School Projects**

Supporting parents to help their children learn	28
Personalising provision for parents as learners	10
IReporting	18
Enhancing pastoral care	10

### **3.2. Literature review**

At the outset of the research project, a comprehensive review of the international literature on parental engagement was undertaken. This review was informed by the experience and expertise of the research team and embraced a wide range of sources including the disciplines outside education such as child development, psychology, and family practice, Databases (e.g. ERIC, SwetsWise, and JSTOR) provided an insight into the literature; EndNote was used to record references and to build the annotated bibliography (Harris and Goodall 2006, Harris and Goodall, forthcoming). This review of the literature informed the development of subsequent instrument design and data gathering. It also provided the overarching categories for data analysis and data reduction.

### **3.3. Research Instruments - Semi-structured interviews**

The aim of the research was to investigate the impact of parental engagement on student achievement, as understood by the three respondent groups: staff, parents and students, It aimed to explore the meaning attached to the term, parental engagement, by these three different groups. Interviews and focus groups were chosen as the main means of data collection (along with information from the schools themselves, including their case studies, and other data such as OfSTED reports). These methods allowed researchers to be “in tune” with the experience reported by the respondents (Shkedi 1998), and to more



accurately make meaning from the data, taking into account not only the spoken word but the interaction among respondents and the value placed on words and wording.

All interviews were semi-structured in nature; i.e., they were based on the frameworks and insights arising from the literature review (Cohen et al. 2000). Semi-structured interviews is an important part of case study design (Delamont 1992). These interviews although semi-structured, still allowed a certain amount of freedom on the part of the interviewer and respondent (Wengraf 2001). In choosing this research approach, we emphasised the importance given to the aspect of voice for all participants; categories of knowledge were not imposed on respondents by the use of closed questions or scales; rather, knowledge was gained and constructed by interview and group participants (Cohen et al. 2000).

The semi-structured interviews were intended to elicit information on a three main issues:

- What was effective parental engagement?
- What barriers were there to parental engagement?
- How did parental engagement impact on student achievement?

Although all respondents were asked to participate in “interviews” or “group interviews”, some of the interviews tended to be much closer to focus groups, in which the interviewer becomes less a controlling force and more an observer of interplay between the participants (Abbott et al. 2006; Carnwell et al. 2007; Cohen et al. 2000; Giannakaki 2005; Morcke et al. 2006 ; Wilson 1997).

The majority of school staff interviews were conducted individually while most of the parents and student interviews functioned as focus groups. Group interviews with students caused less disruption to lessons (no interviews were carried out with students during break or lunch time) (Lewis 1992). Such group interviews also allowed for the interaction of participants (Wilson 1997), and at times this interaction elicited useful data, as students and parents spoke among themselves, with the researcher as an observer, rather than guiding or directing the discussion.

Experience in this project would lead us to agree with Wilson (1997) that neither type of interview (one to one or group) produces more valid or legitimate data; thus enabling us to combine data from both types of interviews in our conclusions. Although interviews touched

upon on the EPRA projects the main purpose of the data gathering was to explore the relationship between parental engagement and student achievement. The schools were assured that the research phase of the EPRA project was independent from the SSAT and was not intended to monitor or evaluate the effectiveness of the EPRA projects or interventions.

### **3.4. Data analysis**

The quantitative data analysis involved the interrogation and manipulation of large data sets on all of the schools in the EPRA project. These data sets allowed patterns and trends on performance, attendance and value added measures to be indentured. In addition, the team collected and analysed individual school based data on behaviour, attitude and exclusions. This analysis formed the backdrop to the larger, more detailed analysis of the case study evidence. However it allowed the team to look for patterns and trends in the quantitative data and to subsequently relate them to qualitative evidence.

The qualitative data analysis was thematic in nature and grounded in orientation (Burgess 1984; Freeman 1998; Gough et al. 2000; Kvale 2002; Shkedi 1998). It involved the construction of a priori categories, largely derived from the literature review, that were subsequently imposed on the data. The analysis also involved the development of grounded categories that arose directly from the data (Freeman 1998). This grounded analysis used a categorisation that emerged from the respondents themselves, rather than imposing existing categorisation upon the data e.g. Epstein's frameworks of parental engagement (1990a; 1992; 1995). Using existing categories would not have allowed the authentic voices of the respondents to be heard from within the data and would have restricted the process of data reduction, interrogation and analysis.

In terms of a priori, imposed categories, the research team used the broad constructs and themes arising from the literature. In particular, the analysis focused upon the definition and value of parental engagement, along with the barriers to that engagement. The literature review revealed that parental engagement is a complex issue, (cf. Epstein 1995), and that there is no agreed definition of the term itself. Therefore rather than impose a definition on data, the research team used the term "parental engagement", while allowing respondents to define or exemplify the concept.

Further, the literature review showed that there is no absolute agreement and relatively little evidence about what methods of engaging parents are most effective (Harris et al. 2007 Forthcoming). In this sense it provided the research team with two overarching categories subsequently used in the data collection and analysis phases i.e. the meaning and value of “parental engagement“ and barriers to parental engagement”

The literature review also underlined the importance of social class, economic status and parental experience of education on children’s achievement. The research team therefore included categories dealing with school and parental context in the interview schedule. All interviews were recorded with the permission of all participants, using an Apple IPod. 314 participants were interviewed, resulting in 166 sound files, (79 hours of interviews) of which just over a third were partially transcribed. Data analysis took account of the sound files, field notes and the transcriptions. The break down of respondents is as follows:

**Figure 3. Respondents**

	Head teachers	Deputy Head Teachers	Assistant Head Teachers	Teachers	(Staff total)	Parents	Students	Others	<b>TOTAL</b>
Phase one	8	8	13	26	55	28	37	3	<b>123</b>
Phase two	9	7	4	20	40	53	87	11	<b>191</b>
Total per category	17	15	17	46	95	81	124	14	<b>314</b>

(See also Appendix One).

Data was analysed using a number of tools: Microsoft Word was used for transcription and coding, Excel was used for numerical analysis and the creation of charts, Access was used for storage and retrieval of information. These tools allowed immediate and close interrogation of the data, as well as the ability to code, order and reorder data (Carney et al. 1997) as new constructs emerged. This progressively focusing analytical approach allowed the research team to gain a deeper understanding of parental engagement and the barriers/ facilitating factors.

The informal, semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for wide ranging discussion with various groups of respondents. This gave them a chance to articulate and develop

their ideas more than in a highly structured interview context. The qualitative phase of the research was also informed and instructed by the literature review. This review provided a framework for the design of the data collection instruments and informed data analysis.

## **4. Literature review**

The literature review informed the construction of the research project. It provided a basis for the interview schedule design and analysis. The literature review is wide ranging and includes evidence from research conducted in the fields of education, social work, medicine and psychology. The prime purpose of this literature review was to a broad framework for the research project. The literature review appears in full in the following section.

### **4.1. Introduction**

The belief that parental involvement has a positive effect on students' academic achievement is intuitively appealing to policy makers, teachers, parents and students alike. However this belief has a firm foundation both in the literature concerning parental involvement and in the school improvement research base. The empirical evidence shows that parental involvement is one of the key factors in securing higher student achievement and sustained school performance (Harris and Chrispeels 2006). It would appear that involving parents in schooling leads to more engagement in teaching and learning processes. The importance of parent's educational attitudes and behaviours on children's educational attainment has also been well documented especially in the developmental psychology literature. This evidence shows that different elements of parents' 'educational attitudes and behaviours, such as the provision of a cognitively stimulating home environment, parental involvement in children's activities and parental beliefs and aspirations, have been identified as having a significant effect on children's levels of educational achievement' (Feinstein et al. 2006:1).

Inevitably research concerning the impact of parental involvement on achievement and attainment is complex due to the interaction and influence of other variables. Early research provided a rather mixed set of findings and conclusions about this relationship. The research conducted in the 60s and 70s revealed inconsistent and varied findings about the impact of parental involvement. Some studies found that parental involvement had no effect on student achievement, while others found positive effects. Such inconsistencies have subsequently been explained by variations in definition and methodology along with some technical weaknesses located in certain studies. For example, different definitions of parent involvement were used across the early studies; some took it to be 'good parenting' which went on in the home while others took it to be 'talking to teachers and link activities at the

school'. Also different measures or assessments of parental involvement were used ranging from teachers' judgements, parents' judgements, student judgements or researchers' observations. Measuring different 'things' or measuring the same 'thing' with different metrics resulted in serious inconsistencies in the research base and confusion about the exact nature of the impact of parental involvement on achievement.

In contrast, later research studies were more methodologically robust and generated findings that were more consistent (Desforges et al. 2003). Collectively, the contemporary empirical evidence points towards a powerful association between parental involvement and student achievement. It highlights that parental involvement in learning at home throughout the age range is much more significant than any factor open to educational influence. They also acknowledge that parental involvement is only one of many factors which have an impact on student achievement (Sacker et al. 2002). Longitudinal studies such as those conducted by Sylva et al (1999) and Meluish et al (2001) provide the most recent research evidence about parental involvement. These studies reinforce the impact of parental involvement in learning activities in the home with better cognitive achievement, particularly in the early years. In contrast parental involvement acted out in the school confers little or no real benefit on the individual child (Okpala et al. 2001). Similarly, other studies (Ho Sui-Chu et al. 1996) have shown that parental involvement which takes the form of in-school parental activity has little effect on individual attainment. The research makes it clear that parents working in schools have no tangible contribution to academic attainment of individual students, (though it is valuable for the schools and parents in terms of community relations).

The most recent review of the literature (Desforges, and Abouchaar 2003:28) concludes that those studies using contemporary techniques of data analysis from large data sets have 'safely established that parental involvement in the form of interest in the child and *manifest in the home* as parent-child discussions can have a positive effect on children's behaviour and achievement'. This is not to suggest that parental involvement always has such positive effects as it is clear that there are many factors which impinge upon the quality and nature of parental involvement. This aim of this overview of the literature is to summarise what is currently known about parental involvement and its potential benefits in terms of educational achievement and success. It focuses particularly on the barriers to

involvement and considers how these might be overcome. It concludes by outlining some future areas for research and development in this field.

## **4.2. Definitions and Interpretations**

Despite the significant amount of research in this field, there are considerable differences and difficulties in defining parental involvement. It includes parents coming into schools informally as well as more formal opportunities such as meetings with teachers or taking part in their children's education through classroom participation. In some cases it includes parents' own learning (Carpentier et al. 2005). More recently, researchers have recognized that the concept of parental involvement is multidimensional and includes a multitude of parental activities regarding children's education (Epstein 1992; Lareau 1989; Muller 1995; 1998). In general, the studies fall into three broad categories: 1. Studies on the *impact* of family and community involvement on student achievement. 2. Studies on effective *strategies* to connect schools, families, and community. 3. Studies on *parent and community* organizing efforts to improve schools. These studies comprise a new, still developing arena of research where much more work is needed on the impact of different types of parental involvement.

Parental involvement takes many forms including good parenting in the home, including the provision of a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of constructive social and educational values and high aspirations relating to personal fulfilment and good citizenship; contact with schools to share information; participation in school events; participation in the work of the school; and participation in school governance. Some studies break down parental involvement into a series of discrete types of participation and home-school partnership, substantively based around the ongoing activities and practices involved. In Britain, for example, Her Majesty's Inspectorate (1991) produced a typology of home-school relations around 'what the schools do for parents', 'what parents do for schools' and 'parents as governors', while Sally Tomlinson's (1991) typology covers communication between home and school; parental involvement in (i) learning and (ii) day-to-day activities; parental informal involvement; and parental formal (and legal) involvement.

Joyce Epstein (1990a; Epstein 1990b; Epstein 1992) in the US, has produced an influential classification of types of involvement that pay more explicit attention to home and school as

sites in which parental involvement can occur: Type 1, 'Basic obligations of parents', covering the provision of 'positive home conditions' that support children's learning; establishing a positive learning environment at home; Type 2, 'Basic obligations of schools', covering a range of 'communications from school-to-home' parent-school communications about school programs and student progress; Type 3, 'Parent involvement at school' in the classroom and attending events; Type 4, 'Parent involvement in learning activities' at home, including parent, child-, and teacher-initiated projects, and parent and school communications regarding learning activities at home; and Type 5, 'Parent involvement in governance and advocacy'. She subsequently extended her typology to cover another type of partnership: Type 6, 'Collaborating with the community', covering resources and services that strengthen home-school links. In the United States of America, attempts to enhance parental involvement programmatically have featured in federal, state and local education policies (Epstein 1991). Parent involvement is one of the six targeted areas in the 'No Child left Behind Act' of 2001.

Within the research literature the operational use of parental involvement has not been clear or consistent. Parental involvement has been defined as representing many different parental behaviours and parenting practices, such as parental aspirations for their children's academic achievement and their conveyance of such aspirations to their children (Bloom 1980), parents' communication with children about school (Christenson et al. 1992; Walberg 1986), parents' participation in school activities (Stevenson et al. 1987e.g., ), parents' communication with teachers about their children (Epstein 1991e.g., ), and parental rules imposed at home that are considered to be education-related (e.g., Keith et al. 1993; Keith et al. 1986; Marjoribanks 1983). This range of interpretations suggests that parental involvement is multifaceted in nature, because parental involvement subsumes a wide variety of parental behavioural patterns and parenting practices (e.g., Balli 1996; Brown 1994; Snodgrass 1991). There is also the question of conventional definitions of 'parent' and 'family', which often exclude single parents and guardians, and which often uphold white and middle-class notion of parenthood (Vincent et al. 1997). In her work, Crozier (1999) shows that parental involvement is beset with problems of definition and that parents are far from a homogeneous grouping, even though schools often treat them as such. Hallgarten (2000, p.18) argues, parental involvement currently acts a 'lever' maximising 'the potential of the already advantaged' by engaging with those parents most



likely to reflect the norms and values of the school and ignoring those hard to reach parents who are less likely to readily embrace the cultural norms of the school.

### **4.3. Effects of Parental Involvement**

As highlighted earlier, the research base points towards the fact that parental involvement has an important effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors (such as social class, maternal education and poverty) have been factored out. The literature suggests that among the non-school factors of school achievement like socioeconomic background, parent's educational attainment, family structure, ethnicity and parental involvement, it is the latter which is the most strongly connected to attainment (Feinstein et al. 1999). Recent research has shown that parental aspiration/expectation on their children's achievements has a strong impact on results at school while the effect of supervision of their work is only marginal (Fan et al. 2001). Desforges and Abouchar (2003) list involvement initiatives as 'good' parenting in the home, including the provision of a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of constructive social and educational values and high aspirations relating to personal fulfilment and good citizenship; contact with schools to share information; participation in school events; participation in the work of the school; and participation in school governance' (Desforge & Abouchar, 2003, p.2).

The research shows that impact of parental involvement arises from parental values and educational aspirations that are continuously exhibited through parental enthusiasm and positive parenting. It also shows that while the effects of parental involvement, as manifest in the home, can be significant, they are influenced by a wide range of factors (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; Fan & Chen, 2001). Henderson and Mapp (2002) conducted a thorough review of two decades of research on parent involvement, structuring their examination around three topics: Studies on the impact of *family and community involvement* on student achievement; studies on *effective strategies* to connect schools, families and community; and studies on *parent and community* organizing efforts to improve schools. The findings from these studies suggest that parental involvement can reinforce the existing power divisions between schools, teachers and parents, and reproduce, rather than break down, existing educational inequalities around class, gender and ethnicity (see, for example, Crozier et al. 2000; David 1993; Fine 1993; Hanafin et al.

2002; Lareau 1989; Rea et al. 1998; Vincent 1996; Vincent et al. 2000). This is, in part, because parental involvement initiatives presuppose that schools, parents and students are relatively homogeneous and equally willing and capable of developing parental involvement schemes, which is not always the case.

Disentangling the web of variables enmeshing the whole of family-school relationships and their impact on learning is daunting, and placing all the fragments of specific knowledge on the subject into a coherent, theoretical framework is a challenge (Redding et al. 2004). Yet it is clear that levels of involvement vary considerably depending on the parents and the context in which they find themselves. Williams et al (2002) surveyed parents of children aged 5 - 16 attending schools in England to establish their degree of involvement in their children's education. A telephone survey was used to contact 2019 households in order to conduct interviews to establish parental levels of practical help in schools, their relationship with their child's teacher(s) and parents' involvement with homework. 29% of parents felt very involved – the more so in primary than in secondary schools. Mothers felt more involved than fathers. 35% strongly agreed that they wanted to be more involved whilst around three quarters of parents wanted to be at least somewhat more involved. 94% found school 'welcoming' and 84% reported that the school was willing to involve them. Despite this level of satisfaction, 16% felt they might be seen as trouble makers if they talked too much. Whilst many parents wanted to increase their involvement, to include, for example, supporting extra-curricular initiatives, they felt that the main barriers to further involvement were the limitations on their own time. The vast majority of the parents and carers say they feel very (38%) or fairly (51%) involved in their child's education but involvement clearly varies across different groups. Men are less likely help with their child's homework because of work patterns. Those in social class D and E (.i.e. those from households where the main income earner's occupation is an unskilled manual job or where the family is dependent on state benefits only) are also less likely to say they feel very involved.

A major factor mediating parental involvement is parental socio-economic status whether indexed by occupational class or parental (especially maternal) level of education. Socio-economic status (SES) mediates both parental involvement and student achievement. Sacker et al (2002) showed that SES had its impact in part negatively through material deprivation and in part through attitudes and behaviours to education. Feinstein and

Sabates (2006) found an association between the duration of mother's full time education and her attitudes and behaviours. Results from their study show that an additional year of post-compulsory schooling from mothers was significantly associated with the index of educational attitudes and behaviours i.e. mothers who stay in full time education beyond the minimum school leaving age are more likely to demonstrate positive educational attitudes and behaviours such as reading to their children. The evidence shows that as educational levels for those with lower educational aspirations rise, individuals with positional ambition increased their education further in order to maintain a relative advantage. These researchers are also careful to note that simply increasing the duration of education will not generate changes in attitudes and behaviours as much depends on the quality and nature of the educational experience. However it would seem that the educational effect of post-compulsory education on a mother's attitude towards her children's educational achievement is largely a positive one. Research also shows that parental involvement is also strongly positively influenced by the child's level of attainment: the higher the level of attainment, the more parents get involved (Okpala et al. 2001).

Parents expectations set the context within which young people develop, shape their own expectations and provide a framework within which decisions are made. However there are significant differences between parents in their level of involvement that are clearly associated with social class, poverty, health, and also with parental perception of their role and their levels of confidence in fulfilling it. Students from low socio-economic families are more likely to be disaffected from school, as are students who attend schools that have a high percentage of students of low socio economic status. As these risk factors compound, students from low socio-economic status families are even more likely to be dissatisfied from school. This phenomenon of 'double jeopardy' (Willms 2003) is also evident in analyses of student achievement: low SES students who also attend schools that predominantly serve low socio-economic status students are especially at risk of poor school performance because they have two factors working together (OECD 2003, p. 48). Students are more likely to be engaged in school if they attend schools that have a high average socio-economic status, a strong disciplinary climate, good student teacher relations and high expectations for student success. Students from low SES families are more likely to attend schools where the average socio-economic status is low. This is not to suggest that all young people from low SES backgrounds are likely to underachieve or to become disaffected. Indeed, the evidence suggests that there are a large number of

students engaged in school, even though they are from low SES families or have relatively weak literacy skills (OECD 2003, p. 53). Instead it is to highlight the challenges these young people and their families face in overcoming some of cultural, social and financial barriers that stand in the way of reaching their potential.

The research evidence shows these differences relating to economic status carry over into the area of parental engagement; that while parents want the best for their children, working class parents may not automatically expect certain outcomes as do middle class parents (National Centre for Social Research 2004). As Lupton (2006) points out 'most working class parents think education is important but they see it as something that happens in the school, not the home'. Their expectations of social mobility through education also remain small. It remains the case that their social class has a powerful impact on subsequent educational attainment. Low attainers are disproportionately from lower social classes while the middle classes have benefited most from the expansion of higher education in the 80s and 90s (Blanden et al. 2004). It is also evident that middle class families have culturally supportive social networks, use the vocabulary of teachers, feel entitled to treat teachers as equals, and have access to childcare and transportation, all of which facilitate parental involvement in education. This allows them to construct their relationships with the school with more comfort and trust. It would seem that the educational odds are still stacked against children from low income families and that this is a pattern that persists (Platt 2005).

As ethnicity is strongly correlated to SES it is important to try and recognise that any differences in levels of parental involvement across different ethnic groups may actually be differences related to SES. However variations in parental involvement are apparent across different ethnic groupings. Yan (1999) found that successful Afro-American students were found to have equal or higher levels of parental involvement than those of successful Euro Americans and significantly higher than those of unsuccessful Afro-American students. Achievement among Asian students was negatively associated with parental involvement (both home and school) as a significant element of the Asian culture attributes success to personal effort and not to parental support or guidance. Overall the general impact of parental involvement seems to work across all ethnic groups studied. With younger children (aged 8 - 13 years), Zellman and Waterman (1998) observed differences in the forms of parental involvement across ethnic groups but the impact of these on

student achievement was mediated by parenting style. Once this was factored out, no ethnically based, achievement-related differences were evident. In similar vein, Smith and Hausafus (1998) studied the impact of parental involvement and ethnicity on science and maths achievement using an intervention study. A sample of 8th grade (14 year olds) 'at risk, minority' students and their families were invited to participate in courses intended to enhance achievement through working with families. Across all groups, students did better if their parents helped them to see the importance of taking advanced science and maths courses and took them to exhibitions, science fairs and the like. No ethnic differences were reported. Parents who are more involved in their adolescents' schooling, regardless of parents' gender or educational level, have offspring who do better in school, irrespective of the child's gender, ethnicity or family structure' (p.729). In summary, the general impact of parental involvement seems to work in support of student attainment across all ethnic groups. Parental involvement, especially in the form of parental values and aspirations modelled in the home, is a major positive force shaping students' achievement and adjustment.

#### **4.4. Barriers to Involvement**

There is an extensive empirical literature on the barriers to parental involvement in education. Some of these barriers reflect clear gender differences in childcare arrangements, other barriers are work related and some, as already highlighted, are socially constructed. One of the most cited reasons for parents not being involved in schooling is work commitments. Lack of time and childcare difficulties seem to be significant factors, predominantly for women and those working full-time. Most parents see the main limitation to involvement in education arising from the demands on their time and the restrictions of work on their availability to attend events such as parents' evenings. Single parents feel very restricted in this respect and tend to be least responsive to invitations and requests from school (Anning 2000, September; Standing 1999). However the issue of time is part of a more complex picture of social and economic variables. It is clear that a major mediating factor in parental involvement in schooling is the socio-economic status of the parent or parents. Parents from low SES backgrounds are less likely to get involved in education, particularly at the secondary level. Nechyba et al (1999) summarised three possible mechanisms through which social class might operate as a barrier to parental involvement. Firstly, the suggestion is that there is a 'culture of poverty'

in which working class families place less value on education than middle class parents and hence are less disposed to participate. Secondly, working class families have less 'social capital' in terms of social networks and skills. They do not know the 'right sort of people'. In consequence, regardless of disposition, working class parents either are, or feel they are, less well equipped to negotiate and deliver on the demands of schooling. Thirdly, working class parents face certain institutional barriers as schools are middle class institutions with their own values. They accept involvement only on their own terms which are non-negotiable. Consequently, those parents not conforming to these values are quickly 'put in their place'.

While such theories are largely impossible to test there is evidence to illustrate the sorts of barriers met by working class parents in their exchanges with teachers, schools and school administrations (Crozier 1997; Crozier, G. 1999; Crozier 2001; Rea and Weiner 1998; Tett 2001; Vincent 2001; Vincent and Martin 2000). Williams et al (2002) reported that 16% of parents were wary of overstepping some unwritten mark in their relations with teachers. Parents' evenings are a particularly well documented site for creating parental frustration and confusion (Cullingford et al. 1999; Power et al. 2000). In the latter study, 'there was not so much marked antipathy (between parents and teachers) as mutual fear' (p.259). Crozier (1999) interviewed in depth a sample of parents (71% working class) on the experience of home-school relations and found (a) many working class parents have perceptions of teachers as superior and distant (b) these perceptions are reinforced by the teachers' stance (c) teachers engage with parents only on their own terms (d) this does not encourage parents to be proactive in partnership, rather it encourages parental fatalism in regard to their children's schooling. Whilst there is a broadly held desire amongst parents for more involvement in schooling there are clearly material (time and money) and psychological barriers which operate differentially (and discriminatingly) across the social classes and individual differences amongst parents that operate within social classes. It remains the case therefore that middle class parents are more involved in education than those lower down the social scale and are more likely to have the material circumstances to support their children's learning. Also middle class children were more inclined to 'go along with the idea' of parental involvement than those from a working class background (Edwards et al. 2000, p. 450).

Kohl et al (2000) reported a study of family factors which potentially put parental involvement at risk. They studied the effect of parental education level, maternal depression and single parent status on general involvement. It was argued that parent's views of their role as a teacher and their degree of comfort in communicating with teachers might in part be a reflection on their own education experience. In their exploration of the impact on these factors on involvement, Kohl et al (2000) developed a conception which attempted to go beyond the common 'quantity' models reported and to index the quality of the involvement. In consequence they assessed the degree of parent-teacher contact, the extent of parental involvement in school, the quality of the parent-teacher relationship, teacher's perception of the parent, the extent of parental involvement at home and the parent's endorsement of the school. Once again, parental education was a factor, being positively related to parent-teacher contact. The more educated the parent, the greater was their involvement in their child's education. A lack of extended personal educational experience has, argues Kohl et al, (2000) rendered some parents lacking in relevant skills or appropriate conception of 'parents as co-educator'. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) and Hoover-Dempsey et al (2001) took a different approach to explaining why some parents get involved in their child's education more than others. They reviewed psychological theory and related educational research on role construction. Theory in this field attempts to explain how and why we conduct ourselves in various facets (roles) in our lives (e.g. as 'parent', as 'employee'). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler suggest that parents are likely to get involved in their child's education to the extent that they see it as part of their role or 'job' as it were. In regard to parents in England, Williams et al (2002) found that 2% of parents felt the responsibility for education belonged wholly to the school whilst 58% believed that they had at least equal responsibility.

The attribution of responsibility for education is a key factor in shaping parents' views about what they feel is important or necessary or even permissible for them to do. Role definitions are complexly shaped by family and cultural experiences and are subject to potential internal conflict (parent as housekeeper/breadwinner/nurse/teacher). Parental role construction in regard to their child's education is not the only determinant of their involvement. Their 'sense of personal efficacy' is also implicated. This refers to the degree to which one feels able to make a difference. This in turn depends on a number of related beliefs, attitudes and skills. Parents will be involved to the degree that they see that supporting and enhancing their child's school achievement is part of their 'job' as a parent.

Likewise, parents will get involved to the degree that they feel they have the capacity to make a difference. People can learn new roles and skills. The desire and capacity to be involved will be enhanced or limited to some degree by the barriers or opportunities afforded by schools and by individual teachers. Throughout the age range however, parental involvement seems to have its major impact on children through the modelling of values and expectations, through encouragement and through interest in and respect for the child-as-learner. It seems that students internalise aspects of parental values and expectations as they form an image of themselves as a learner - their so-called 'educational self schema'. These influences are played out through discussions about and beyond schooling.

#### **4.5. Commentary**

The literature reinforces that parent involvement in education can foster positive learning outcomes (Epstein 1992; Sammons et al. 1995). It also suggests that relationships between schools and families must be improved if achievement is to be optimised. The central question therefore is how to increase the types of parental involvement that makes a difference to achievement? The available evidence to answer this question is not extensive. Research on intervention programmes is not robust or reliable enough to draw any clear conclusions about what works in securing higher levels of parental involvement in schools, particularly from hard to reach families. What we do know is that schools that succeed in engaging families from very diverse backgrounds share certain key practices. They focus on building *trusting collaborative relationships* among teachers, families, and community members; they recognize, respect, and address *families' needs*, as well as class and cultural difference.

The existing evidence also suggests that if a sustainable difference is to be made for all children including those from low SES backgrounds certain conditions have to be in place which include:

- strategic planning which embeds parental involvement schemes in whole school development planning
- sustained support, resourcing and training
- community involvement at all level of management



- a commitment to a continuous system of review
- a supportive networked system that promotes objectivity and shared experiences (Desforges, 2003; 70)
- An acknowledgement of the differences among groups of parents, and strategies which reflect these differences

The evidence base about interventions that succeed in raising parental involvement has certain limitations. While it demonstrates that parental involvement makes a difference to schooling, relatively little is known about the most effective ways of securing and increasing parental involvement, particularly in 'hard to reach groups'. Also there is a considerable lack of evidence about the 'achievement gains' from many interventions and programmes aimed at increasing parental involvement. As Desforges and Abouchar (2003:88) conclude, 'the link between getting parents in a position to be pro-schooling and getting children to make a quantum leap in achievement is missing'. Raffaele and Knoff (1999) suggest that unless a whole community approach is taken to parental involvement clearly linked to a teaching and learning strategy within the school the return on effort is likely to be minimal. Krieder (2000) shows that the best effects tend to be obtained when parental involvement is integrated fully into the school development plan and when an 'action team' have responsibility for the delivery of the plan that included teachers and community members.

To conclude, the literature is unequivocal about the fact that parental involvement makes a significant difference to educational achievement. However it says relatively little about the ways in which parental engagement can be extended, enhanced and facilitated to maximise educational achievement in schools. The evidence about interventions and programmes aimed at improving parental involvement is patchy, anecdotal and often based on self report. Consequently, this research project is an important and timely opportunity to focus on the relationship between parental engagement and student achievement. It presents a contemporary account of this relationship and it highlights some of the barriers that prevent certain parents becoming involved in their child's learning.

## 5. Qualitative Findings 1

This section outlines the findings from the case studies of the thirty schools involved in the research. A wide range of initiatives were undertaken by EPRA schools, under four different strands:

- o Supporting parents to help their children learn
  - o Supporting parents to help their children learn aims to equip parents with the knowledge and skills to support their children’s learning from home. This includes focused activities to help parents understand elements of the curriculum, advice about revision techniques at KS 3 and 4 as well as more diverse activities designed to stimulate parental engagement with schools and raise parents’ aspirations for their children.
- o Personalising provision for parents as learners
  - o Personalising provision for parents as learners building on evidence that parents own level of achievement and experience of the education system is a key determinant of their expectations for their children’s experience of learning. This strand aims to re-engage parents with low or no formal skills or qualifications in learning. By breaking down barriers between the school and the parent and igniting an interest in learning, these projects aim to shift long held negative attitudes to education held by some parents which may contribute to generational under achievement in some groups.
- o IReporting
  - o IReporting: a strand designed to push the boundaries of practice on the use of new technologies to engage parents in their children’s learning, progress and behaviour. This strand aims to explore the most effective means of using new technologies to keep parents up to date with what their children are studying, how their children are progressing and what parents can do to help. This also includes a handful of projects looking at solutions for parents who do not have home access to a PC, and schools exploring innovative approaches to providing “real time” data through traditional methods of reporting and information sharing

- o Enhancing pastoral care
  - o Enhancing pastoral care this strand focuses on developing support for parents in their interactions with the school and with their child. It aims to engage parents usually missed in broader parental engagement programmes, through projects focusing on the specific needs fathers, Somali parents, Bengali parents and the most disengaged poor white families. This strand also encompasses projects designed to improve parenting in the home through the use of dedicated staff such as School Home Support Workers and Parent Support Advisers. (Specialist Schools and Academies Trust 2006)

Schools categorised their own work according to these strands; every school's projects touched on at least one of these themes. The four strands were an organising principle of selection for funding, and provide a useful means of examination of results from the case studies.

### **5.1. Supporting parents to help their children learn**

Many schools in the research had instigated initiatives aimed at supporting parents in helping their children learn. These events included "dads and lads" maths events, centring on cars or football; family learning events, and classes aimed at helping parents understand the contemporary curriculum and homework/course work. While some of the more ambitious and innovative events under this heading did not yield the results desired by the school, many at least met expectations and some exceeded them: parents attended parent and child learning events, or attended "help your child learn" courses.

Other initiatives included accredited work with a local University for parents, which focused on the content of the school curriculum, booklets for parents on the same subject, and allowing parents to "shadow" a year group during a school day to experience contemporary schooling for themselves. Some schools reported increased communication between parents and students about homework, an increased ease in helping with learning on the part of parents, and a greater propensity among students to discuss learning with their parents.

## **5.2. Personalising provision for parents as learners**

In terms of provision aimed particularly at parents, the most successful initiatives were those which related directly to family dynamics: courses on parenting, on family issues; these events provided not only expert advice from teachers or other agencies (ParentLine), but allowed parents to discuss family and learning related issues with peers, in comfortable, non-threatening situations. Although these projects were aimed only at parents rather than parents and students as a unit (e.g. they were attended only by the parents), their focus was on the parent-child relationship.

Parents who engaged in these activities reported increased rates of conversation with their children, reduced stress in the home, "I keep thinking something is missing - we've not had an argument for weeks!" (Parent) Students also reported increased communication with parents, "I like it when you go to those courses, you're nicer to us!" (Student). The provision of parent's handbooks was also successful; parents reported satisfaction with the availability of information and with the ease of finding the information needed. One of the parent's handbooks created by a project school has been adopted across the LA, and is being used as a model for handbooks in other areas.

Other schools concentrated on learning aimed directly at parents themselves, often based on responses to parental surveys, questionnaires or focus groups. Such courses included craft or cookery based courses, language courses, beauty courses and IT courses (web design and the European Computer Driving Licence Course).

## **5.3. Enhancing pastoral care**

Programmes aimed at enhancing pastoral care were often either combined with or ran alongside events in the previous category, so that parents were supported electronically, and enjoyed the same success. Some schools fulfilled this category with the appointment of a pastoral care officer or the deployment of current staff in different ways so that they were available to support both parents and students; schools engaged mentor for students, and supported both students and their parents around issues of attendance and punctuality. A number of schools targeted year six pupils and parents, offering support and pastoral care around transition for both groups. Other schools responded to parental requests for support in specific areas.

Project schools reported that attendance among students who received support around this issue has increased and remained steady; students and parents in vulnerable groups have reported feeling more secure about coming into school, and about contacting school when needed. The importance of having a named contact for parents, and direct access to this contact, has been emphasised by staff and parents.

#### **5.4. IReporting**

Most of the schools fulfilled this category by using new technologies, so that parents were offered access to “real time data”, that is, access to most or all of their own children’s records through the use of a secure sign-on to the school system. Other schools used new technologies to alert parents not only of absences and tardiness, but to remind them of parents’ evenings, awards ceremonies, etc. Some schools, however, addressed this strand in other ways, by revamping their current reports or the way these were shared with parents.

This category also tended to be successful in terms of the aims set out for it by the schools. Parents either reported being satisfied with improved information from the school, or accessed on-line data; other measures of success in this area were improved attendance and a reduction in tardiness. However, even a brief treatment of the case study material reveals that many schools are still at the point of seeing information for schools as a generally closed cycle; that is, information is *given* to parents, rather than elicited from them.

Some schools did institute a cycle of “you said, we did, you said, we did” and found that increased parental engagement *with the school*. Other schools made it clear in their reports that their conception of intelligent reporting was still a front-ended one, originating with the school and ending with the parent. Schools have reduced and simplified their reports to parents, on the basis of parental preference; language used in reports has been made consistent, and staff workload reduced, as reports are shorter and more to the point; staff have agreed that the new systems instituted are a different way of working, rather than more work. Parents can now access online, real time data for their own children, leading to family conversations which have had a beneficial effect on behaviour.

“Having just looked at my two children’s records on the E-Portal I feel the need to email you and congratulate you on how excellent this site is each time I go on it. The layout is fantastic and easy to access, I have also noticed that the school does not have our full contact numbers since moving address and can now send these in straight away. Comments from staff are also appreciated.” Parent, writing to school about online access to student data

Throughout the case studies there are phrases which support the view that information is something schools *give to parents*, who are in the main passive receptors, rather than active agents in the learning of their children; parents have been “spoken to”, have been “given information”. The same may be said of removing barriers - many times, the barriers removed are to interaction with the school. While this is a useful first step (and perhaps all that could be expected at this stage), it is not the end of the journey; parental engagement is not about engaging with the school but with *the learning of the child*.

It would seem, from the basis of the case studies, that many schools have not fully embedded this understanding of parental engagement. Some schools have not taken the final step of moving from *engagement with the school* to *engaging with the learning of the pupil*. As evidenced by the comment above, some schools and some parents have bridged that gap.

## 6. Qualitative Findings 2

The qualitative data collection focused initially on the main research question: *in what ways does parental engagement impact upon student achievement?* The data collection methods were designed to allow free discussion from respondents on a wide range of issues concerning parental engagement and student achievement. The findings from the qualitative data are presented under the following thematic headings: engagement with student learning, the meaning of “parental engagement”, barriers to parental engagement, and other issues arising from the research.

### 6.1. Engagement with student learning

It was clear from the research literature that what makes the difference to student achievement is not parental involvement in *schooling* but parental engagement in *learning* in the home. The majority of projects in the EPRA programme were aimed at getting parents into school; “getting them across the threshold” was a common phrase. In short they were focused primarily on *involvement* and not *engagement*.

As noted earlier there is a significant difference between *involvement with the school* and *engagement with the learning* of the child - at home. Involvement with the school may be characterised by responding to phone calls, attendance at parents’ evenings or meetings, responding to reply slips or questionnaires, signing student diaries, membership of parent teacher associations or governing bodies, as well as physical presence in the school as either employee or volunteer. These activities are premised upon parents being reactive to the school rather than proactive.

There is evidence from the research that certain schools in the sample were seriously and deeply focusing on parental engagement in learning. Some schools had instigated programmes of support for parents that were held in the community, rather than school venues, but for the most part, even events aimed at influencing learning in the home (such as parenting classes,) tend to be held on school grounds. This signalled that the school was leading or directing the relationship.

The research results reinforce that schools tend to focus on involving parents in various activities, which while enjoyable and socially reinforcing, often do not impact upon learning.

The data showed that many schools involve parents in school-based or school related activities. However this constitutes parental involvement rather than parental engagement. It is clear that parental involvement can encompass a whole range of activities with or within the school. Where these activities are not directly connected to learning they have little impact on pupil achievement.

The data from students highlighted that parents tend to come into school rarely and then only for particular events, such as parents' evenings, target setting meetings, and award ceremonies. Yet, what students seek from their parents is not presence in school but rather their engagement and participation in their *learning*.

The research found that there are very different views of parental engagement held by teachers, students and parents. Parental engagement is viewed as a 'good thing' by teachers, parents and pupils although interpretations of the term vary. Parents view parental engagement as offering support to students while teachers tend to view it as a means to improved behaviour. Students view parental engagement as being primarily about moral support and interest in their progress.

The research showed that there is little consensus about the value of parental engagement as illustrated in figure 4.



**Figure 4. Staff, Parent and Student views of Parental Engagement**

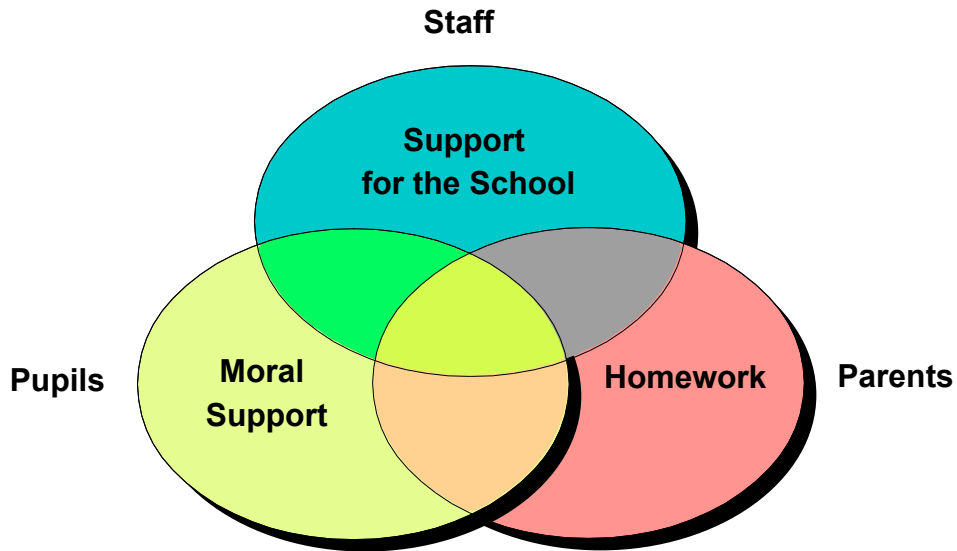
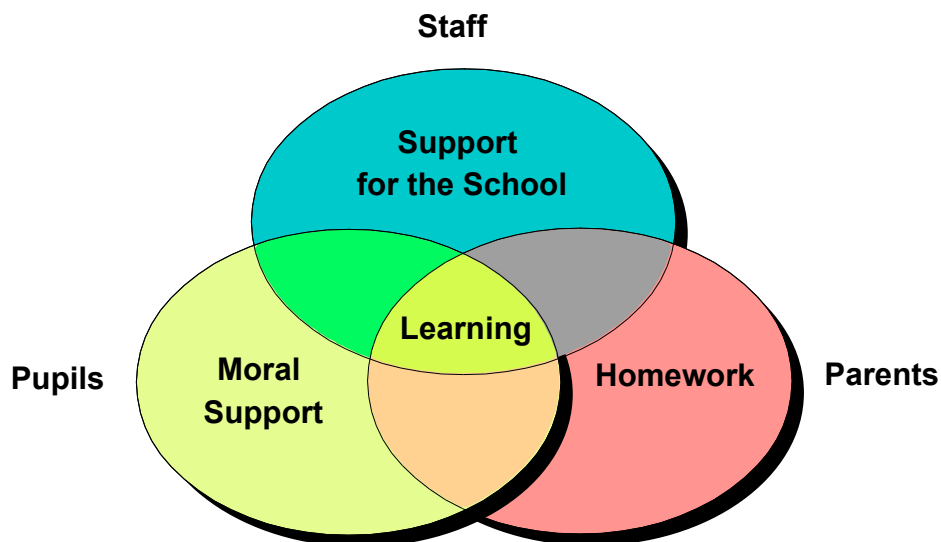


Figure 4 shows that school staff felt that parental engagement was particularly useful in supporting school policies. Conversely, parents reported that they saw it as support with homework while students responded that what they valued most about the engagement of their parents was moral support. Figure 5 this learning provides the focal point. Student learning is at the centre of the process of parental engagement.

**Figure 5. Views of Parental Engagement**



The difference between these three groups is important in understanding responses parental engagement. It suggests that schools need to be clear about what it is they understand by parental engagement and to reflect this consistently

## **6.2. Parental engagement**

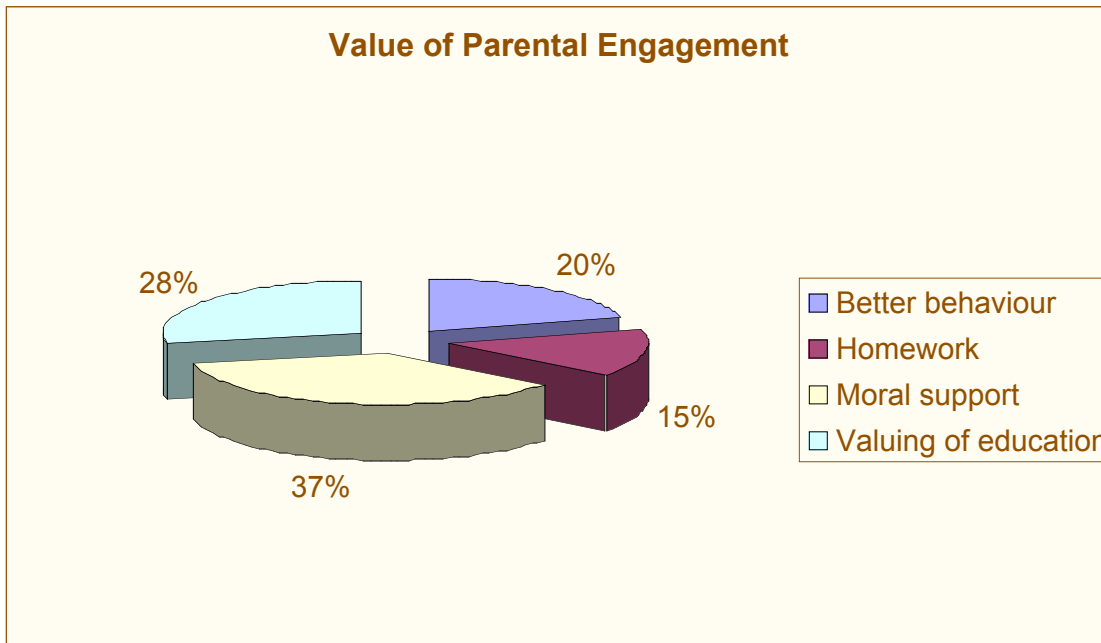
During the first phase of the research project, it became clear that there was no strong consensus about “parental engagement” it meant different things to the different respondents. No definitions of the term. “parental engagement” were given to respondent groups. The first column in Figure 6 shows the categories of the value or use of parental engagement; these categories arose from the interview responses themselves. The next three columns show the number of people in each respondent group who gave that answer. The final column shows the total number of people who gave specific answers. Bold numbers indicate the response given most frequently by parents, students and staff.

**Figure 6. The value of Parental Engagement - all respondents**

	Parents	Staff	Student	Total
<b>Moral support</b>	<b>62</b>	25	<b>102</b>	189
<b>Valuing of education</b>	56	17	74	147
<b>Better behaviour</b>	24	<b>32</b>	51	107
<b>Homework</b>	21	14	65	100

Figure 7 shows the percentage of all responses given under each category of behaviour, homework, moral support and the valuing of education. This chart does not disaggregate by the respondent group but rather shows the total responses given for each category.

**Figure 7. Value of Parental Engagement,**



Questions about the value and nature of parental engagement were asked to allow for different understandings, and to take account of the different ways the words could be used; the question was often asked two or three times in different ways to elicit a response.

Perhaps the situation is best explained by a deputy head teacher who, when asked why parental engagement is important, said,

“I don’t know, I just know it is, and I’m not going to give up!” Deputy Head,  
School P

It should be emphasised that in almost every case when respondents of every group were asked, “Is parental engagement important?” the answer was always unequivocally positive.

This was the case even in interviews where students had expressed reservations about “overly involved” or “smothering” parents. It was also the case even where students were aware that it was possible to feel that their parents were too involved, the importance of their involvement was not diminished. In fact, of all the students interviewed, only one ever expressed complete ambiguity about the value of parental engagement.

Overall, respondents were clear that the engagement of parents was “important”, “really important”, “vital” to the success of their children’s learning. There were however many who equated “parental engagement” with “engagement with the school” rather than with the learning of the young person,

“Engagement relates to commitment and support for something - and the more understanding they have through engagement the more commitment and support you can provide. And the more support you can provide for the school it’s like a circle from home to school with the child in the centre. It’s the support and the feedback on what the school is trying to do” School Staff,  
School N<sup>2</sup>

“It completes the circle - parents supporting school and the child” Head  
Teacher, School V

“If we are concerned with the personal development of the persons as well as their GCSE grades, then we absolutely have to be talking to the parents because the parents are also concerned with their personal development”  
Head Teacher, School X

“Education is a triangle with three legs: parents, child, school and if any of the legs fall the triangle falls as well” Deputy Head Teacher, School F

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<sup>2</sup> Quotations from interviews are given with the role of the respondent, and a letter symbol for each school. Thus, all responses coded as “School A” will be from one school; all those coded “School B” from a different school.

“[I’d like] Pupils seeing the joined-upness of homelife and school life. Sometimes it feels like parents are out there and we’re in here and that’s got to be broken down if we’re going to be a genuine community school” Teacher, School EE

“If they come to school and they’re learning to do things and they go home and life is completely the opposite they’re almost leading two separate lives as it were? I really think that I want to be more involved in what’s going on at school so I can reinforce what happens at school and school can reinforce what happens at home. And if you’ve got a more consistent approach in both areas then I think that’s good for my children they’ll function better. For me it’s wanting to be involved so that I understand what’s going on at school so I can try and reinforce it and help and try and do things in a consistent way at home where I can” Parent, School X

“And that’s what it’s about, really - extended schools provision is about that. Providing extra vision for our parents and our kids... Children are not isolated, they are not islands. We influence their time five hours a day - they’re at home for 19 hours. The rest of the time they’re engaged with their parents. If we engage the parents then we stand a chance of increasing their life chances and their parents’ as well.” Head Teacher, School U

“Engagement with families, parents is key - It’s got to happen - my ideal would be to be able to see all these children’s parents” Pastoral Worker, School S

“because i don’t think that children can successfully study and learn if there is a massive divide between school and their home life in terms of their learning an their work” Deputy Head Teacher, School Q

“My attitude has always been that the child will only benefit if there is synergy between the school and home. It can’t work if one isn’t working“  
Parent, School O

Throughout the research it was clear that schools were using engagement and involvement inter-changeably, even though they meant very different things in principle and practice

### **6.3. Practicalities and Value of Parental Engagement**

Responses to questions about the value of parental engagement in schools elicited two types of response. The first focused on the practical issues of engagement: what is it that parents actually **do** when engaging with their children’s learning and/or school. The second response focused on the **value** those actions are perceived to have, by different groups of respondents. The first type of response focused on practicalities i.e. parents helping with homework or assisting with project work or asking how the child’s day. Parents and students also mentioned attendance at parents’ evenings but overall, the majority of

responses highlighted the practical ways of being involved”. Staff echoed this response, and added to it ‘support for the behaviour policies of the school. The second type of response reflected parents valuing of education and espousing its importance. The data showed that parents are more likely to be involved in their children’s education when they believe that such involvement is a key part of what it means to be a responsible parent.

### **6.3.a. Moral support**

The data showed that students valued the moral support parents gave more highly than any other involvement:

“If they weren’t interested, then you wouldn’t be” Student, School D

“If they didn’t want you to do well, then you wouldn’t want to do well because it wouldn’t make much difference” Student, School CC

“If they didn’t want to come to parents evening, you wouldn’t like have anyone pushing you” Student, School CC

“Some people’s parents don’t really get involved in their education and they aren’t gong to do as well - they aren’t going to get a really good job because it all starts from here. “Student School Y

“I think it’s your parents’ recognition - I’ve lost my certificates now but I still know that my parents were proud” Student, School D

“Because if no one’s involved, there’s no point in doing it” Student, School N

“If they are involved then you’re going to do well because you’ve got family behind you backing you up. If they’re not involved you aren’t going to do as well” Student, School Y

As more than one student summed up, “You can’t do it alone”. Overwhelmingly, students saw the value of parental engagement as being moral support and as a role model (if parents value education, their children will do the same). Students were also clear that their peers who lacked this support were less likely to do well academically, “They have to find that support from their friends” Student, School C. One student who was facing exclusion stated, “I might have done better if (my parents) had pushed me”.

Parents echoed the view that their role was a crucial one and fundamentally concerned with moral support,

“It’s not something a child can do alone - some of them do but it’s much harder. I’m not really talking about academically - I’m talking about social and emotionally” Parent, School T

“I honestly think that a lot of parents do not spend enough time with their children. A lot of parents are spending less and less time with their children. They don’t have time of their children. The parent might not realise how the child takes it. I think it breaks a bond. When the child gets older, when I needed that help you didn’t listen. I think it’s very important to keep emphasising how important that is. Work is always going to be there. You bring them into this world and you should be a part of them until they are old enough to know what’s right and what’s wrong” Parent, School T

“It’s part of growing up as well - if you hear other children that their parents don’t care - you know that your children can say, well my mum and dad are there my mum and dad help me. It’s very hard to explain but if you’ve got children who are brought up in a lovely family atmosphere, they know they’re loved, they know their parents want them to do well at school, in my mind that child will do better than a child that doesn’t get that attention.” Parent, School Q

It is significant that both parents and students highlighted this issue of moral support above any other. It is also significant that staff felt that such support was also crucially important:

“There’s no more powerful thing in education than a close working relationship between parent and child” Head Teacher, School D

“What I want to get across is that we’re not just talking about physical involvement - it’s hearts and minds that we’re trying to get involved, is what we’re trying to do” Head Teacher, School X

Students were remarkably clear that what mattered to them was that their parents were behind them, supporting them.

### **6.3.b. Valuing of education**

The data showed that students were also very clear about the importance of the value placed on education by their parents. As summed up by one student, “If they’re not bothered, why should I be?”

“Your parents are your main influence, really - if they don’t care about it, you don’t take as much of an interest in it” Student, School V

“If your parents aren’t involved and don’t really care, then you don’t realise how important it is and then you just don’t turn up to lessons and go downhill and that’s it, and you sort of slide” Student, School D

“If the parents aren’t bothered then the child won’t, which I don’t think is good.” Student, School C

“But some people even if they do get like praise letters or bad letters they [parents] don’t really care and I think that’s when you start going downhill a bit - if parents don’t really care if you get good grades then you start to lose interest” Student, School D

“If parents aren’t bothered about a child’s education then I don’t think the child would be bothered either” Student, School Y

These comments are important because they highlight the relationship between parents’ interest (not necessarily involvement) in their children’s education and the value the students placed on their learning. Even when older students made the point that they needed space of their own, and that parents could be too involved (“smothering”, or “clingy”, or applying too much academic pressure), there was no question but that they valued and actively wanted their parents (grandparents, carers) to be interested in what they were doing.

Parents were clear that if they did not show interest in their child’s education, the child would show a similar lack of interest.

“If we had an attitude that it doesn’t matter - why should they bother?” Parent, School D

“You talk to kids about what they want for the future and how education is a step for that future, and it’s “No you don’t need an education - my mum says, my dad says, my brother never went to school and he’s got a good job and it’s only school and it doesn’t matter if you don’t get an education”” Head of Year, School D

This reinforces the fact that both parents and students tend to see the value in education and the collective need to invest in supporting learning.

### **6.3.c. Achievement and behaviour**

The evidence showed that parental engagement had a direct and beneficial effect on student behaviour, “I try to be good for her [the student’s mother]”, and in a preventative manner: students were clear that if there was no home based consequence to bad behaviour at school, such behaviour would continue. They often spoke of “getting away” with bad behaviour or the fact that those who were poorly behaved did not “get punished” at home. Students were clear that communication between home and school on the subject



of behaviour does have an effect on the way they behave in school and their responses to learning:

“Yes - we know we’re not going to get away with it - other people might think they can get away with it” Student, School C

“If your parents had nothing to do with school you could skip your lessons and nobody will be bothered; but if your parents are bothered then if you do something you think it won’t be very good cause I’ll get punished or I’ll get my spending money taken off me” Student, School D

“Parents should encourage their kids if they’ve done something well because then automatically the kid will want to do better to make their parents proud” Student, School V

Students often expressed the view that lack of parental support contributed to the bad behaviour and poor performance of those they termed “troublemakers”, or expressed sympathy for those who did not have such support (or in one case, felt that they themselves would have performed better with more support).

Parents broadly agreed with young people about this issue, linking their own relationship with their children to behaviour in school.

“I’ll respect you and you respect me and you don’t show me that respect when you’re misbehaving at school” Parent, School C

“If the home isn’t supportive it can undermine what the school is doing” Parent, School T

Students also echoed the views of school staff in seeing parental engagement as supporting behaviour policies and promoting behaviour that was conducive to learning. School staff expressed their hope that parents would support school policies, “sing from the same hymn sheet” - so that students would receive a unified message.

“I think the very fact that a parent is interested makes a huge difference because it just reinforces immediately the sorts of things we’re saying in school” Head Teacher, School C

“I think it’s vital if the parents not behind the teacher then all our work’s in vain and we’re really undermined - teaching the child that you’ve got to respect their teacher. “ Teacher, School Y

“The very fact that a parent is interested makes a huge difference, [it] just reinforces immediately the sorts of things we’re saying in school. Emotionally from the individual student it reinforces the ethos of the school whether it be

at home or in school, the same sets of value are in effect. It's coming from all the different angles then for the young person" Head Teacher, School C

School staff saw student behaviour as directly related to improved learning:

"And it's usually behaviour triggers their visits but if we don't get the behaviour right there won't be the learning and I think it's their visits that helps parents see the link between behaviour and attendance and learning" Deputy Head Teacher, School C

"Yes - we need to have that thread - when you say you're going to ring home, some of them say my mum won't care - or she'll support me anyway. But some students it puts the fear of God in them." Teacher, School Y

Students, on the other hand, saw parental support for behaviour policies in terms of prevention and cure - they were often clear that if parents enforced penalties (almost always referred to by students as "punishments") for breaches of school policy, students were more likely to behave.

"Yes - because they show that they actually care about you. If she didn't tell me that, I'd misbehave, I'd be out of the house" Student, School N

"I think it's cause you're here for so long that they're doing something different at home and you're here and you want them to know that you've not gone off the rails and that you're still alright " Student, School D

Students tended to link the interest shown in their learning/education with better behaviour, providing a link between the first and second categories used here:

"You can tell the difference between someone whose parents are involved and when they're not. When they are involved you can see that like you work a bit harder, because you've got someone to realise that you are working harder. If my parents weren't involved, I'm not saying I'd go off rails but I wouldn't be as bothered because there'd be no one to realise I was working hard, and you get that feeling that you've done well and they've seen it. The kids that come to school and don't wear uniform and don't follow rules - it's the parents in a way - if they just let you wear what you want and they don't check up on your homework, that's when you slide" Student, School D

Conversely, they were also convinced that students whose parents took no or little notice of such infractions had little cause to uphold school policies. Some students saw the point of academic achievement as primarily about pleasing their parents, "Otherwise, there's no point, really, is there?" (Student, School CC). The relationship between parental engagement and student behaviour in school was clear to all respondent groups.

### 6.3.d. Homework

This final way in which parental support was considered important to students and parents was homework. This was often the first mentioned purpose of parental engagement

“If they’re not doing homework their academic performance is going to be lower and parental support is key in getting homework done”  
Teacher, School Y

“Yes - it must, because if they know that their parents know what it is that they should be doing then they’re more likely to do it and do it properly, whereas I think a lot of the time it’s because the parents don’t really know what they’re doing because the kids aren’t very talkative about what they’re doing. But with this the parents have actually been here and have seen it and know what they should be expecting from their child and if they’re not seeing that I would hope that they would take the necessary action which should ensure that they work a little bit harder” Teacher, School EE [ Of a family learning event]

Students also mentioned homework first, when asked about their parents’ engagement in their education. Younger students placed more value on their parents’ help with homework than older students, who often reported that their parents “couldn’t” help or “didn’t understand what we’re taught now”.

Many parents expressed difficulties in dealing with the content of homework, but suggested their contribution could include trips to museum, provision of computer time, etc.

“My daughter has been quite conscientious - there’s been no need for me to get involved. There’s no need for me to push her into doing her homework”  
Parent, School X

Others saw it as expressive of a more general interest:

“It’s difficult sometimes to sit down with a 14 year old - spend three quarters of an hour doing what? If you’re working on an essay you’re talking about other things. And they’re having you there, they’re pleasing you, you’re pleasing them and I think that’s really important especially with so many”  
Parent, School Q

All groups of respondents mentioned homework - either “helping with” it or “taking an interest in it” as a part of parental engagement. Parents in particular felt that it was part of their “responsibility” as parents to be involved in homework, and expressed frustration when they were not able to help as they would like to do, or did not know what homework had been set. As seen in the comment above, parents often saw homework as a vehicle for deeper discussions with their children about learning and school.

## 6.4. Discussion

It is clear that parents and students are in broad agreement about the value of parental engagement in the learning of young people. This agreement centres on the moral support that parents can show for their children, the encouragement given and the role models provided. This reinforces the findings of the literature review, and the main theme of this report i.e. that engagement must be with the learning of the student, rather than with the school.

Students, in particular, were very clear that parental interest in their education had a direct and positive effect on in-school behaviour. If students faced parental sanctions for bad behaviour at school, that bad behaviour was far less likely to continue. On the other hand, students often stated that those who flouted school regulations, “slipped up” or “fell off the rails”, did so with impunity in the home - good behaviour was not reinforced and bad behaviour was not punished.

Homework - either in terms of monitoring it or helping with it - came far down the list of activities valued by students. Yet this is often the most obvious way in which parental engagement is understood. For staff, the connection between homework and parental engagement was obvious,

“If they’re not doing homework their academic performance is going to be lower and parental support is key in getting homework done. There’s a definite knock on effect on their overall attainment, yes. And their confidence in class as well - if they’re not doing their homework and everyone else is contributing. There is a real boost, if they feel that they can do their homework, there’s a huge boost in confidence” Teacher, School Y

The data suggests that while involvement in homework is of value, in and of itself it does not fulfil the prescriptions of students’ needs. Rather, it is the beginning of a process, which ideally should lead to deeper discussions:

“Getting over that whole philosophy of what did you do at school - that goes no where but asking what did you learn at school that’s quite a deep question. How could you learn better at school today? What stopped you learning at school today?” Deputy Head, School X

Parents and staff both stated that parental engagement was “easier” at primary school than in secondary school. Usually, this is couched in terms of “you’re there (or, they’re there) at the school gates”, though parents have also reported being far more comfortable with

helping with homework in the primary years. However, difficulties relating to secondary school are often expressed in terms of physical presence, which is deemed to be more difficult at secondary level. Yet both the literature and respondents reinforce that what is of greatest value is not the physical presence of the parent in school but their support and interest in learning at home.

## **6.5. Barriers to Parental Engagement**

Schools face certain barriers in engaging parents. These include practical issues such as lack of time, language barriers, child care issues and practical skills such as literacy issues and the ability to understand and negotiate the school system. Schools can offset these barriers by supporting parents to help their children learn; personalising provision for parents as learners; improving pastoral care; listening to parents and responding to real rather than perceived needs.

The research data highlighted three main barriers to parental engagement. These are: parental experience of education, practical issues and perceived teacher attitude.

Figure 8 shows the different barriers to parental engagement raised by respondents. Responses given by parents, staff and students are listed next to each barrier, with bold figures indicating the most common response for that group.

**Figure 8. Barriers to Parental Engagement**

<b>Barrier</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>Staff</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Total</b>
Parental experience of education	28	<b>44</b>	2	74
Parental lack of skills	<b>29</b>	17	0	46
Practical issues	3	30	<b>11</b>	44
Perceived teacher attitude	18	11	3	32
Attitude of the child	20	0	3	23
Parents not interested	8	0	8	16
The school itself	11	5	0	16
The school not doing enough	1	1	0	2

A further breakdown of the response data will be found in Appendix 4.

### **6.5.a. Parental experience of education**

The data showed that the greatest barrier was parental experience of education. School staff in particular felt that this was the greatest barrier. This reinforces the findings in the literature, which shows that parents can see schools as places where they have experienced (or remember experiencing) only failure, as places of conflict, or as representatives of a system which they must fight and must aid their children in fighting. This was seen as a particular issue by staff,

“We’ve got a barrier with parents who came here and maybe didn’t have a pleasant experience. And you’ve got that carried on generation after generation. And we’ve got people coming in saying that their children came here and their grandkids come here... It’s trying to get them over the threshold. It’s very difficult to beat the psychological barriers” Community Development Officer, School C

“Many of our parents had teachers who [said] - sit down, do this, don’t speak - lots of directive teaching and not a lot of interaction” Deputy Head Teacher, School C

“They can’t take an active role in the life of the school if they feel they’re being excluded and I think some parents would feel that because of their own experiences of school “ Teacher, School EE

“A lot of the barriers for learning that children have come from the home. It’s not necessarily intentional from home - it’s to do with the educational background of parents and the fact that families have broken down” Head Teacher, School AA

Some parents highlighted this barrier also often combined with other barriers (perceived teacher attitude, the school itself):

“I think they look up to teachers and maybe it’s just school - something since they were at school, something to be feared from [their own experience]” Parent, School A

When parents feel that they have the opportunities, skills and knowledge required to help their children, they are more likely to be engaged. The consequences for parental engagement of negative self-efficacy beliefs or negative experience of schooling result in a general reticence and reluctance to engage in supporting the school’s efforts to engage them in learning. Such reluctance or reticence on the part of parents is a powerful signal to their children that education is not valued or indeed valuable.

“So I’ve seen how the negativity on their part can create negativity for children. And that’s what I don’t want to happen” Parent Governor, School EE

### **6.5.b. Parental lack of skills**

“Parental lack of skills”, is the second most commonly cited barrier from within the data. The particular skills in question were social skills (a term used by school staff but no other group), that is, confidence, understanding of school structures, even comfort levels with meetings that entailed agenda, minutes and formalities. It was also the case that for some parents, language was a real barrier.

“Sometimes it’s language - we have lots of different languages in school I know some parents have found it a little bit scary to come to school because they’re not sure if anyone will speak their language” Teacher, School O

This barrier was most clearly stressed by parents - they felt they often did not have the right language to use in discussions with teachers. This category is clearly linked with others, “perceived teacher attitude” and “practical issues” among them.

“In terms of reporting - my husband doesn’t understand it, he can not understand it one bit. The reporting system is very complicated and it does need simplifying” Parent, School O

Parents also stated that they were uninformed about the educational system; this was particularly mentioned by parents who had not been through the English educational system themselves. Parents also expressed the point that their own lack of schooling, their own inability to “keep up” with the work their children were doing, was a barrier, leading to feelings of inadequacy.

“If the parents can’t do it (answer the questions) you do feel that you’re not right for your child” School staff/Parent, School D

“With a lot of parents they think that what we’re doing at school is way above their heads and they’re petrified they don’t want to admit that they can’t deal with it makes it really, really difficult” Community Development Officer, School C

“A lot of parents want to approach the school but don’t - think people will laugh at their ideas” Parent, School T

This barrier was particularly highlighted as the reason why - the “hard to reach” - parents did not interact with schools.

“But the parents ... in areas like this are not confident to come into school and tackle these issues with staff, they haven’t got the social skills to do so”  
Deputy Head, School H

“With a lot of parents they think that what we’re doing at school is way above their heads and they’re petrified; they don’t want to admit that they can’t deal with it; it makes it really, really difficult“  
Community Development Officer,  
School C

It was also suggested that in many ways the schools are ‘hard to reach’ and inaccessible for certain parents.

### **6.5.c. Practical issues**

The third most common barrier highlighted by teachers, parents and students was the matter of time, and the lack of it. One parent reported that dealing with family issues could get in the way of engagement with learning,

“I’ve got five [children in the home]; it’s busy!” Parent, School Q

(It should be noted, however, that this same parent highlighted the value of making and taking time for individual children, “They know I’m busy, they value the time”).

Some school staff reported that parents’ working lives often dictated that they had little time to spend with their children; more than one head teacher spoke of “middle class neglect”, resulting from parental concentration on work to the exclusion of time for family interaction.

Other factors reflected under the general issue of time were child care, and lack thereof - parents dealing with children of differing ages might not be able to arrange care for younger siblings while attending meetings for secondary school students. From the literature review, we know that social class has a definite effect on parental engagement; this was reinforced by the data,

“I was on the EPRA website the other day - and it’s got a lovely picture of a lad... with a lamp and his father at his shoulder surrounded by books - and I thought “if only it were like that””  
Community Worker, School C

School staff also mentioned other barriers, such as language,

“If we’re talking about different cultural groups, there are language blocks - the ability to support students with their homework; just on a very basic level parents can’t support students to do their work”  
Extended Schools coordinator, School I



For some schools, simple geography could be a limiting factor, due to the distances involved and difficulties of transport for parents.

#### **6.5.d. Perceived teacher attitudes**

The fourth barrier identified was teacher attitudes. As one head teacher said, he felt that one of his tasks was to convince both staff and parents that “the other side doesn’t have horns and tails” (Head Teacher, School X).

School staff felt that parents sometimes perceived teachers to feel that they were a “cut above” parents, or (conversely) that parents would feel intimidated by teachers who had degrees and were more formally dressed than parents.

School staff spoke about the perception parents might have of teachers:

“The perceived attitudes of teachers and the way they relate to parents is not appropriate to the partnership relationship with parents. I wonder if that’s an occupational hazard - if you learn to control large groups of people you have to step back from that language and those approaches when you’re doing a one to one. Some people have it and some don’t.” Head of Year, School I

“A lot of people think that teachers put themselves on a pedestal and think they’re a cut above and that’s a barrier” Community Development Officer, School C

“There are a lot of people out there who think they [teachers] aren’t going to listen” Parent, School EE

“So there is an imbalance in the relationship - parents feel that teachers may look down on them because they’re uneducated” Extended Schools Coordinator, School I

Interestingly, a student touched on this issue, in saying:

“Some people feel that they can’t, that they’re not allowed, if you know what I mean - you’ll never really know how many of those there are. It’s important to show [parents] that they’ve got the opportunity [to be involved]” Student, School EE

Parents who discussed this barrier spoke of the perceptions of other parents, not themselves; this perception was often related to the previous barrier of parental experience of education, and with distance from the school: as parents who held this view of teacher attitudes did not attend the school for meetings or social events, they had no chance to learn that their perceptions were not accurate. This barrier seems to be a self-perpetuating

one: as parents do not engage with teachers because of perceived teacher attitude, they have no opportunity for learning that the attitude of teaching staff is not what it is perceived to be.

#### **6.5.e. Attitude of the child**

Another barrier highlighted in this study is the attitude of the child towards the engagement of the parent. When parents discuss children's attitude as a barrier to engagement, it is almost always in terms of "if they [children] don't want them [parents] involved, there is nothing you can do about it". This may be on the level of not getting information from the child (hence frequent calls for all communication from schools to be posted on websites as well as delivered through student post), or it may escalate to the child actively seeking to keep the parent at a distance from the school, often (by report) to keep the parent from discovering difficulties the child is experiencing, behavioural issues. Comments about this barrier must also be weighed against the need for space expressed by older students.

It is significant that few students and no staff commented on the attitude of the child as a barrier to parental engagement. This reflects not only parents' own experience of dealing with their children but their perception of barriers to the engagement of other parents. Parents noted a marked gender difference among their own children, with girls being far more forthcoming about events, homework and school in general than boys.

#### **6.5.f. Parents not interested**

The data showed that students and parents felt that parental attitude and interest is a barrier. "They're adults - if they don't want to be involved, you can't make them be" (Student, School EE) is a typical example of discussion in this area, as well as:

"But some people even if they do get like praise letters or bad letters they [parents] don't really care and I think that's when you start going downhill a bit - if parents don't really care if you get good grades then you start to lose interest" Student, School D

This has been echoed, though very infrequently, by parents,

"I know the school tries very hard to get parents in but there just isn't that commitment from parents." Parent, School O

In discussion, it frequently became apparent that the lack of interest was often lack of interest in the school, or in coming into school; it is unclear whether or not this translates directly (or indirectly) into lack of interest in the learning of the student. This barrier may be related to previous experiences of school, or to parental perceptions of staff and staff attitude toward their children. Some parents also related it to the role models their own families had provided for them; their own parents were not involved in learning, so today's parents had to make a conscious decision to be involved.

### **6.5.g. The School**

The data revealed that the school itself had an effect on parental engagement. Some hard to reach parents felt the school was hard to reach. The data highlighted the difference between primary school and secondary as a major influence on parental engagement. Parents generally felt that engagement in learning in the primary school was easier. Their comments revealed that they missed the camaraderie of the school gates and the interaction with other parents that took place in the smaller, more intimate primary venues.

“Secondary schools, parents aren't as involved. You don't meet at the school gate” Parent, School O

“I think once they (the kids) get past primary school where you leave them at the door, you lose them (parents) - you see them at parents' evenings but that's about it” Parent, School EE

Parents also pointed to a different interaction with their children in secondary school:

“The change from when they're in primary to secondary and the amount of information they tell you - it's completely the opposite” Parent, School T

A number of parents also highlighted the difference between primary and secondary students as a reason for feeling less comfortable in a secondary school:

“I find it difficult to come into a high school - I didn't come to this one (as a student) it can be quite intimidating, you come to the office and that's quite intimidating - and you look at the kids as well, I'm not being funny, they're big, they're quite frightening - so I find it quite intimidating coming to a high school” Parent, School D

“I found it quite intimidating to come to a high school and say I have concerns” Parent, School C

Throughout school staff emphasised the importance of ensuring that parents would feel comfortable coming “over the threshold”,

“So that anything we can do encourage parents to become more involved and at least to step into the school starts to break down some of those perceived barriers” Head Teacher, School C

“It’s just so big and it’s so vast. This school’s huge; for some parents it’s just too big to come into. They go into the primary school but when they come here it’s just too big - the crowd, the size, they can feel intimidated not just by authority - the teachers but also by the teenagers as well” Pastoral Manager, School C

In some ways, this barrier is one that schools will find it difficult to overcome: a school which caters to a thousand or more students will always be a large, busy, imposing place. Secondary schools will always be inhabited by teenagers. Analysis of parent comments about the difference between primary and secondary school, however, shows that it is not only the size of secondary schools that parents find intimidating, it is also their complexity, and the number of people to whom parents must relate. Parents often commented on the fact that “in primary, there’s only one teacher”, whereas in a secondary school there is a confusing mixture of roles and people: form tutors, class tutors, heads of year, senior management team, class assistants.

#### **6.5.h. Discussion**

It is clear that parents and students are in broad agreement about the value of parental engagement in the learning of young people - it centres around the support that parents can show for their children, the encouragement given and the role models provided. This reflects the findings of the literature review, and the main finding of this report i.e. that engagement must be with the learning of the student, rather than with the school, per se.

Students in particular were very clear that parental interest had a direct and significant effect on in-school behaviour; if students faced parental sanctions for bad behaviour at school, that bad behaviour was far less likely to continue. On the other hand, students often stated that those who flouted school regulations, “slipped up” or “fell off the rails”, did so with impunity in the home - good behaviour was not reinforced and bad behaviour was not punished.

Homework - either in terms of monitoring it or helping with it - came far down the list of activities valued by students. Yet this is often the most frequently cited example of parental engagement. For staff, the connection between homework and parental engagement was important,

“If they’re [students] not doing homework their academic performance is going to be lower and parental support is key in getting homework done. There’s a definite knock on effect on their overall attainment, yes. And their confidence in class as well - if they’re not doing their homework and everyone else is contributing. There is a real boost, if they feel that they can do their homework, there’s a huge boost in confidence” Teacher, School Y

The data would suggest that while involvement in homework is of value, it is not sufficient to improve achievement.

“Getting over that whole philosophy of what did you do at school - that goes no where but asking what did you learn at school that’s quite a deep question. How could you learn better at school today? What stopped you learning at school today?” Deputy Head, School X

Parents and staff both feel that parental engagement is “easier” at primary school than in secondary school. Usually, this is couched in terms of “you’re there (or, they’re there) at the school gates”, though parents have also reported being far more comfortable with helping with homework in the primary years. The difficulties relating to secondary school are often expressed in terms of physical presence, which is deemed to be more difficult at secondary level. Yet the research data shows that the greatest value is not physical presence but support and interest for learning. Again, this highlights that some of the barriers raised by parents and staff are not barriers to the most beneficial forms of parental engagement.

The research evidence points to consequential dispositions about parent engagement on the part of school staff, students and parents. Parents report frustration if schools do not appear to welcome their contact. For some parents schools feel like a ‘closed system’ that primarily exist to support teachers over students when there are conflicts of any sort. Further tensions are created when parents and staff hold very different assumptions about the nature, pattern and purpose of family-school interactions. These differences can lead to parental frustration and distrust. The evidence shows that a school’s disposition towards parental engagement manifests itself in various ways. Many parents reported that they felt a sense of powerlessness in their interaction with the school. When parents had a negative

experience they sometimes concluded that not being involved might be in the best interests of the child.

A parent who was also an adult educator told us,

“I saw a lot of people, 20, 30, 40 [years of age] - they’d not achieved in school always been told they couldn’t, and they were learning - And I think a lot of that was because parents weren’t involved” Parent, School U

Many parents felt they were struggling to carve out a path for their own involvement and support of their children, in the absence of a culture which actively supported them to do so.

## **6.6. Specific issues**

### **6.6.a. Reporting - Teleological Reporting**

“IReporting” is a term used to signify intelligent use of reporting to parents. Many schools in the EPRA project have been working on their means of reporting to parents, in various ways, from the “high tech” methods involving web access to school based data<sup>3</sup>, text messaging, etc., to more “low tech” solutions such as sending home post cards or making telephone calls to report good work or outstanding progress. Some schools have seen remarkable results from technological advances:

“What it has improved is the attendance - it’s gone up in 12 months nearly 3%. We have the truancy call system...the truancy call system lets them [parents] know immediately” Deputy Head Teacher, School H

However, “intelligent” in this sense must mean not only accurate but *useful* information; reporting that is *fit for purpose*. There seems to be little agreement on what precisely would be useful for parents. As one head teacher reported,

“They [staff] don’t agree with me but I don’t think parents need to know what topics their child is doing in history - they just need to know how that child is doing.” Head Teacher, School C

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<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps significant that of the four non-staff respondents who were “looking forward to” the onset of online availability of data, one was a student, who felt she could benefit from tracking her own progress in this way.

There are, of course, at least two issues here: what schools need parents to know (so that they may best support their children) and what parents want to know (for the same reasons). The two things may not entirely overlap but they are unlikely to be mutually exclusive.

“We’re not asking teachers to do more to share the information you do hold - they have to record this stuff anyway - so if there was a website or something where we could see it - not a twenty page document” Deputy Head Teacher, School E

Reporting to parents - no matter how “intelligent”, how accurate, how up-to-the-minute the information is, is not necessarily engaging them.

“I’m not sure we engage parents when we send letters... If I give information - I may only know I engage you when I get something back” Deputy Head, School Q

“I don’t think parents feel as involved as they could be because sometimes it’s a case of handing a letter, signing the letter and giving it back - I’m not sure everyone will read the letter” Student, School EE

Indeed, very early on in the research, a student made the distinction for us, in a discussion of the school newsletter,

“Yeah, but that’s informing parents, not engaging them” Student, School EE

Parents reported both “information overload” and difficulties in dealing with the language in reporting from schools. This was not only in terms of English as opposed to other languages but in terms of being “parent friendly” rather than in “teacher speak”:

“In terms of reporting - my husband doesn’t understand it. He can not understand it one bit. The reporting system is very complicated and it does need simplifying” Parent, School O

“We can’t talk about parents without talking about the data that we’re feeding parents. It’s all very well telling them about the things going on outside of school, but if we’re talking about getting parents involved with the education of their kids then what we’ve got to do is, we’ve got to supply information to the parents that they can understand and help them interpret what we’re saying about their kids” Deputy Head, School H

“Information overload” was cited by parents as a particular issue. They complained about receiving too much information with little explanation of what they should do with it. From

discussions with parents and school staff, it appears that there are two streams in communication with parents: open and closed.

The diagram below shows the process of each of these strands. Giving information to parents does not (necessarily) require a response from them to the school. This sort of communication may well take place in a “closed” fashion, so that the process is complete, and has to some extent fulfilled its aim, when parents become aware of its content.

“I don’t think parents feel as involved as they could be because sometimes it’s a case of handing a letter, signing the letter and giving it back - I’m not sure everyone will read the letter” Student, School EE

“Getting the consultation procedure right as opposed to the communication procedure...” Head Teacher, School D

“We’ve been attending parent’s evening and asking if there are things that parents want. Some things we can’t change but we’ve explained why...” Head Teacher, School T

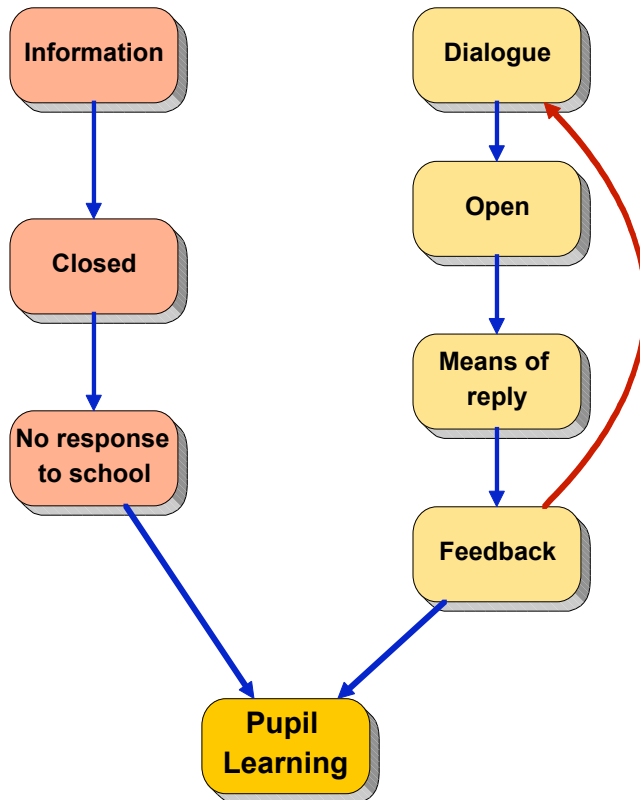
Dialogue, on the other hand, does not end with the reception of information by the parent; it calls for action and reaction on the part of the parent. At the lowest level, reporting in this strand requires a reply-slip, showing that parents have, indeed, received its content. However, on a more effective level, parents will contribute far more than their signatures to the discussion.

“The questionnaire - for me that’s engaging because they’ve responded and we’ve responded to their response - so for me engagement is a two way process. If I give information - I may only know I engage you when I get something back” Deputy Head, School C

School-parent communication can be a significant source of tensions and frustrations for both parents and school staff. These tensions and frustrations can be traced to the frequency, timing and effectiveness of communication initiatives.



**Figure 9. Types of communication with parents**



Ultimately, of course, the reason for giving information to parents is to engage them with the learning of the student. Even when communication is frequent and timely, it sometimes is not effective if schools use jargon or are unclear about the purpose of the communication and the intended response. Communication ought to be two way, should be at the point of need and should provide parents with some guidance on how to use or respond to the information.

**6.6.b. Need for Space**

It was clear from the student data that one of the issues concerned their need for space at school i.e. away from their parents. Students expressed this in different ways, such as having a different personality at school than at home, being with peers and not wanting parents to encroach on their social space.

“You come up to comprehensive and the whole point of it is independence and you’re totally thrown into a massive building and you don’t know where

you are, and tons of homework. You need your independence at this age but you also need your parents' guidance" Student, School D

Other students made a distinction between being involved enough and overly involved,

"It's not too good when your parents get too involved and they get all clingy over what you're doing and every day when you get home they want to know what you're doing, what your homework is" Student, School D

Students were aware of the perhaps uneasy alliance between parental engagement in learning and parental presence in school,

"It's a bit embarrassing. You want them somewhat involved but you don't want them coming into school when everyone's around. You want them to know what you're talking about" Student, School P

"You want them to realise and take notice but you don't want them on your shoulder" Student, School P

This was felt more acutely by older students than younger students. The older students wanted their parents' support but didn't want them anywhere near the school.

### **6.6.c. Engagement for sustainability**

The data showed that schools were frequently preoccupied with the "hard to reach" parent - the parent who does not attend parents' evenings or achievement days, who does not come to social events, who does not sign books or diaries, who, in the words of more than one head teacher, "only comes in when they have to". Many school projects were targeted at this group, no matter how small it was in relation to the overall parent body.

School staff often equated parents who were hard to reach with under-performance of students. A number of schools had put into place programmes to engage parents of students in "intervention groups" or similar. Some of these schools were successful in reaching and interacting with this group of parents.

Schools in the research project tended to agree that this group of parents who do not engage at all with the school are the minority - sometimes a very small minority of parents.

"There's like three types of parents. There's the parents who are involved and always will be: they check the homework, check the bag for letters; sit down and do stuff with their kids. You've always got them. You've got a set that are just like - that "I'm not bothered"; that leaves those kids with not many options. The ones that are in the middle are the others - they're good parents, they're

there; but they're not involved with the kids; they make sure they go to school but they don't try to help them" Community Development Officer, School C

"There's the people who always want to get involved, and then others who get involved depending on the subject and then others who can't be bothered. [but there are] Some people who feel that they can't, that they're not allowed, if you know what I mean - you'll never really know how many of those there are." Student, School EE

"I think there's a lot of parents that do (want to get involved) but they aren't aware that they can" Parent, School EE

The concentration on this particular parental group has two implications. Firstly, schools are placing a disproportionate amount of efforts getting these parents simply to interact *with the school*. While interaction with the school may be a first step (particularly if parents lack the skills to fully interact with learning), it is how they subsequently interact with learning that has the impact on achievement. The second implication is that in concentrating on the "hard to reach" parents, schools may then neglect, by default, those parents who are already engaged, those parents who are in the middle band, between those who are very highly engaged with the school (parent governors, members of PTFA groups, etc.) and those who do not voluntarily engage with the school at all.

As one group of parents involved in an EPRA project, stated:

"What we've decided is that once we've got disengaged parents there isn't much we can do so what we're looking at is getting the parents who are coming up and keeping them engaged" Parent, School D

Consequently, schools need to consider how to balance engaging hard to reach parents with keeping engaged parents engaged over time. They need to consider how to sustain engagement once they have secured it.

## 7. Reflection

Parents play a vital role in the development and education of their children and in the success of schools. Parental involvement is a common vehicle for bringing teachers and parents together in schools. Parent involvement programs tend to be directed by the school and attempt to involve parents in school activities and or teach parents specific skills and strategies for teaching and reinforcing tasks at home. With parent involvement, the emphasis is upon harnessing what parents can do to help the school realise its outcomes.

Parental engagement is not the same as parental involvement. Engagement implies that parents are an essential part of the learning process, an extended part of the pedagogic process. This research has shown that the aspiration of raising achievement can only be fulfilled if parents are both involved in schools and engaged in learning.

This research has also shown that there are multiple characteristics or correlates that influence the levels of student achievement and the attainment of educational outcomes. The exact impact of parental engagement on student achievement is therefore difficult to disaggregate but it is clear from the research that there are trends in performance associated with higher levels of parental engagement in learning. There is evidence that parental engagement increases with social status, income and parents' level of education.

One of the most significant findings from this research is that there is no clear agreement between respondent groups on which are the most pervasive barriers to parental engagement. Those in schools feel that previous parental experience of education is the greatest barrier to engagement. Students, on the other hand, cited practical issues more often than any other barrier: childcare, time, language, transport and work patterns were all seen as barriers, "I've got a little sister", "My mum works", "Parents are really busy". Parents saw the school often as the main barrier culturally and socially; the hard to reach parents tended to view the school as hard to reach

The research found that parental engagement is maximised when parents are assisted in developing skills associated with effective parenting, leadership, governance and decision making. The research showed that parents often benefit from learning about strategies for assisting their children's education at home, as well as the capabilities needed to take on instructional and support roles in the school.

The following section outlines the implications of the findings from this research study for schools, parents, policy makers and researchers:

**7.1.a. Implications for schools**

- o Parental engagement must be a priority in schools - it can not be a bolt-on extra. It must be embedded in teaching and learning policies, and school improvement policies, so that parents are seen as an integral part of the student learning process
- o Schools must be clear about the aims of all communication with parents. Is communication in any given case meant to be open or closed? What response, if any, is required from parents, and how will that impact on the school and the learning of the child?
- o Schools should endeavour to support the engagement of parents who are already involved in the learning of their children as well as reaching those parents who are less engaged
- o Schools should consider training for staff who work most closely with parents: these staff members need not be teachers
- o Schools need to be prepared to be flexible in dealing with parents, in terms of times of meetings (shift work, child care issues) and, if possible, in terms of locations
- o Schools should carefully consider the uses of new technologies, and be clear what they aim to achieve with such technologies and how any given technology will help them achieve that aim
- o School must make the shift from seeing parental engagement as engaging with the school, to understanding its value as being placed with the learning of the student

**7.1.b. Implications for parents**

- o Continue to be appropriately involved in your children's schooling as they progress in the school. They need your involvement whether they think so or not.

- o Seek support from schools (and other agencies) so that you can best support their children; this is particularly the case in dealing with issues of behaviour and curriculum.
- o Parents should be proactive and form their own support networks and reference groups
- o Involve yourself in your child's school in ways that acknowledge the school's responsibilities to all of its students, as well as the interest and right other parents have in being involved in the school

#### **7.1.c. Implications for policy makers**

- o Offer clear guidance about parental engagement in schools rather than involvement
- o Provide direction to schools about the relationship between forms and purposes for parent engagement in their children's education.
- o Create policies that clarify the range of ways in which parents can be productively engaged in schools.
- o Ensure that the purposes for parental engagement are explicit in policies that address parental engagement in schools

#### **7.1.d. Implications for Researchers**

- o More research is needed that examines parental engagement through the eyes of parents and students rather than educators.
- o More research on what parents know and understand about engagement and the ways in which this can be developed alongside teacher knowledge and understanding
- o There is a need for longitudinal studies that focus on the impact and effect of interventions focused upon parental engagement.
- o There remains a lack of clarity in the current research base about which types of engagement activities have the most impact on attainment. Studies are needed to investigate:

- What is parental engagement, how is it perceived by different groups, how do perceptions of parental engagement impact on practice?
- What activities are most effective in supporting parental engagement?

Parents are the most important influence outside the school. Long after direct learning from parents in a child's early years gives way to formal education, parents continue to play a key role in student success and learning. Schools are more effective where there is a stronger connection with parents as part of the learning community. The lives parents lead today means that it is more challenging to secure their engagement in learning. Yet this still remains the factor that can make a significant difference to a child's educational attainment and life chances.

Consequently, schools need to place parental engagement at the centre rather than the periphery of all that they do. Parental engagement in children's learning makes a difference- it is the most powerful school improvement lever that we have. Parental engagement will not happen in a school without concerted effort, time and commitment of both parents and schools. The literature and research evidence shows that the impact of parental engagement on student achievement is significant.

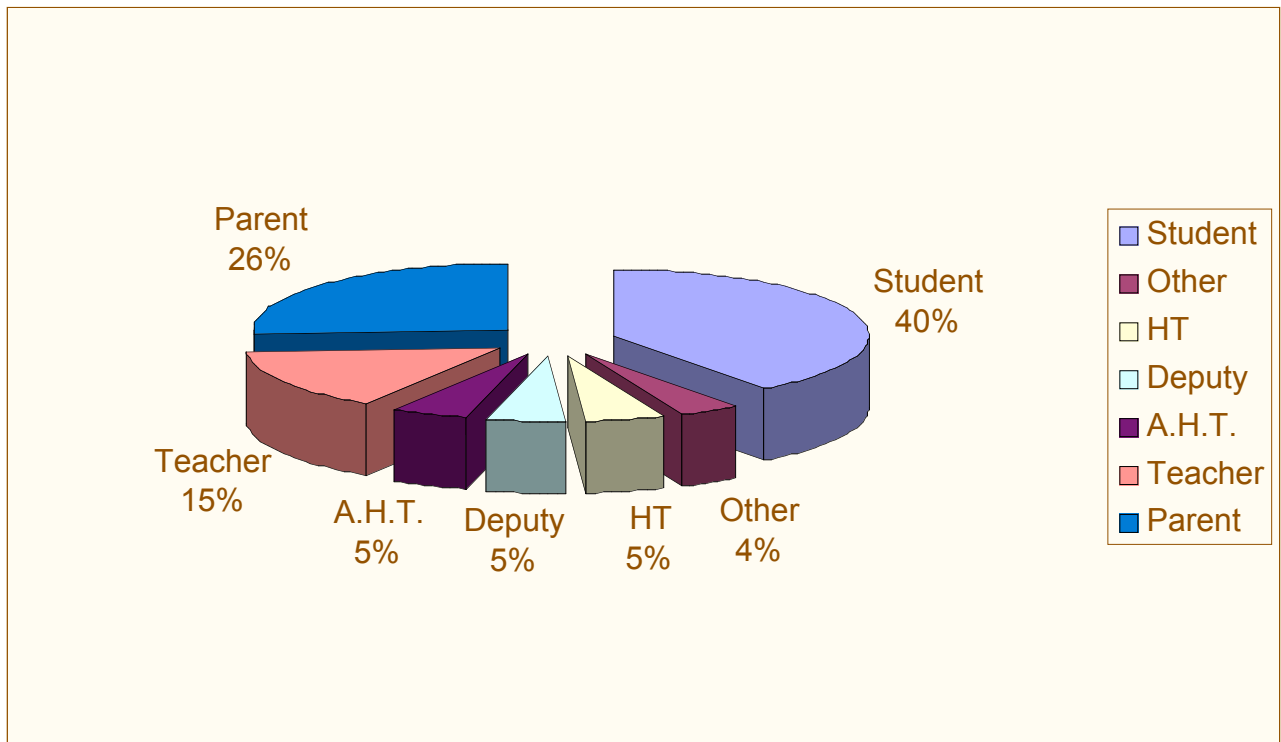
This research has shown that the engaging 'hard to reach' parents has a disproportionately positive effect on student learning and achievement. In other words, where schools have succeeded in engaging this group of parents the impact on achievement has been shown to be greater than that resulting from the engagement of other groups. Both the quantitative and qualitative evidence confirm that trends in achievement, attendance and behaviour are significantly improved where 'hard to reach parents' are engaged in supporting learning in the home.

## 8. Appendices



## Appendix 1. Total Respondents

Figure 10. Phase one and two respondents



## **Appendix 2. Illustrative Case Studies**

In this appendix, we offer one illustrative case study per strand, abbreviated from the schools' own case study reports.

### **Supporting parents to help their children learn**

(Context: Medium size comprehensive school, 11 - 16 age range. The school is in an area of high deprivation and high unemployment).

#### **Projects undertaken:**

Vulnerable students were identified from the profiling work done on Year 6 in March prior to transition in September. Parents of these students were invited to meet members of the CSI (Centre for Student Intervention) team and Peer Mentors who support and intervene with students who have emotional, learning and behavioural needs. Student barriers to learning were discussed and relationships established. The issues relating to the students were tackled and lines of communication opened up.

Evaluation of the evening was positive. Parental confidence in the school was increased. They were happy to know support would be immediate.

Classes for parents established to support parent learning and to assist their children in reaching their potential.

Year 9 was targeted for this strand as they were considered the one to invest in further intervention. Letters posted to parents asked whether they would be interested in Adult Numeracy, ECDL or Parenting Classes. They were also asked if they would like to be part of a focus group. Classes were set up for ECDL and Getting On With Teenagers.

Parenting Classes (or Getting On With Teenagers).

Advertising Posters went up in school. Letters sent to all year 9 parents. Reminders sent by letter and phone. These sessions were delivered in conjunction with Parentline.

These were two hour sessions from 6-8pm on a Thursday. Homework was set! The classes were held in the school bungalow so that parents felt more comfortable. Refreshments

were available. The 3 who didn't had personal difficulty in the family. Feedback was very positive.

## **Evaluation**

The 7 parents were very positive on their evaluation forms.

The parents commented that the course helped them to focus better, deal with disputes, keep calm and understand everyone's needs. They recommend the service. An additional letter is enclosed from one parent. The parents felt able to continue using the techniques and guidelines in the future.

## **Personalising provision for parents as learners**

(Context: 11 - 16 mixed gender comprehensive, of smaller than average size. The school is set in an area of high unemployment, low parental educational attainment and low parental aspiration. Through examination of their own school data, staff recognised a need to target fathers in particular; the school undertook a range of projects, of which one is highlighted here)

### **Projects undertaken:**

#### Dads & Lads or Lasses

To meet this aim we linked with the Study Support Centre based at the local Football Club to develop a programme targeting fathers. Using the vehicle of sport this programme aims to provide fathers and their child with an opportunity to participate in activities together.

The initial plan for the programme was to run over 10 weeks, benefiting a total of 15 fathers. Feedback identified that a shorter course would suit our fathers work commitments, therefore we adapted the structure to benefit a potential 32 fathers and 32 children over 2 Saturdays.

Through parent and child supporting each other with a variety of activities we intended to increase confidence of both parties around family learning activities. The activities also link with the schools curriculum (PE, ICT, Graphic Design, art, leisure & tourism) via a discrete

structure which provided parents with an understanding around their child's school work and fathers confidence to access additional learning.

## **Outcomes**

To measure the direct impact on student achievement we asked students to feedback 'what they thought about their parents, completing the sessions'. Feedback highlighted a clear link between the sessions and parental engagement within the home environment. Students felt more confident about approaching their parents with queries 'as they knew they had completed the sessions' and 'it was the same work as they do at school' also parents had completed activities from the sessions with students at home.

A key outcome of the project included confidence of both parent and students. Parents were empowered to believe they can support their child thus extended study support into the home environment. Students felt their parents could relate to their experience at school as the sessions were held in school and of a similar format to a school lesson.

A total of 21 fathers participated in this project with 24 children (some fathers took more than one child). The level of interest was much higher among younger students which we expected based on secondary research (child trends data bank).

Most parents would be interested in participating in adult learning. Although the data does not highlight if the project has contributed to this, over the 2 weeks it was evident that parents had an increase in confidence and have learnt new skills, which may have removed barriers to engagement in adult learning.

## **IReporting**

(Context: Medium sized 11- 16 comprehensive school, in an area of high social deprivation, with a high number of students benefiting from free school meals. This is an area of low parental educational achievement and low parental aspirations).

### **Project undertaken:**

Parental involvement is fundamental to the College ethos, a two-way communication channel that exchanges 'useful and understandable information and data'. Management software was already being used for internal functions such as online assessment and reporting. It was a logical next step to use it to 'report' to parents.

How 'Intelligent Reporting' works

Parental information is predominantly internet based and includes:

- A Management System, available to parents through an E-Portal.
- An external website: which can be accessed by anyone, including parents.
- A weekly letter to parents from the Headteacher, which celebrates what the College has been doing and puts forward any issues - for example, mobile phones not being allowed to be used in school. Both this newsletter and the termly newsletter about the College are sent to the local press who, on the whole, receive them well and print positive stories which show the local community 'how nice our kids are'.
- A termly newsletter about the College - sent, with the weekly letter, to local newspapers.
- Annual reports - as well as being accessible via an online pdf, annual reports are also produced as paper copies, since not all parents have internet access.
- The use of Truancy Call, used to alert parents when their children miss classes - an automatic phone system linked to registration (which takes place during the first

period). Any message can be recorded, so school closures, for instance, could also be communicated in this way.

### E-Portal

Through the E-Portal parents can access:

- Attendance and punctuality details of every lesson, every day
- Their personal information - such as phone numbers, doctor's details
- Event Logs - part of the target-setting process, these conduct logs (both good and bad) are monitored and discussed with students, as are the targets themselves.  
Student timetables
- School calendar and notice boards
- Assessment information - reporting and tracking systems
- Previous reports, letters and documents relating to that student - the school can record any document against the student's record, not just data from the management system.

### Implementing the E-Portal

The College was running a 'Keeping up with the students' online course for parents, covering topics such as how the children are taught, what subjects they studied, information about the school and its management systems. This was the ideal vehicle to introduce the E-Portal.

The E-portal is mentioned to parents at every opportunity to maintain its high profile. The weekly newsletter, for instance, carries a reminder, and annual reports have the individual's username and passwords. Consequently, the number of parents using the E-portal is growing all the time.

**Outcomes:**

The College has identified the following as demonstrating the success of their approach:

- Staff realise that this is an alternative way of recording data, not an extra task.
- Parents are on board, which contributes to student motivation.
- Staff can be accurate in targeting specific groups, ensuring that intervention is appropriate.
- More and more parents are logging on regularly.
- Students are now armed with school information, such as timetables - they have no excuses!
- Student data are shared with all teachers.
- The demise of the paper mark book.
- The school community is linked by the internet, thus ensuring more effective communications and better targeting of interventions.

**Enhancing pastoral care**

(Context: 11 - 16 medium sized urban comprehensive. About 20% of the students live in areas of high social deprivation).

**Projects:**

We used our EPRA funding to appoint a Parental Engagement Officer (PEO) whose role includes leading a Pastoral Support Team, monitoring and impacting on attendance and transition work with feeder primaries. Following several visits to the feeder primary schools as part of the ongoing year 6-7 transition work, it became clear that primary students were still anxious about starting secondary school and would welcome the opportunity to engage in activities at the school in a more informal way. In response to this, the PEO organised

an Easter Football School which ran for three days and was open to all students in year 6 in feeder primaries.

Publicity material was sent into each school and was followed up by a visit from the PEO who spoke to year 6 classes and also to targeted students (those whose attendance was an issue in year 6/those who were likely to be placed on school action on arrival for poor behaviour). In cases where the PEO was not confident in the effectiveness of student post as a delivery method, parents were contacted directly.

### Challenges

- Funding for the soccer school. Sponsorship was sought from local business and community groups and a small charge (£5 for the three days) was levied for participation in the Soccer School.
- The experience was formalized in terms of completing risk assessments, parental consent and medical forms and written offers of places, rather than simply an ad hoc 'turn up on the day' approach.
- Staffing. We invited students from our year 10 football team and GCSE PE groups to attend as coaches and were pleased that 9 students volunteered. In addition, 2 sports coaches agreed to run the school for a nominal fee.

### Outcomes

46 students attended the 3 day Soccer School. Of these, 15 were targeted students, chosen specifically because they have poor attendance patterns that we are hoping to improve by engagement with them and their parents. Of the 46, only 5 failed to attend for all 3 days and each one of these submitted a genuine explanation. Of the 15 targeted students, all 15 attended the school on all 3 days.

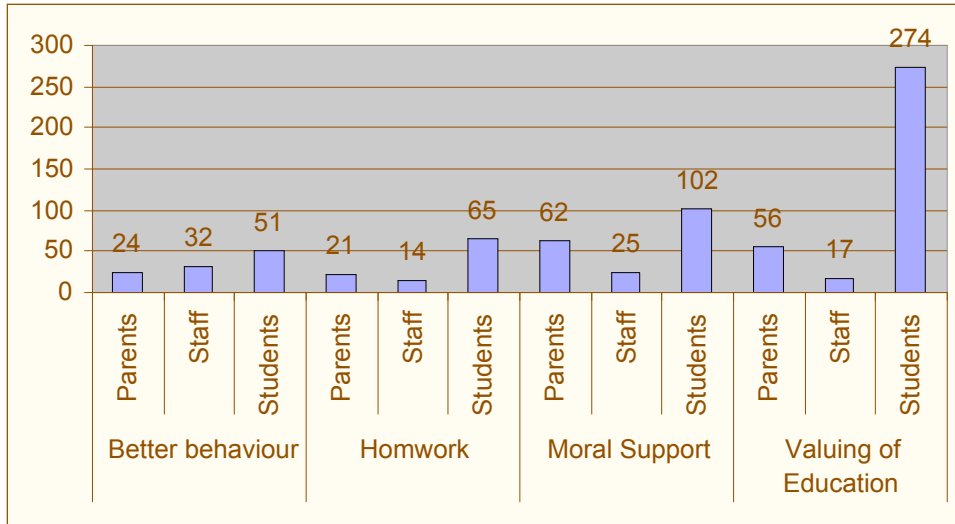
Parental involvement in the soccer school increased as the days progressed, particularly in the afternoon when the 'World Cup' was played; by the third day most students had parents or family on the sidelines cheering them on and several parents had volunteered to act as linesmen, refreshment servers and sponge bearers for injured players.



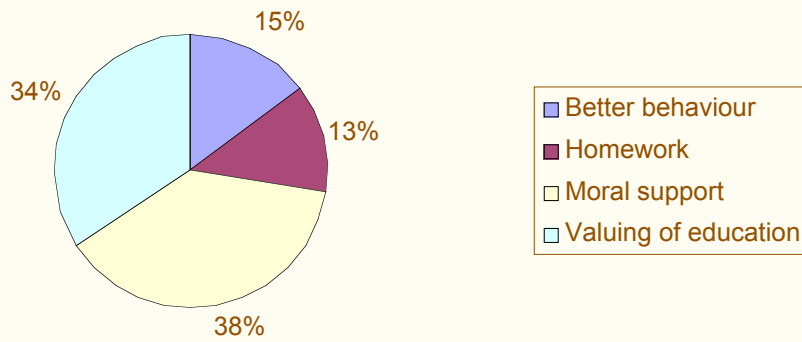
In terms of engagement in a more formal way, the Soccer School ended with a formal presentation in the school hall of the trophies, prizes and certificates. In terms of our original aspirations, this was a marvellous opportunity for the PEO and pastoral support team to make contact with parents and remove some of the anxiety that parents feel when contacting school about their child. In terms of a personalised link with home this event was very successful. Many parents spoke to the PEO and made appointments to discuss transition concerns that would otherwise have been ignored and allowed to develop from concerns into issues. Again, half of the appointments made are with parents from the targeted group.

The offer of a place at the Easter School had an immediate impact on behaviour in the feeder primary schools, with year 6 teachers reporting an improvement in the behaviour of the targeted students whose place at the Soccer School was granted on the understanding that their behaviour in school during the weeks prior to the Soccer School would be acceptable.

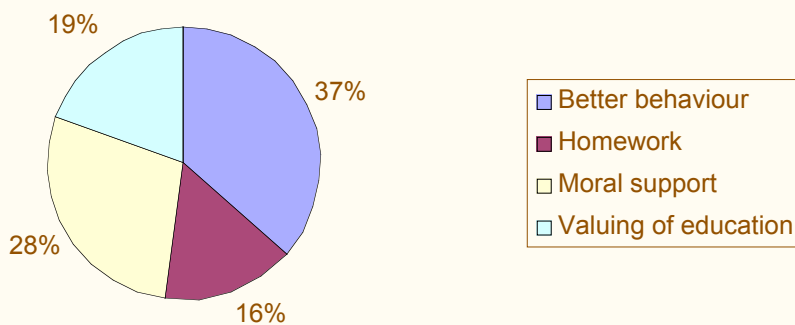
### Appendix 3. The value of Parental Engagement



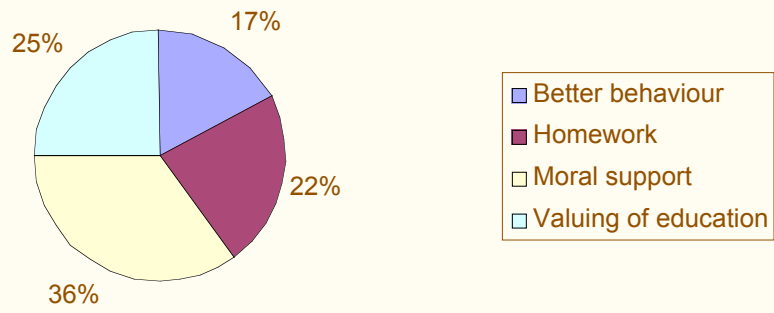
**Value of Parental Engagement - Parents**



**Value of Parental Engagement - Staff**



### Value of Parental Engagement - Students



## Appendix 4. Barriers to Parental Engagement

Figure 11. Barriers to parental Engagement: Overall Percentages

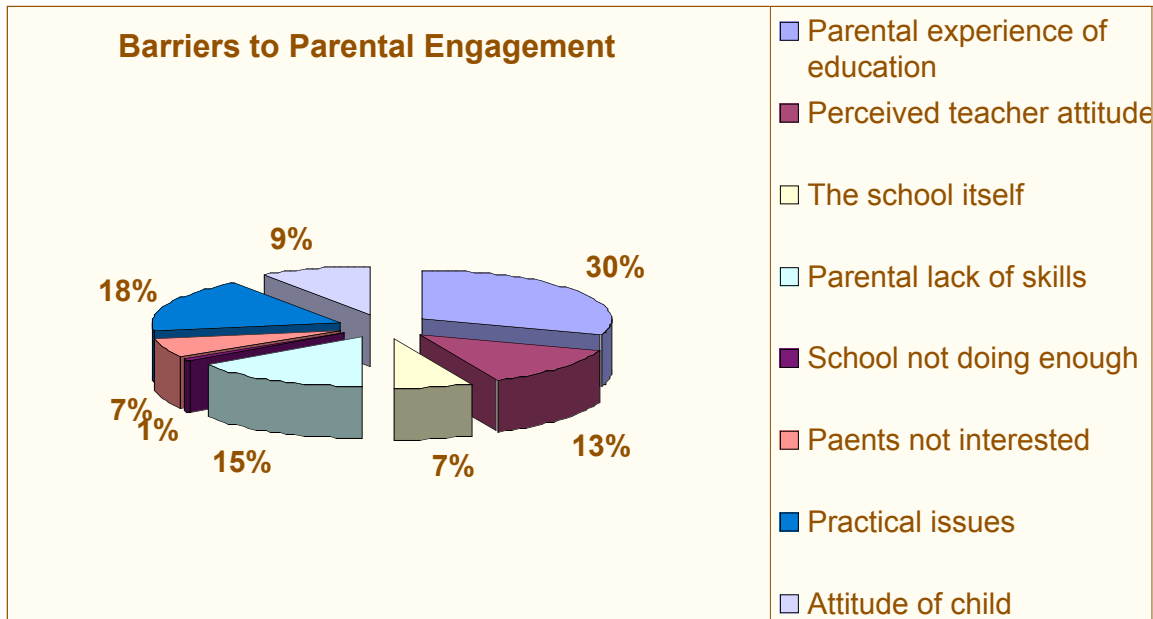
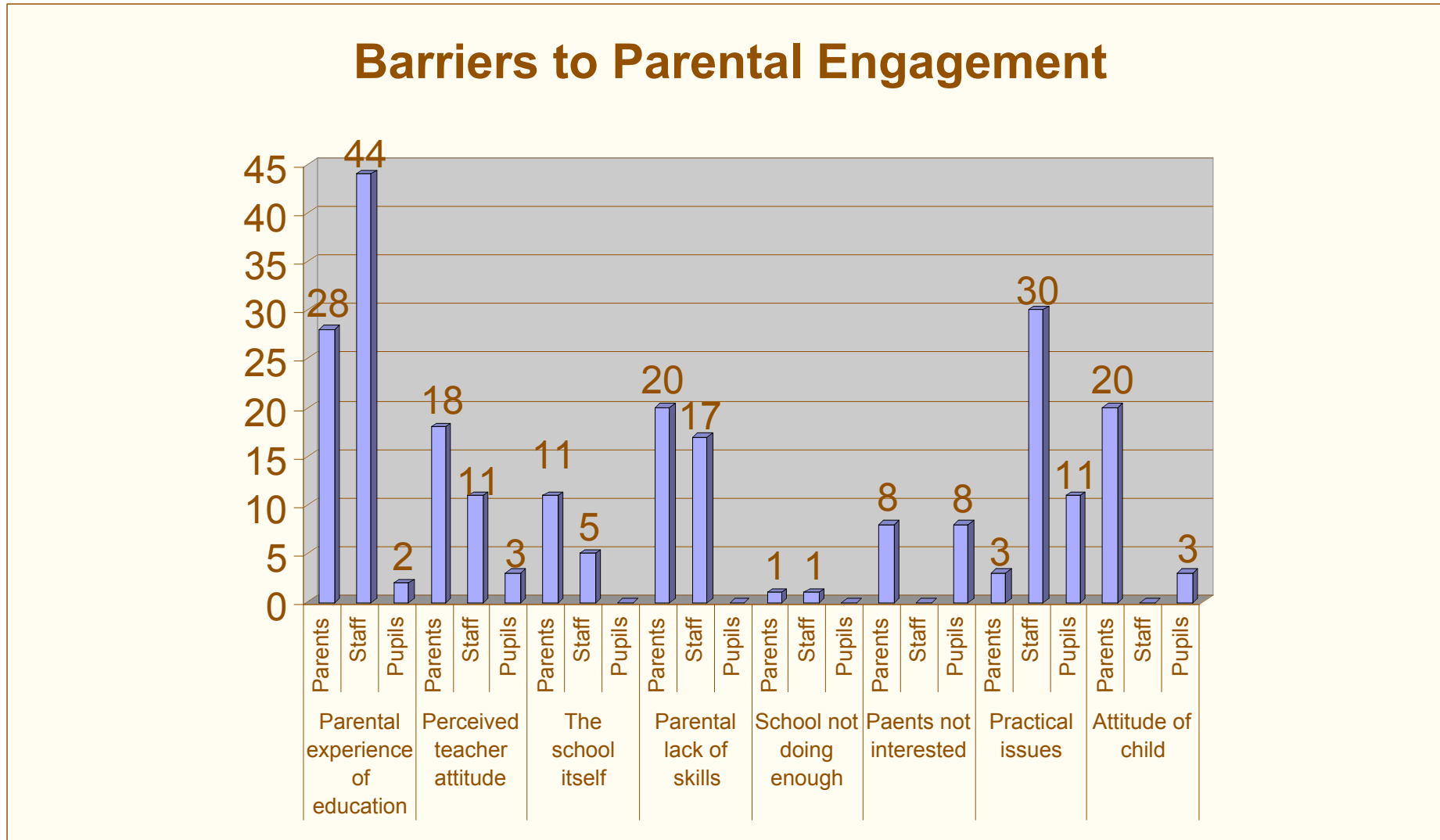
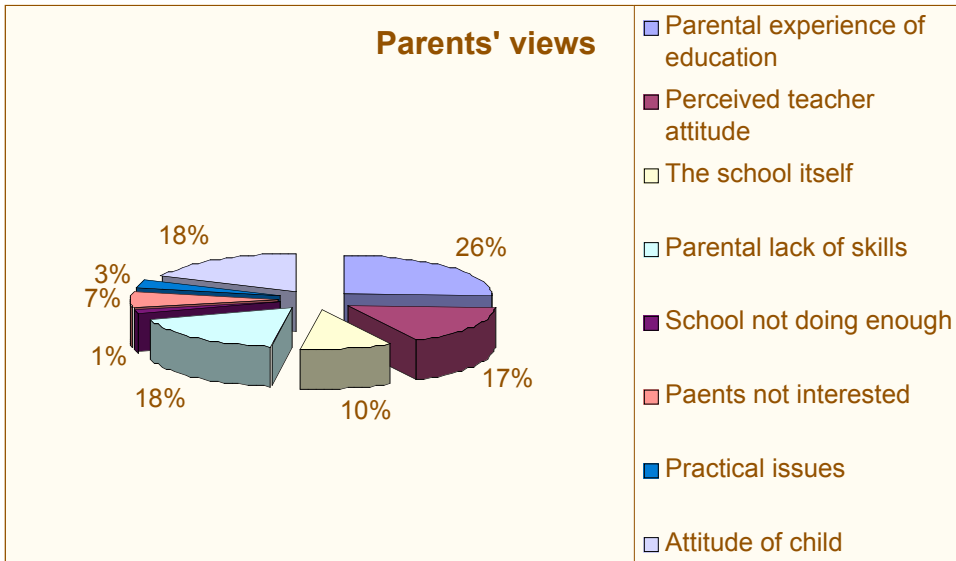


Figure 12. Barriers to parental engagement: Overall Responses

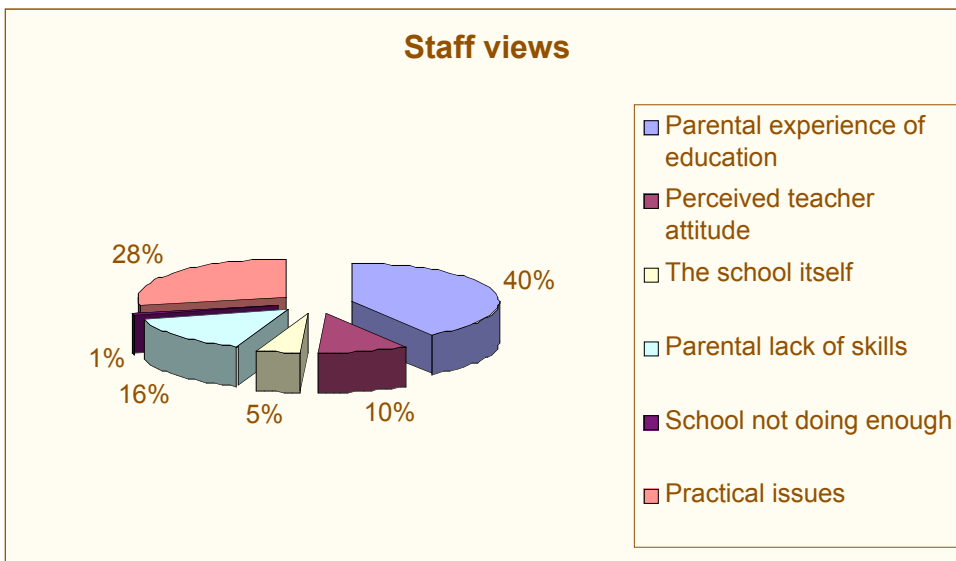
Figure 13. Barriers to Parental Engagement, full data



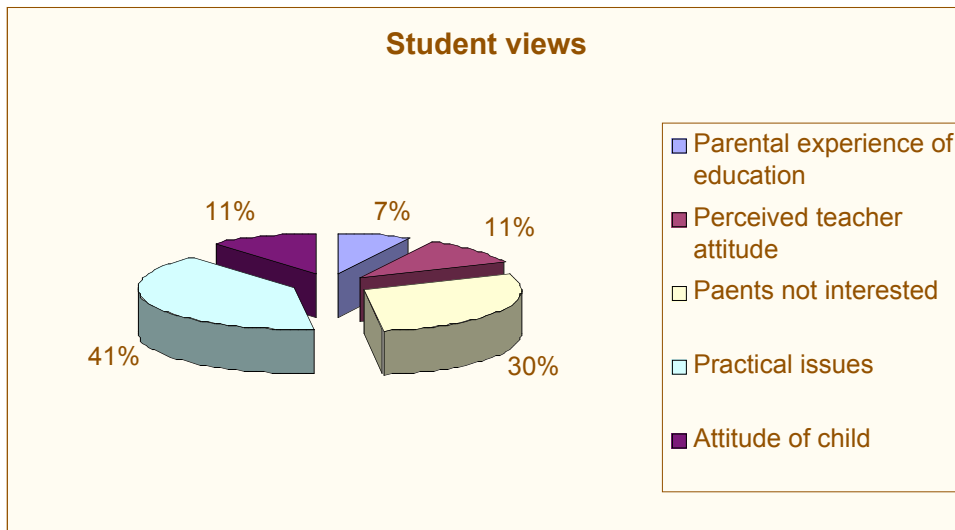
**Figure 14. Parental views of barriers to engagement**



**Figure 15. Staff views of barriers to engagement**



**Figure 16. Student views of barriers to engagement**



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