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Problematising conceptions of “effective” home-school partnerships in secondary education

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual study seeks to understand parent and teacher perceptions of “effective” home-school partnerships across three secondary schools in England, before problematising these normative understandings. Currently there is little research into home-school partnerships at a secondary level in the UK, and the policy environment is anaemic. To aid the possible direction of future research, six themes are reported from in depth case studies with three schools chosen due to a reputation of good practice. These findings create four principles of perceived effective home-school partnerships: relationships, community, pastoral support, and supporting learning at home. We then problematise these principles and suggest key areas for future research and practice, particularly around the ethics of the relationship with parents, and constructing parents as “co-educators”.

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Parent-teacher; home-school; partnership; secondary school

Introduction

Home-school partnerships (HSPs) within UK secondary schools are poorly researched. Therefore, this article utilises findings from case studies with three English secondary schools, focusing on parents’ and teachers’ perspectives of HSPs to highlight gaps in current scholarship. As a conceptual paper, we take a critical approach to the dominant assumptions within our findings to demonstrate the need for further research in the area. We consider a thematic analysis of parents’ and teachers’ perspectives on partnerships before presenting four principles of effective secondary-level HSPs.

We define “home-school partnership” as people with parental responsibilities and educational practitioners working together with the common understanding of a “shared responsibility for children’s learning” (Epstein and Sheldon 2006, 6). This notion of “shared responsibility” captures the essence of the partnership model, as differentiated from “parental involvement”, where the responsibility for children’s learning remains with the education system (Goodall and Montgomery 2014; Goodall 2018b). Therefore, in this study we sought examples of schools that attempted to empower parents to be co-educators of their children.

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Several systematic reviews have found that parental involvement is a predictor of students' academic success, however, the evidence suggesting a causal link is weak, often due to the design of the studies (Axford et al. 2019; See and Gorard 2013). For example, See and Gorard (2013) evaluated 68 parental engagement studies focussing on children's educational outcomes across all age groups. They found almost every study had at least two serious flaws for quantitative studies (e.g. small sample sizes, differences between groups at baseline, and high attrition post-randomisation), and the "medium quality" studies showed mixed results, albeit this is using randomised controlled trials as a "gold standard" in research, which pays less attention to the benefits of qualitative research.

The limited evidence-base for HSPs in secondary schools that *does* exist suggests interventions seeking to improve parental involvement mostly have a positive impact on academic-related outcomes (e.g. school absenteeism, attitudes, and participation in class) rather than academic grades (Higgins, Katsipataki, and Tracey Bywater 2015). However, there is some evidence that interventions employing technology (e.g. text messaging) to communicate academic progress to parents can demonstrably increase Maths and English scores (Bergman and Chan 2020), as well as participation in class (Kraft and Dougherty 2013) and class attendance (Kraft and Rogers 2015). Family-management interventions, which included parent support sessions and parent management training, do not appear to increase academic or related outcomes (Smolkowski et al. 2017). Research also suggests parental involvement in education decreases throughout schooling (Goodall 2013; Hornby 2011), which arguably has implications for the benefits of HSPs in secondary education. Potential reasons include negotiating adolescence (Goodall 2013; Hornby 2011), the increased independence of children (Hornby 2011), parental low confidence with the learning material (Chen 2008), and schools' lack of initiative (Hornby 2011).

From the USA there are recommendations to develop parent confidence and ability to engage in partnerships with schools that allow genuinely parent-led initiatives (Kim 2018), and Mac Iver et al. (2015) highlight the demonstrable positive impact that occurs when parents engage with the transition to high school. Though this transition does not have a direct comparison with UK transition years, there is a common theme of active involvement by parents in supporting student learning appears to improve academic outcomes.

Constructing effective home school partnerships

We recognise that parental engagement can be a powerful strategy for narrowing the attainment gap between pupils from different social economic backgrounds (Goodall 2017), however this narrative can blame parents for the effects of wider structural issues (Sylva, Jelly, and Goodall 2018). Typically, the literature assumes there are significant benefits to HSPs, particularly around improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils.

However, developing HSPs remains challenging, especially within specific contexts. For example, with families of children with impairments (Hirano et al. 2018), high-poverty contexts (Bower and Griffin 2011), ethnic minority families (Crozier 2010), and particularly within secondary schools (Costa and Faria 2017; Antonopoulou, Koutrouba, and Babalis 2011). Barriers to parental involvement can include stress, lack of resources, lack of cultural capital, as well as school barriers, such as racism, discrimination, and teacher's attitudes and practices (Hirano et al. 2018). Considering these systemic barriers, Bower

and Griffin (2011) argue that culturally relevant strategies and new ways to engage parents from high-minority, high-poverty contexts which focus on relationship building and advocacy, need to be developed.

Despite these challenges, the policy environment on HSPs in the UK is anaemic. OfSTED (England's school inspectors) expect certain information to be available to parents and that they have a voice in the leadership and development of the school (OfSETD 2019). School leaders are required to "engage parents . . . thoughtfully" (OfSETD 2019, 64), however no advice is provided on how. Schools are expected to have parental representation on governing bodies and to present key information about the school's performance to parents regularly (DfE 2020), however the Department for Education offers no further specific guidance or policy direction on what would constitute good home-school practises. There is no expectation in these policies that parents will be "partners" in co-educating their children, rather parents are a resource used to help hold the school leadership to account and act as passive recipients of information.

In a primary context, the role of the head teacher as one both supportive of HSPs and taking a strengths-based approach to parents is key (Tett and Macleod 2020), although it should be noted that less attention is paid to whether a strength or deficit-based approach is taken with students here. Terms like "collaboration" are often used in conjunction with "achieving shared goals" (e.g. Wadham, Darragh, and Ell 2020), although these are typically goals that reflect the priority of the schools rather than the student (e.g. for students to achieve in core curriculum subjects).

Therefore, recognising the gaps in research alongside existing challenged in HSPs, the research questions we seek to answer through the data presented in this article are:

- From the perspectives of teachers and parents, what constitutes effective home-school partnerships?
- What gaps exist in theory and research around "effective" HSPs? In particular, where can we problematise dominant perceptions of "good practice"?

Methodology

This research formed part of a project designed to identify strategies for forging strong parent-practitioner partnerships in secondary education in the UK (Gundarina et al. 2019). We report the findings from a qualitative multiple case study with three schools (Yin 2014), including a total of 20 interviews with stakeholders and 12 home-school meetings observed.

Participants

The selection of schools started with a criterion and convenience sample designed to approach schools likely to aid in answering our research questions (Yin 2014, 28). This was later complemented with the use of a snowball approach (Seidman 2013). The criteria used for selecting schools were:

- (1) They were secondary schools;
- (2) They engaged parents to jointly deliver services, preferably with evidence of sustained engagement;
- (3) They were within 100 miles of Leeds. However, there could be exceptions to this if practitioners were willing to be interviewed remotely to enable case study development.

Before the application of the criteria, potential schools were identified following an internet search of school websites with information about home-school activities and the consultation of the parent survey section of Ofsted reports, and we asked participating teachers if they could recommend other schools.

Physical invites were sent to 145 schools. Of these, eight schools responded: six rejected and two accepted. Two more schools were found using the snowballing strategy. The final sample included four schools; however, due to time constraints it was not possible to arrange a meeting with the fourth school and the final sample was then formed of three schools.

All three schools were rated as “outstanding” by the school inspectors (OFSTED) and were relatively large (1200–1600 students on roll). School 1 (S1) had a large proportion of children who had English as an additional language (79.5%, national average 17.8% in 2021, ONS 2022) and approximately average level of children on free school meals (21.1%, national average 20.2% in 2021). School two had a much lower level of English as an additional language (4.2%) and free school meals (12.8%), while school 3 was about average with EAL (20.8%) and below average with free school meals (13.8%). School 1 was already known to one of the researchers who had worked with a teacher in the school in a previous project, the other two schools were unknown.

Procedure

The aim was to generate case study data from our three schools to document the nature and type of HSPs that could develop into principles of “good practice”. We conducted a mix of observation and interviews with teachers and parents.

Each school was visited once or twice to allow for data collection to include semi-structured interviews with at least three parents and three teachers (Table 1) and the observation of at least one parent/teacher evening with multiple meetings. We asked members of the school’s Senior Leadership Team to identify and invite the parents and

Table 1. Number of interviews and meetings with parents, teachers and SLT.

(Anonymous coding system in brackets)	Interview with SLT	Teacher interviews	Parent interviews	Recorded/observed parent/teacher meeting	
School 1 (S1)	Head teacher (HT)	4 (T1,T2,T3,T4)	3 (P1,P2,P3)	1 evening with multiple parents observed	
School 2 (S2)	Assistant Head (AH)		2	3	7 individual meetings recorded
School 3 (S3)	Assistant Head (AH)		2	3	4 individual meetings recorded

teachers who would be willing to talk about the HSPs in their school. During school visits, parents, leaders, and teachers were interviewed first, which was followed by attending and observing parent-teacher meetings.

Data collection occurred December 2018 to March 2019 and included interviews with three senior leadership team members, eight teachers, and nine parents, and the observation of 12 parent evenings with individual face-to-face meetings between parents and teachers. A total of 11 meetings were conducted and audio-recorded (62 minutes in total, with an average duration of 5.7 minutes) for Schools 2 and 3, and a further non-recorded observation of one parents' evening with multiple meetings (School 1) was conducted. Alongside recordings and observation notes, additional field-notes were produced in all schools.

The variety of data collected, including interviews and observations from multiple types of participants, allowed for the triangulation of findings and enabled the inclusion of first-hand experiences of school culture. It also supported the initial stages of analysis within a more descriptive purpose (Wolcott 1990). The observations made use of naturally occurring conversations; that is, the kind of dialogue that occurs within a natural setting rather than the more artificial, researcher-guided interview setting. This complemented the data collected through the interviews and allowed for a more naturalistic set of data. For each meeting an observation protocol, including the date, time, participants, aims of the meetings, and unstructured activities, topics discussed, strategies of partnerships mentioned, parental involvement, rapport, use of questions, silences, etc., was used.

The study received ethical approval from the University of Leeds Ethics Committee and followed BERA (2018) guidelines regarding informed consent, participant anonymity and limitations to confidentiality.

[Table 1 to be inserted about here]

Data analysis

We conducted an exploratory qualitative thematic analysis, drawing themes from the data following the procedures by King and Horrocks (2010) and Bazeley (2009). We also conducted a content analysis (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007, 650) to articulate descriptive summaries of the data. Here, a cross-case thematic presentation of the findings is produced to demonstrate important gaps in knowledge (Yin 2015, 256) while also being sensitive to the voices of stakeholders (Yin 2015). This was of particular importance in the attempt to give equal voice to both parents and teaching staff.

All audio-recorded data were transcribed through a professional transcription agency and the analysis was computer-assisted (Creswell and Poth 2018, 17), using NVivo Plus. The researchers started the analysis with the individual inductive coding of two interview transcripts and one set of field notes. This coding was then compared to allow for adjustments that enable coding consistency and trustworthiness. After the initial coding, we used a peer debriefing validation strategy, whereby the analysis was checked by a member of the team that had not coded data.

Results

The purpose of the research was to understand what stakeholder perspectives on “effective” HSPs. This section presents the main themes from the data, before we interpret these as potential “principles” other schools could follow, and then problematise those principles to demonstrate where greater research is required.

Aims of the home-school partnerships

Effective HSPs were founded upon shared aims by parents and teachers (though not necessarily students). Most commonly, parents and teachers described educational attainment as the direct and indirect aim of the HSPs, alongside increasing communication between home and school to improve the monitoring and modification of student’s behaviour.

The aim of HSP as a mediator for “better” behaviour in school was explored during interviews, but it was also recognised in the observations of the parents’ evening:

The teacher greets the parents, shakes their hand. Teacher summarises the student’s progress and explains: “I am pleased with what you produced . . . keep doing what you’re doing, stay focussed, and . . .” Mum interjects . . . “and keep your mouth shut”, then laughed (S2)

Implicit in this conversation is the parent reinforcing (albeit, with a joke) their expectation that the student will work within the confines of the school’s behaviour policies.

Participants did consider other secondary aims that would promote improved academic outcomes and/or behaviour. For example, HSPs were believed to improve pastoral care, which improved students’ perception of school so that they “come into school and they’re in the right frame of mind to learn and they’re happy, then that has a positive impact on what they achieve”. (S2T2). Equally, there was a desire across schools to use the partnership to better understand and encourage students. This understanding required increasing teacher awareness that:

Children have lives outside of school. It’s easy to assume, for example, that a naughty child in school is a naughty child at home or that a good child at school is a good child at home, but we quite often find through partnership that parents are just as frustrated as we are or sometimes, parents know less about their children than we think they do. (S1HT)

Opportunities for students for learning outside the classroom

Our data described how parents’ perspective of their role in their child’s educational journey changed after partnership work. In one of our schools (S1), the relationship with parents was explicitly to facilitate the home as an “extension of the school”. This involved inculcating a particular set of values to help parents promote the aims of the school. Although in another school it was acknowledged teachers need to understand more about the strengths and priorities of the community to better serve the students, the transmission of values and aims was broadly expected to be from the school to the home.

Once those values had been transmitted schools could then resource parents to participate in the student’s learning, as one teacher explains:

I think [parents] feel a part of their child's educational journey. It's not something that's being done to them, they're a part of it If parents are engaged, the children have something to aspire to, they feel that their parents care and I think that in itself can massively benefit them . . . (S3T1)

Parents and teachers articulated that regular updates from school preceded effective homework support from parents. Dedicated school applications for smart phones (in schools 1 and 3) and Twitter (in school 2) and homework booklets (in school 1) achieved this. Teachers were aware that parents were often the first people students went to for help, and parents needed resourcing for this role:

As part of the learning process, the student needs to ask questions and if the parent knows what it is the student is learning, then the parents may be in a better position to [answer] the questions or give them the help. (S3P2)

Parents reinforced this in at least three observations, often asking the teacher how they could offer greater practical support to their children.

Ensuring schools are inclusive and accessible

Inclusive schools seek to understand and respond to causes of parental anxiety. An assistant head (school 2) recognised parents can feel “judged” and “insecure” when comparing themselves to other parents in school, and a teacher (school 1) explained effective partnerships required pastoral work to rebuild parental trust after their own “bad experiences” with schools. Parents commented that open communication and prompt replies to messages helped “taking away any of that, maybe, anxiety about contacting the school” (S2P1). Increased communication with the school also removed the “mystery” so parents could access information and understand “how the school runs” (S2P1).

Schools used physical clues that parental engagement was welcome. One school kept the gate open, with a receptionist and support team available at all times. This resulted in teachers appearing approachable and parents belong:

Schools are places that they can just come to and it's not about necessarily great events but it's just creating a space where partnership at an informal level can take place, so that parents think 'this is my school'. (S2P1)

Teachers and parents recognised that a variety of opportunities to come into school was important. As one teacher noted, schools generate “lots and lots of reasons for parents to come in. To see performances and plays and positive experiences for parents” (S3T2). Accessibility, then, can be context specific and diversity in opportunities for parental engagement is a key strategy for inclusivity.

Accessibility and inclusion also came due to a dedicated team of non-teaching staff in each school: these were either non-teaching members of the senior leadership team and/or support staff. Consistent availability with minimum delay in returning messages was important here. In one school, this team has a remit for both pastoral and achievement issues, where parents can come with any concerns and be signposted to other services:

If they tell me a problem I will say “you can speak to this person” or if it's with their children, so I refer them to the appropriate agency. (S3AH)

Schools were also perceived as a positive part of the community. This provided experience of issues within the community to aid the schools' pastoral decision making and created a dialogue with families. Effective partnership was therefore about trying to "understand what it is about that community that is positive, that we can harness, than what's negative and we're going to be constantly fighting" (S1HT). A Teacher reflects:

I think that's key about knowing very well who your target audience is and what is it that our community and our local context is made up of and trying to then create policies and different initiatives to ensure that we engage them in the best way possible. (S3T1)

Participants also described the school as a "community" (S1T3) where parents feel comfortable communicating with staff. This interaction of school-in-the-community and school-as-community began to manifest as the school provided services for parents and families, for example one school hosts members of the Citizen's Advice Bureau and Foodbanks because "problems at home" affected children's learning (S1T1). This also extended to providing education for parents in English and Maths, which were helpful for parents with English as an additional language.

Building personal relationships between students, parents and staff also improves the perception of accessibility. This can include inviting students to parents' evening, ensuring messages from school are being reinforced by parents, and helping parents educated overseas understand the UK education system. (S2P2)

Communication with parents

A main point that parents articulated was that the availability of teachers was important to maintain communication:

[It isn't] a good sign if a parent wants to get in touch with a subject teacher but they have to go through a head of year or they have to go through a head of department. (S3P1)

Positive communication between parents and teachers was thought to improve student confidence and aspiration. Teachers also appreciated being able to contact home to send them good news, with a recognition it eased parental anxiety around children making friends, settling in, and knowing things are going "smoothly" (S1T2).

Parents engaged in HSPs were also assumed to apply extra pressure on students to meet expectations for behaviour. This helped to motivate some students when they felt parents supported the school:

Obviously, it [communication about behaviour going home] depends on the child, but there's some children that need that when actually home is being supportive so therefore, "I need to do my homework because my parents will find out and then I'll be in trouble." (S3P3)

Honesty in the communication with home was considered important, including explanations of students' learning or behaviour below the expected level. These were communicated so parents would leverage changes in behaviour or attitudes from students:

When students aren't cooperating as they potentially could in school ... it gives us a way of having that extra guidance at home, so they know that the parents are aware of the situation. (S2T1)

I.T. was emphasised as a key element in communication for effective HSPs, particularly the use of dedicated apps and social media (S1P2). This was achieved through listening to parents who “don’t want letters being sent through the post, they want text messages, they want Twitter” (S3AH). The use of a school app for smart phones was also considered more inclusive due to the low level of IT literacy required to communicate with teachers through it.

Effective home-school partnerships provided space for parents’ perspectives to effect change:

I think if [parents] feel listened to and you’re active on the things that they’re saying then that can sustain a long-term partnership. If a parent tells you something and you don’t act on it, then why would they bother? (S2AH)

A parent in another school similarly said effective partnership is ensured when parents feel their contributions are acted upon (S3P1). One school listened through a termly “Parent Voice” event, where parents were invited to share to ideas. In another school the head teacher said they had successful partnerships because they: “Say ‘yes’ to anything [parents] want to do” (S1HT).

Schools seek to develop new parent practitioner partnership strategies

Teachers prioritised the ongoing development of strategies to improve partnerships by using: parent’s perspectives; the experiences of other schools and research; and their own evaluation cycles.

School staff could also articulate a vision for the HSPs: “we want teachers and parents to work together to holistically help the child” (S3AH). None of the schools felt the development of HSPs was complete. This drive to improve helped to embed partnerships as “more part of the day” rather than just “parents” evenings once a year’ (S1HT). In addition, schools were aware marginalised communities were disproportionately missing from these activities, which raised reflection on the strategies used by the school:

We have a sizable proportion of students who come from less affluent backgrounds and really the question should be “Do we communicate as well with them as we should do?” And, probably, the answer is “No”. (S2AH)

Often the “missing” parents seemed to coincide with those families perceived as having lower aspirations for their children.

Discussion

To answer our first research question, parents and teachers reported that effective HSPs require: relationships that build trust, confidence and transparency between staff and parents; understanding of communities where knowledge of context allows teachers to set shared goals; and schools to engage in pastoral support beyond education, although academic outcomes always remained the ultimate aim. Next, we turn these themes into actionable principles of effective HSPs, before highlighting problematic areas if these principles were adopted without further scrutiny or research.

Principle 1: Building Relationships

Our data show that effective HSPs develop from participatory relationships that build trust through transparent communication. This begins with parents affecting change within the school. The literature review highlighted recent research around parental voice in secondary education is lacking and other studies have demonstrated that teachers tend to “dominate” the discourse (Tveit 2009, 298) or fail to provide space for parents to engage collectively (Howard and Reynolds 2008, 93). This is evident when the broader context of home life is ignored (Munje and Mncube 2018). In our data, schools overcame these issues by ensuring myriad diverse opportunities to begin building relationships and increasing confidence of parents within the school. Teachers listening to and acting on suggestions by parents was considered important, though the schools did appear to limit the scope of change that parents could affect – ultimately, the range of the conversations was set by the school more than the parent.

Principle 2: The school as part of the community, and as a community

We evidenced community development as both “the school as a community” and “the school as part of the community(ies)”. “School-in-community” is reminiscent of the “collective work” component of the “community of engagement” model (Torre and Murphy 2016, 211) and Epstein’s (2011) “learning at home” type of involvement. Here, the role of the HSP is to provide resources and motivation for parents to engage in actively educating their children. The reach of the school extends beyond the usual physical location or formal education services. To work effectively, this requires the school to be more aware of the community context and to build relationships with the communities they serve. This could also be evidenced in the community development or welfare/social service roles the school assumed, and all those places where the reach of the school extended beyond buildings and students.

With “schools as a community”, parents perceive the school as the enabler of HSPs. We see this in our data through examples of inclusivity (e.g. keeping school gates open, responding quickly to messages) and parents identifying as part of the school community. This happened through the school building being accessible to parents and providing a range of opportunities to come into school, reflecting the heterogeneous community they served, and providing dedicated staff whom parents could build relationships with.

Principle 3: Focus on pastoral and holistic support

Related to the above notion of the school as a community, there was the focus on staff providing holistic support to students and families. This included information and advice on supporting academic attainment at home, and in actively seeking to understand barriers to learning and attendance within the context of austerity. These schools attempted to meet those needs with a range of services, including foodbanks.

These services originate from dedicated pastoral support teams with open-door policies. This is adding to a growing body of evidence suggesting schools have been fulfilling a range of welfare services post-austerity (Kerr, Dyson, and Gallannaugh 2016; Dyson et al. 2016). This is unsurprising as child welfare policy has increasingly prioritised “Early Intervention” or “Early Help” (Frost, Abbott, and Race 2015); the provision of support to

families when the first predictors of health, wellbeing, social, or educational issues are manifest. There is also evidence of children's services reconfiguring around secondary schools, coinciding with a rise in "welfare managers" working to prevent the social exclusion of young people (Edwards, Lunt, and Stamou 2010, 42).

Principle 4: Supporting learning at home

Finally, parents would work with their children on academic tasks when they felt included in their child's educational journey. Previous studies emphasised the need to provide parents more "opportunities for learning" (Sylva, Jelley, and Goodall 2018, 2), and reveal that parents receive few resources to support their children's learning at home (Becta 2010). Our findings demonstrate four features of engaging parents to support their children's home learning: having a collective goal, directing the attitudes of parents towards a similar set of values/aspirations, resourcing parents, and receiving reciprocal support from parents back to teachers. Thus, our findings support Goodall's (2018a) that a whole-school strategic approach to HSPs is imperative in reaching long-term productive relationships with parents.

Schools engaging in effective partnerships provide the tools parents require to support homework completion, which can involve opportunities for parents to improve basic skills through courses held in school or through sharing the tasks set for students.

Problematising the principles

The principles above summarise our data and add to the body of existing evidence about HSPs – little departs from common findings we see in other research on HSPs, although the focus on secondary schools is rare. Therefore, if we can accept that the principles above present perceptions of "good practice" in HSPs within our schools, and in a lesser way are indicative of perceptions of "good practice" in other schools too, then the remainder of this article will critique these perceptions and highlight apparent gaps in scholarship. Although we will critique and problematise these findings, this is not to denigrate the hard work of teachers and parents done in good faith, but to highlight problematic unintended consequences and implied values that frame these partnerships, and to develop a research agenda for more equitable HSPs that centralises the student.

It is already acknowledged that the language of "partnership" can mask an imbalance of power between the teacher and parent (Brain and Ivan 2003; Todd and Higgins 1998) and there exists a gap between the rhetoric of collaboration and dominant practises (Graham et al. 2021). All three schools provide evidence of HSPs predominantly serving to improve the academic attainment and behaviour of students – goals perhaps shared by parents but set by the school. Parents may, for example, have a greater interest in improving extra curricula activities or student wellbeing, with no ulterior motive of improving grades or behaviour.

Therefore, it is disingenuous for school to utilise language of equality while also setting the agenda for what HSPs can achieve. This is particularly concerning in two areas. Firstly, where an effect of the HSP may be to shift some responsibility for students' school-learning and behaviour onto parents rather than the school. Critiques of the responsibility of parents within a neoliberal educational framework are myriad (for an example,

see Doherty and Dooley 2018). Framing student academic attainment as resultant from parental choice places risk and anxiety within the traditional gender roles of the home: “in short, mothers increasingly take up the moral responsibility for assuring children’s academic development” (ibid p552). Parents are increasingly expected to have “pedagogical knowledge” to aid the academic development of their children (Dahlstedt and Fejes 2014, 170), and a lack of knowledge (or lack of resources to acquire that knowledge) can lead to feelings of guilt and inadequacy. It would appear HSPs risk perpetuating rather than challenging that narrative. Much of the discussion around supporting learning from home could also be framed as a neoliberal education system individualising symptoms of inequality and “blaming” parents for “poor” performance of children. Although in our case-studies school staff were not overtly blaming parents, and were attempting to avoid presenting judgemental attitudes, nonetheless the notion that parents were in some way responsible for their child’s behaviour and academic attainment also serves to create a sense of shared responsibility if a student fails to reach an expected standard. Schools showed no overt resistance to the dominant policy landscape that pathologises inequality (Allen and Bull 2018; Taylor 2018).

Secondly, the imbalance in power in the HSP causes the transmission of values to be almost entirely from school to home. There is an expectation that the values of the school, usually around the importance of education in general, “good” behaviour and attainment in particular will be (or should be) shared by parents. While schools may often be doing this with the best of intentions, with the belief that improved exam grades will increase life chances for young people, it is possible the school is prioritising its own need for exam success. Alongside the prioritisation of grade averages a set of neoliberal values are actively promulgated within the home: individual achievement, competition, and marketisation/commodification of citizens. In fact, as commented above, these values are at risk of being presented as a moral imperative and a failure to embody them in the home is a failure of parenthood. This transmission of values could become oppressive (Luet 2017), particularly for parents with low levels of social and economic resources (Torres and Hurtado-Vivas 2011, 223).

It appears some parents are seeing themselves as agents of the school, or as “an extension of the school’s arm”. The appropriateness of influence of the state into the private values of families requires further thought. A state-sanctioned intervention into the values and morality of citizens (Sayer 2020; Mooney 1983; Plummer 2003) will always be controversial in a liberal society (Keeney 2016, 3; Archard 2018, 68–9), yet the neoliberal competitive education system appears to be taking precedence over broader political liberal values of autonomy and freedom from state interference. Liberal states are based on the assumption that citizen wellbeing is promoted when they are free to make choices and enact choices, although there are limits to this freedom, where the state adopts a more paternalistic approach to ensure child-wellbeing. Therefore, most people accept that children have a right to an education that should be protected by the state, even if the family do not value education. What is more nebulous, in the case of HSPs, is whether the school as an agent of the state should be seeking to influence those values. Schools are not only attempting to promote the value of education within the home, they are asking families to value compliance to a particular, exam-focussed and market-orientated school culture. Of course, it could be argued that parents are both free to choose to enter into the HSP, free to choose a school, and even (within England) free to set up the own

school if they disagree with the ethos of the local state schools. However, these options work on the assumption that (1) parents are genuinely free to choose to enter into the HSP, however the rhetoric around the responsabilising of parents (and associated guilt) makes this difficult, and (2) parents have significant resources.

The data demonstrated a third example of an imbalance in the HSP relationship: communication. Communication appeared more effective within a trusting relationship that parents felt was “honest”. Honesty, however, was typically an opportunity for teachers to present a holistic picture of student achievement and behaviour at school, with little space for parents or students to reflect back their perspective on the school’s ability to create a positive environment for their child. It is possible for parents to influence schools through formal opportunities to contribute to school governorship or taking part in consultation exercises, however our data do not demonstrate HSPs in which parents are able to hold the school accountable. Our data shows no evidence of the “traditional” parents’ evening being used by parents to seek the kind of cultural or contextual changes to make school more suitable for their children. Rather, the behaviours that the school would like to see from the child are presented to the parent. The behaviours the child would like to see from the school are not. There are examples in research of parents successfully challenging structural issues within schools, including heteronormativity (Strear 2016) and creating inclusive cultures for students with Autism Spectrum Condition (Crosland and Dunlap 2012), however these seem to occur when school staff are intentional about facilitating parent-led changes (e.g. Kim, Fletcher, and Bryan 2017) or parents are able to self-organise (e.g. Delgado-Gaitan 1991).

Greater equality within these partnerships is possible. Values could be co-developed with a genuine partnership between school, community, and family. Neoliberal (and other) ideologies driving schools could be identified and named, and the school could facilitate a critical discussion with parents around the values that should be transmitted from school to home, but equally how values of the home and the community could be transmitted into school. The “honest” conversation that highlights students perceived “successes” and “failures” could be balanced with a dialogue around how school cultures provides (or otherwise) a safe and stimulating environment that caters for the student.

This highlights a fourth issue with imbalances in power: safeguarding the parent/teacher relationship. If parental participation is important, but egalitarian relationships are difficult to build, typical professional/client relationships use boundaries and codes of practice to protect those with less power (Doel et al. 2010; Hart 2016). There is little evidence that schools or teachers have considered this. If building relationships with families is an aim, then some greater thought needs to go into defining the aims of that relationship, what is appropriate behaviour and values, and how power differentials can be articulated rather than hidden (Doel et al. 2010; Cooper 2012). Popular discourses on boundaries place the power of boundary setting with the professional. What our data is not able to show is where, how, and under whose instructions are these boundaries created? It is a common tension in work with families that parents are co-constructing the role of the professional and their involvement with the family, creating a different relationship to that envisaged by the teacher (Hall et al. 2010). Therefore, while our data reinforce that a key principle of HSPs are in building relationships between school staff and parents, the imbalanced nature of that relationship requires a more developed set of professional standards for what is appropriate within that relationship.

A second over-arching concern alongside the imbalance of power between home and school is the apparent subjugation of student voices – and, perhaps, even their right to privacy. We can join other researchers (e.g. Davis 2001; Hanafin et al. 2010; Lockwood 1977) in considering the limits of information teachers should share with parents (and vice versa). It is beyond the scope of this article to engage in this kind of philosophical debate around privacy, rights and ethics – however the dominant discourse of “partnership” seems to have obscured these questions of children’s rights. There are likely to be safeguarding issues that place the safety and wellbeing of the child above their right to privacy, however most information shared between teachers and parents are not around such concerns.

If a child does have a right to privacy (commensurate with their age), and there are no safeguarding concerns present, then we can imagine situations in which the sharing of information may constitute “harm”. For example, a gay student from a strongly traditional family may face persecution at home if their teacher “outs” them. Or, if a young person has been involved in moderately disruptive behaviour, and the aim of the communication home about their activities is to gain greater compliance (perhaps rather than to confront the lack of stimulation provided within the lessons), and this led to sanctions at home, would that constitute a breach of privacy that resulted in harm? Therefore, we can ask whether the aim of improving attainment and behaviour sufficient cause to bypass a young person’s privacy? Should students be able to “opt out” (or even “opt in”) to information shared with home?

This concern may be alleviated if students were equal partners within this three-way relationship. O’Fee (2012) show the potential of student-led conversations with parents and teachers as a way to increase their responsibility and confidence, and increasing student voice within this three-way relationship may increase a sense of “shared responsibility” for education (Epstein and Sheldon 2006). However, evidence, both in our data and elsewhere, suggests that students *may* have a voice within the HSP, but there is little opportunity to exercise control over information about them (except for examples from our data where students are intercepting communication between school and home – which perhaps reflects the fact they do not consent to this information sharing).

A third broad concern is the lack of research into the impact of schools as post-austerity providers of welfare services. Some specific programmes that have been evaluated, such as the Positive Family Support intervention, found that within families with young teens, improved home-school relationship had reduced incidences of teachers reporting problematic behaviour in students (Smolkowski et al. 2017). There is also existing research in analogous areas, for example many schools have provided breakfast to disadvantaged children since the 1990s where there was a drive to improve “pupil attendance and tardiness” (Simpson 2001, 79). Although there was a wider political concern at the time with reducing childhood health inequalities associated with poverty, within schools the motivation for breakfast clubs appeared to be predominantly around improving attendance. Schools have also provided bases for other services, including sexual health services, for some time (Formby et al. 2010).

While we can confirm that our case study schools are providing an increased range of “social” or “welfare services”, we cannot evidence the level of success they achieve. Nevertheless, we are aware that ultimately the aim of these services is to improve academic outcomes for students or to “get them into school”, which produces a different motivation

for engaging in holistic work compared to, say, social workers or family support workers. There is currently no research considering the effect of schools delivering welfare services that may have been delivered by other organisations pre-austerity. It is also uncertain whether these services are provided to improve home-school partnerships and student learning, or if they are provided unconditionally and would be available *even if* the effects of poverty did not affect learning. These questions are of significant importance – there may be a fundamental difference between the provision of a service based on the perceived need to improve externally-measured metrics with the aim of alleviating the effects of poverty on educational attainment and behaviour, compared with seeking to deal with inequalities in health and wellbeing for their own sake.

Implications for research and practice

The findings for this exploratory study highlight potential areas for future research and practice. We have recognised that HSPs are almost unilaterally presumed to be positive but are, nevertheless, lacking direction from UK policy makers, except to ensure adequate information is set from school to home and that parents have the opportunity to feedback concerns to the school. In this research, we highlight areas in which greater research and scholarship is required: the imbalance of power and lack of clear boundaries in the relationship, the lack of student voice and a side-stepping of their right to privacy, potential issues with the school acting post-austerity as a provider of basic social and welfare services, and the potential for schools to actively influence the values of the home.

Based on these, we suggest areas for policy development after greater research has been undertaken.

Firstly, the voice of the student in home school partnerships appears to be lacking. A greater understanding on how students can be autonomous within this relationship is required, and a clearer understanding of what they can (or should) be able to consent to and withdraw from in this relationship. A clearer understanding of what information a parent should be able to access without their child's consent and, vice versa, a clearer understanding about the information a school can ask for about home-life without the child's consent. The lack of dialogue around student rights is a concern.

Secondly, a clearer understanding on the extent to which the school should influence home values is key. A faith school that was attempting to convert families, for example, may face criticism. However, the values associated with neoliberalism are no less potent – and there is a clear focus on grades, exam results, and compliant behaviour with very little here on a more holistic or rounded idea of wellbeing and education.

Thirdly, young people's perspectives on HSPs could be included in ongoing guidance about their suitability and the forms of information shared. Safeguards and appropriate codes of practice could be devised to ensure that boundaries are maintained, and families are protected. Particular attention could be paid to the power dynamics within HSPs and a clearer understanding of young people's right to a private life.

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