Summary of Parental Engagement Research

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Research is unequivocally clear that parental engagement has huge benefits for children's education; indeed, "the impact caused by different levels of parental involvement is much bigger than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools." [i]

What do we mean by parental engagement?
It should be noted that education is wider than schooling. Whilst attending teacher-directed parents' meetings and attending school plays can be useful, these are not the types of activity that make a real difference to their child's education. It is what parents do at home that matters, through interactions, conversations and aspirations. [ii]

What can schools do?
As well as engaging parents in home-school activities (reading, homework, etc.), teachers and schools can play a significant part in educating how, and then reinforcing the message, that what all parents do really does matter. [iii]

It is part of the leadership function of a school's leadership team, and particularly the head, to influence, set the culture and expectations and provide training for staff. In terms of parental engagement this can mean how relationships with parents can be fostered and ultimately lead to true parental engagement taking place.

There are a wide range of skills and attributes that a leader may or may not employ, but perhaps predictably, studies have found that the enthusiasm of the headteacher is the most important factor where effective school-parental relationships do exist. [iv] Friendliness, being visible and being charismatic can also be useful attributes for heads in forging relations with parents, especially in primary schools. [v]

Improving relationships is a key leadership feature of successful change in education systems in general, [vi] and with regards to parental engagement, relationships need to be built among staff and parents. Do headteachers (and subsequently others in the culture they attempt to set in the school) seek to manage parental involvement or actively seek a partnership? Research has found that principals would say that developing relationships with parents was a priority, but in reality, their actions showed they wanted to maintain all the power in a one-way relationship, [vii] or that the parameters of parental engagement are set by the school, without asking for or taking into consideration the wishes of parents. [viii]

Barriers to developing relationships: teachers?
Of all the school-based factors concerning parental engagement, the quality of teachers' partnership with parents has been found to have the largest effect size, [ix] and that building a true relationship requires mutual trust and respect. Research has found that teachers often tend to view parental knowledge about education matters to be inadequate, supplementary or unimportant. [x] Other significant barriers to true teacher-parent partnership can include differing goals, agendas, attitudes and language used, [xi] and that parents can actually be seen by schools as being problematic, vulnerable or less able. Despite teachers now often using constructivist and engaging methods in the classroom, they can still use didactic, school-centric methods in dealing with parents, resorting parents to receivers of knowledge from them as the experts. [xii]

Schools' propensity to over-focus on tests to satisfy inspection bodies in England has been admitted by the current Ofsted Chief Inspector who said, "our inspections have looked hardest at outcomes, placing too much weight on test and exam results when we consider the overall effectiveness of schools." [xiii] This narrowing of school focus on purely pupil performance through high-stakes testing can be seen as a barrier to a genuine teacher-parent relationship because many, but not all, parents actually value education in a much wider sense. Furthermore, even when teachers have the best of intentions, through their lack of true understanding of issues such as poverty, race and

sexual orientation and subsequent deficit thinking, they can end up participating in practices that are counter-productive, or through making excuses they put limits on a child's learning.[xiv]

Although the personality of the school leader affects the quality of home-school relationships, even in schools that do have such a positive and friendly headteacher, this attitude and practice does not always extend down to the staff in the school.[xv] Whilst a positive and welcoming attitude is considered important as a good step to gaining parental involvement[xvi], it is hard to see how this alone is enough to change the mindset, attitudes and agendas of some teachers towards parents.

Barriers: lack of training?

According to Hargreaves, "The new relationships that teachers are having to form with parents is one of the greatest challenges to their professionalism in the postmodern age."[xvii] Fewer than 10% of teachers have participated in CPD on parental engagement,[xviii] and although providers of initial teacher training are warm to the idea of family school partnerships, in practice they state that a lack of space in their curriculum restricts the ability to provide new teachers with the knowledge and experience to feel confident.[xix]

Recommendations have been made for further training in engaging parents, for both principals in ways they can engage and manage parental engagement better,[xx] and for staff both in initial teacher training programmes and through ongoing professional development, especially when they are working with parents whose background is different from their own.[xxi] Staff need supporting in understanding the families they are working with, and in challenging beliefs and assumptions held through purposeful and sustained staff training.[xxii]

Research has found that teachers rank dealing with parents as more difficult than maintaining discipline or dealing with endless testing.[xxiii] Brown claims that in general, "Leaders must either invest a reasonable

amount of time attending to fears and feelings, or squander an unreasonable amount of time trying to manage unproductive behavior."[xxiv] It may be that extra time and resources spent initially are a long-term time saver and catalyst to more meaningful change.

What about 'hard to reach' parents?

Whilst some parents or groups of parents may not appear to be actively engaged with schooling, this does not necessarily mean that they do not engage with their child's education in other ways or really value education more widely. It has been argued that it is the schools themselves, through a lack of true understanding of the complexities of their parents' lives and through entrenchment in traditional methods of involving parents, that are the barrier to parental involvement.[xxv] Schools may simply design more opportunities to interact for some parents than others.[xxvi] For many parents there is a lack of scaffolding as opposed to a lack of aspiration.

What about parents who 'go too far'?

Whether intentionally or otherwise, do some parents advocate for individual pupils or groups to the detriment of the wider school community? Highlighting a tension that can exist between parents and principals, which may in turn be a barrier to meaningful relationships, research has found the importance of the principal 'managing' the relationship and the significant issues of power and control. They argue that it is necessary to acknowledge the power dynamics between parents and schools before a real understanding of the issues relating to authentic relationships can take place.[xxvii] Other research has also found that middle-class parents can use their social, economic and cultural capital to their advantage within the education system and thus strong leadership is needed to counter the over-influence of 'entitled-minded' parents.[xxviii]

How can *School Leaders Training* help schools?

1. **Provide training to teaching and non-teaching staff** to develop understanding and skills to facilitate engagement and deal with more demanding parents;
2. **Provide training and coaching to school leadership teams** in leading staff and dealing with demanding staff and parents, and finding creative ways to engage with parents;
3. **Deliver sessions directly to parents** emphasising activities that really matter to their child's education.
4. Work together with a school to **produce a whole-school 'Parents Strategy'**.

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