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Family-school partnerships in the age of Covid-19: reasons for optimism amidst a global pandemic

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Abstract

This article reports on research undertaken in May and June, 2020, during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic when schools in England were still closed to the majority of children. The research sought to explore the impact of the so-called 'lockdown' on family-school partnerships. Research shows such partnerships make an important contribution to the effective education of children and young people, potentially leading to improved behaviour, engagement and learning outcomes. The study was conducted as a short online survey, circulated through social media and email, which invited teachers, school leaders and others working in Primary and Secondary schools to share their experiences of family-school partnership during this time. Analysis of data showed that schools had made considerable efforts to maintain communication and support for all families, particularly those deemed 'hard-to-reach', and many participants reported that family-school partnerships had actually been strengthened through this testing period of time.

Keywords: children, coronavirus, Covid-19, families, lockdown, parents, partnership, schools, young people

Introduction and rationale

In March 2020, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the United Kingdom government ordered the closure of schools for all pupils, with the exception of those whose parents were identified as key workers and those children and young people deemed to be vulnerable.

Family-school partnerships (FSP)[1] are a collaboration, with the aim of increasing the opportunities for, and success of, children and young people (Sheridan et al, 2012). Such collaboration is seen to provide many benefits, such as an increase in the subject knowledge of parents (Henderson and Mapp, 2002), the transfer of significant knowledge about individual children from parents to schools (DfES, 2001; Warren et al, 2009) and a mutual approach to a child's learning, which can boost their knowledge and confidence (Loughran, 2008). In recent years, numerous attempts have been made to evaluate and disseminate best practice in relation to FSP, through research (Watt, 2016) and the work of educational charities (EEF, no date), including those with a focus on children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Barbour et al, 2018).

This article reports on research undertaken in May and June 2020, during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic when schools in England were still closed to the majority of children and were beginning to make the transition to reopening for some cohorts. While FSPs are always important to a child's education, the relationship took on additional significance during this period due to the additional involvement of many parents in the education of their children. The research sought to explore the impact of the so-called lockdown on the educational partnerships between schools and

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[1] We acknowledge that other terms are widely used when discussing the relationship between parents and schools including 'parental engagement' and 'parental involvement'. These terms are often understood differently by different groups though Goodall and Montgomery (2014) set out a useful continuum foregrounding the value of 'parental engagement' with a child's learning. We therefore chose to use an alternative term in this research.

their families, as many children and young people missed eight or more weeks of school. The project also aimed to explore the perceptions of teachers and school leaders on the possible long-term implications for FSPs of the partial school closures.

The objectives of this research were to:

- Identify approaches taken by schools to maintain family-school partnerships during this period of partial closure, particularly with families of vulnerable learners or those with limited or no access to online materials
- Identify approaches taken by schools to engage families that may be deemed hard-to-reach[2]
- Explore the perceptions of school staff on the potential long-term impact of the lockdown in relation to family-school partnerships.

Review of Literature

Three key aspects of theory and research were identified in the literature and will be explored through this review: features of effective FSP, partnership with 'hard-to-reach' families and partnership during extended school closure.

Effective family-school partnership

Schools, families, young people and the communities to which they belong are all potential beneficiaries of effective partnerships between schools and families. For example, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) suggest that it is the development of

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[2] A National College for Teaching and Leadership study (2011) defined 'hard-to-reach' parents as exhibiting the following behaviours: very low levels of engagement with school, do not attend school meetings nor respond to communications, and exhibit high levels of inertia in overcoming perceived barriers to participation. We acknowledge that the term 'Hard-to-Reach' can become a barrier to constructive partnerships, however, include it in this work due to its wide usage.

'effective partnerships' that will ultimately lead to increased motivation and self-esteem, a greater engagement with learning and improved behaviour and attendance at school, all of which support an improvement in outcomes for young people.

Research studies have set out the factors believed to be important for effective FSP (Henderson et al, 2007; Mutch and Collins, 2012; Jeynes, 2018). Jeynes' (2018) model, developed from six meta-analyses, is the most thorough of these and considered the crucial domain of the family home, in addition to school-based components of FSP. While Bartz et al (2018) suggest training families in effective interactions with their children to support success in the home environment, Jeynes (2018) focuses on the actions taken at school, which he argues can foster the same or similar behaviours at home. These actions, referred to as components of parental involvement/engagement, include the provision of a supportive school environment, exhibiting high but realistic expectations of pupils, informative communication and setting clear rules that can, in partnership with parents, be practiced at home (Jeynes, 2018). Jeynes (2018) further suggests that successful partnerships that support the learning of the child can be developed by ensuring that parents are able to understand homework tasks and that reading opportunities are structured through the provision of suitable materials such as suggested daily readings from specified texts.

A further component highlighted by Jeynes (2018) was 'partnership with the teacher', which had the greatest effect size of the school-based factors measured in the analysis, and must be built on a basis of mutual respect. Other studies highlight the importance of schools valuing parents and viewing them as equals (Day, 2013; Barr and Saltmarsh 2014; Audet et al, 2016), and posit that communication must be two-way (Young et al, 2013), encourage parental voice (Torre and Murphy, 2016) and involve genuine dialogue (Mutch and Collins, 2013).

It is clear that for effective and inclusive FSPs to be possible, headteachers must value their existence (Kim, 2009; Aurbach, 2012). Torre and Murphy (2016) would then posit that such partnerships should be placed at the core of the school culture and vision. A school's vision, it is argued, should at the least receive 'buy in' from parents (Torre and Murphy, 2016), with a preferable aim of co-construction with parents (Mutch and Collins, 2012). This supports the school to understand the values (Goodall, 2015) and needs of parents (Mleckzo and Kington, 2013), prior to agreeing a shared purpose (Hornby and Lafaelle, 2011) and understanding (Alexander, 2000) of the home-school partnership. Such collaborative work, which may take the form of a series of parental workshops, enables the development of a clear vision that provides multiple opportunities for parental engagement at home and school (Torre and Murphy, 2016) and sets out clear, agreed expectations that are linked to pupil performance (Mleckzo and Kington, 2013).

Just as parents should not be treated as a homogenous group (Alexander, 2000), it is important to remember that there is no one best way to develop FSPs, with each school needing to consider their own contexts (Goodall, 2018b). While Stormshak et al (2016) and Goodall (2018b) have both reported a lack of training opportunities for teachers in relation to FSPs, Day (2013) and Barker & Harris (2020) highlight the need for such training. The sharing of good practice across schools, through reflection and discussions between school staff, while keeping individual context in mind, is paramount for ensuring positive change within schools (Goodall, 2018b).

Partnership with 'hard-to-reach' families

School closures are likely to have the greatest effect on the education of those children from lower socio-economic status backgrounds (Doyle, 2020; Montacute, 2020). Not only is this due to the loss of direct teaching in school (Doyle, 2020) but difficulties children may face in completing work at home (van Lanker and Parolin, 2020), compounded by limited access to internet enabled devices (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020). It is this same group of parents, along with those of minority groups[3], who often have difficulty engaging with schools (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). Watt (2016) found schools reporting that parents from such backgrounds were more difficult to engage and were less likely to be involved with their child's learning. From a parent's point of view, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds often lack the confidence to engage with their child's education (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011) and the trust with which to build relationships with schools (Rodriquez et al, 2014). Further, it is more likely that the children of these parents are deemed vulnerable (ACER, 2020). Research has shown the value of parental engagement in a child's learning to their educational success (Goodall, 2018a), and the increased importance of the home learning environment during extended school closure (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020).

Partnerships during extended school closure

During extended periods of school closure, such as that experienced during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, the responsibility for the education of children shifts from the school to the parent (Doyle, 2020). This can be particularly difficult for parents of children who already need greater levels of support (ACER, 2020). When considering parental engagement with a child's learning, an impact brief for the Sutton Trust, by

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[3] Such minorities groups include those from minority ethnic and language backgrounds (Evangelou et al, 2013).

Cullinane and Montacute (2020), focused on UK schooling during Covid-19, and reported that 13% of children only studied when supervised by an adult, with another 67% requiring some form of supervision. Interactions between parents and their children have previously been shown to be motivational, with greater numbers of children reporting such interactions as motivational in comparison to their parents (Borup et al, 2013). Children were also motivated by interactions between their parents and instructors, much more so than they were by the subject content or interactions with other learners. While schools can implement strategies to ensure students remain motivated, it is the parents who act as a physical conduit for this (Borup et al, 2014).

If parents are going to take on a greater responsibility for the learning of their child, it is not unreasonable to expect clarity around their responsibilities and support from schools. A recent study found that parents of online learners misunderstood the level of parental engagement required in online learning, in comparison to school-based learning (Borup et al, 2019). Ensuring all parties hold a clear understanding is vital to the effectiveness of FSP (ACER, 2020).

As parents will, for the most part, lack expertise in directing learning and relevant subject content that their children are studying, there is some need for support and resources for parents from schools (Borup et al, 2019). Waters and Luong (2011) recommended that parents be trained to organise, motivate and support their children when online learning takes a central role. Recent research in the UK and Ireland, during the initial Covid school shutdown, found 52% of teachers providing advice to parents (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020), over 50% of children being provided with resources from school but only 25% receiving virtual lessons (Doyle, 2020). 34% of teachers focused their support on specific parents, providing advice on supervising

learning, in an attempt to lessen the impact on those from lower SES backgrounds (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020). Cullinane and Montacute (2020) found that 4% of parents of primary children, and 5% of parents of secondary children, were offered online training in how to support their child.

Research methods

In order to gather evidence from a range of school leaders, teachers and other school staff in Primary and Secondary education, a short online survey was devised. A questionnaire of three open questions was intended to enable respondents to give detailed qualitative accounts of their first-hand experiences of working with families during lockdown, as well as their views about the potential longer-term impacts on the family-school partnerships in their context. The survey was distributed widely via social media and, locally, via email to partnership schools of the University of Gloucestershire.

Seventy-six responses were received, seventy-five of which were complete, with one discarded as no coherent content was provided. Analysis took the form of tallies, where the same issues were identified by a number of respondents, and thematic analysis of the data, which enabled the identification of a number of emergent themes, particularly in relation to the respondents' views about the potential longer-term impact on family-school partnerships.

Ethical protocols were observed throughout and the project was given ethical approval by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Gloucestershire.

Findings & Discussion

The findings from the questionnaire align completely with the questions asked, leading to three designated sections: successful approaches to maintaining FSP,

specific approaches for engaging 'hard-to-reach' parents, and the most detailed section that reflects on the data received from question three, which focused on the potential long-term impact of lockdown on FSPs.

Approaches found to be successful in maintaining and even strengthening family-school partnerships during lockdown

When asked about approaches used during lockdown that they felt were successful in maintaining or strengthening FSP, the majority of respondents confirmed that their schools utilised online and telephone communications in order to achieve such ends. The most popular of these methods was the telephone (55), with online learning platforms (23) and e-mail (22) also employed in almost a third of cases. While some respondents provided little detail beyond the mode of communications used, some provided greater detail, stating that phone calls allowed them to have personalised conversations, discussing parental concerns and responding directly to questions. Such open communication is vital in developing trust with parents (Day, 2013), enabling positive growth in FSP. Online learning platforms were also used for regular communication and allowed schools to follow the progress of all learners. These were also successfully used to provide pupil work and to monitor progress, allowing school staff to provide learning support for parents and pupils. Further learning support in the form of physical resources, such as printed learning packs, were provided by over one third of respondents, with IT equipment (9) and care packages/vouchers (13) also being utilised to support the learning and wellbeing of families. Alongside greater levels of contact and the provision of places in school, the sharing of IT equipment, care packages and differentiated learning was reported to have played an important role in relation to pupils and families deemed vulnerable.

Approaches used to engage families deemed 'Hard-to-Reach'

In reply to question two, focusing on families that may be deemed hard-to-reach, responses often mirrored those provided to question one, with much less content recorded overall. The prevalence of the use of phone calls was similar to question one (56), though more respondents suggested doorstep visits took place for this demographic in particular, with some stating that this course of action was taken if the family could not be reached by telephone. Many respondents appeared to be acutely aware of the potential needs of these families, with three referencing welfare checks directly and twelve referring to direct contact with, or signposting to, family support workers or outside agencies providing family support. One respondent, in particular, confirmed that the provision of food hampers and donations was particularly useful, as parents were keen to receive them and so it provided an opportunity to keep lines of communication open. It was also acknowledged by a respondent that they had not found the perfect solution to engaging families that may be deemed hard-to-reach, which is reflected in pre-Covid school life, as each school and family are situated in their own context and may have unique needs and challenges to overcome. More research is required about how schools may successfully involve parents in their child's academic work (Kraft and Rogers, 2015).

What will be the long-term impact of the lockdown be on family-school partnerships?

The majority of participants' comments (88 of 129) indicated that they expected to see long-term improvements in relationships between families and schools as a result of the actions taken during lockdown. Of the other 41 comments, only 15 suggested that the participants believed that the lockdown would have a negative impact on FSP, with the rest being non-committal or not directly referencing any particular impact on

relationships. The three key themes to emerge from the data were communication, a sense of community and a mutual understanding between families and schools.

Communication

Most respondents reported an increased level of communication between schools and families, during the period in which schools were closed to the majority of pupils. Many respondents referred to the regularity with which they were contacting families through various media, including doorstep visits when necessary. While this increase came through necessity, it shows the value of ongoing dialogue, as opposed to communication being focused around a couple of set points during the year or moments of snatched communication at drop off and pick up time. Though one respondent indicated that they had more time to communicate with parents, it is clear that this would not have been the case for all school employees. It is also not just the frequency of communication that is important but also the quality of those discussions, which must involve genuine dialogue (Mutch and Collins, 2013). When reporting on the increased strength of relationships, respondents used such words as 'fantastic dialogue', 'unprecedented' and 'really supportive'. Such appears to be the increase in a number of schools, that greater trust grew between practitioners and families, the development of which, literature shows, is particularly important when trying to engage families from lower-socio economic backgrounds (Rodriquez et al, 2014). School staff reported a 'close bond', being on 'first name terms' and an increased engagement from some families who would usually avoid it. While it is unclear when school life will return to a greater sense of normality, one respondent expressed a hope of longer-term impact: 'I am hoping families continue to engage with school and teachers as they are in lockdown'. This, of course, works both ways, with the increase in communication from schools being replicated following any

enforced school closures. This will ensure parents have the numerous opportunities to engage with the school advocated by Torre and Murphy (2016). Opportunities to co-construct a school vision with parents, as encouraged by Mutch and Collins (2012), would then be increasingly feasible.

It was reported that parents themselves were more proactive in their contact during lockdown, were increasingly open to support and advice, and took greater interest in their child's education. Whether that was 'parents that have never shown an interest before … reaching out for advice' or 'families … working closer with us to receive hampers', such a development is an important step in the establishment of strong and lasting FSP for the betterment of the child's physical, mental and educational wellbeing. Such partnerships, if maintained, may play a vital role in the continuation of the family behaviors experienced by many schools such as parents having 'a greater understanding of their child's learning', being 'more confident to attempt tasks at home' and 'asking for support from school where necessary'. Those schools that reported parents as being 'willing to engage with supporting children's learning more readily', may be able to work more closely with those parents for the benefit of the child.

Sense of community

The increased engagement with school life and strengthened relationships between school and families, led to both a perceived and apparent increase in the sense of community in schools. In many cases, school closure brought more attention to the work schools do to support families, in addition to their role of providing an education. Respondents highlighted the role they played in supporting the wellbeing of families, whether through the advice offered or the various packages of food and other essential items that families struggled to afford. Care packages appear to have

been a successful way of maintaining contact with eligible families and, with literature suggesting those families from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds are more difficult to engage (Watt, 2016), the provision of material support may enable relationships to be built with this specific group. Providing support to all families gave schools the opportunity to show parents, in the words of one respondent, that 'we are not the enemy but are genuinely here to support'. In turn, it appears that respondents saw an increase in parents wishing to be involved in Parent Teacher Associations, general school-based volunteering and attending workshops aimed at parental support. Even schools who believed their school community was strong before the Covid-19 outbreak stated that 'this has brought us even closer!'. Further research could investigate how schools hold on to this increased sense of community, when restrictions lift and some form of new normal becomes established.

Mutual understanding

A further contributor to the development of trust, communication and sense of community is the increase in the mutual understanding of roles and respect that developed, which, according to Jeynes (2018) is essential when developing effective partnerships. A small number of respondents highlighted a greater understanding of the difficulties families often face, the individual situations of the families of their pupils, and how they can support parents to work closely with their children at home. A much greater number believed the parents of their pupils had a newfound or renewed respect for the role of the teacher and an appreciation for the job they do. This included the value that school brings to a child's 'mental health', and the support of 'social', 'emotional' and 'behavioural' development. It is clear this respect had come, in part, from the challenges some parents had experienced in engaging their

child with learning at home and the recognition of the skills needed to focus and develop their learners. One particular response highlights this clearly:

> I think some parents might be more receptive to teachers in the future. When students misbehave/don't do work, some parents are quick to blame teachers/work. I think in trying to get their children to work might open some eyes a little.

A small number of respondents were clear that some parents still do not understand the pressures schools are under, and in some circumstances made reference to the anger some parents show towards those in the profession due to their frustrations of having children at home or because they feel not enough support has been given. Although trying to work with parents holding such views is difficult, Day (2013) advocates for schools valuing parents and developing a greater understanding of their needs.

While some respondents reported an increase in the engagement of those who would not usually do so, others were clear that engagement issues were still evident for them. One respondent suggested that some parents may feel 'cut off from the school' due to the reduced day-to-day contact. Various responses noted the difficulty to engage certain families, and ranged from a resignation to the fact, to an intent to monitor engagement even more closely after lockdown. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) have shown the benefits to children of close ties between home and school, which highlights the challenge for schools to continue a proactive approach when it comes to engaging families.

The noted increase in communication, trust, and mutual understanding and appreciation experienced by the majority of those involved could lead to an increased engagement with a child's learning, not just an involvement with the school. The

closure of schools, and subsequent need for parents to be more active in supporting their child's learning at home during this period, could, as found in some settings in this study, increase the knowledge families have about their child's learning and their confidence to support it. It is clear, however, that parents require assistance in order to support their child's learning (Borup et al, 2019), and it is therefore notable that so many of the respondents provided learning support and were routinely available to provide advice. The value to all parties involved in these developments is clear and presents an opportunity to realise a silver lining to the dark cloud of Covid-19. In addition, the increased engagement with schools, where such knowledge and confidence has not been developed by parents, will enable schools to support parents to engage more often and more effectively with the learning of their child.

Conclusion

This study has shown that schools continued to make use of the same methods for contacting and developing relationships with parents during school closure that would be commonplace prior to Covid-19, though the importance of visiting homes and providing care packages may well have increased. This research also found that the majority of those school staff involved in the study believed that relationships between home and school improved in their settings during the period of enforced school closure and they felt positive that this change will continue to be realised into the future. Such challenging times have brought some school communities closer together, necessitated an increase in communications between school staff and families, and enabled a greater mutual understanding to be developed. This research suggests that schools should aim to take advantage of these positive developments to ensure that the increased engagement of parents in their children's learning continues following the return of all pupils to full time schooling. Providing parents with

suitable further guidance in regard to supporting learning, including encouraging parents to attend workshops on school grounds (when Covid allows), may aid in the further development of improved communication and understanding found in this study. This research could have gained further valuable insights by asking respondents whether attempts to connect with hard-to-reach parents were well received, whether they were more positively received during lockdown than prior to lockdown, and whether they felt these attempts to contact hard-to-reach families made a positive difference to the experience of the pupils and their family unit. Although it is understood that a balance must be struck between seeking to engage 'hard-to-reach' parents and those who are already or have been engaged (Harris and Goodall, 2008), it is these hard-to-reach families that may be particularly vulnerable in times of school closure. Further research on this topic should investigate whether the enforced school closure has seen a change in the engagement of schools with hard-to-reach parents, explore whether progress seen in this study continues over the longer term and consider whether the increase in parental involvement with schools translates into an increase in parental engagement with pupils' learning.

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