Reimagining parental engagement in special schools – a practice theoretical approach

Sara Spear[a]*, Fiona Spotswood[b], Janet Goodall[c] and Stella Warren[d]

[a]*School of Management, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, UK*
[b]*School of Management, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK*
[c]*School of Education, Swansea University, Swansea, West Glamorgan, UK*
[d]*Business and Management Department, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK*

*corresponding author

Sara Spear, sara.spear@anglia.ac.uk, ORCid ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1693-9018.

Fiona Spotswood, Fiona.spotswood@bristol.ac.uk, ORCid ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1223-2012

Janet Goodall, j.s.goodall@swansea.ac.uk, ORCid ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0172-2035

Stella Warren, stella.warren@uwe.ac.uk, ORCid ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6303-4123

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Abstract

Parental engagement is widely acknowledged to have a positive impact on children's achievement, and interventions to increase parental engagement have had some success in improving educational outcomes for children in mainstream settings. However, there has been little research on parental engagement in special schools, despite some studies indicating that the challenges of parenting children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) can negatively impact parental engagement. Understanding and supporting parental engagement in this context is therefore an important area for research and intervention, to provide the same opportunities for enhancing outcomes for children with SEND. This paper reports on research with two special schools, using theories of practice to understand parental engagement. A practice theory framing diverts from an individualist or responsibilising conceptualisation of parental engagement and instead takes practices and practice architectures as the unit of enquiry, and by implication as sites of intervention. Based on data from focus groups with 129 school staff and depth interviews with 26 parents, our analysis illustrates the opportunities and challenges for special schools in fostering a practice architecture supportive of parental engagement, and highlights the importance of effective mechanisms for interaction between actors, in order to connect the practices performed at home, with practices performed at school. This offers a wide range

of practices and connections between them as potential sites of intervention for special

schools seeking to support parental engagement and drive beneficial outcomes for children.

Key words

Parental engagement; parental involvement; practice architecture; practice theory; special

education

Introduction

Parental engagement is widely acknowledged to have a positive impact on children's

attainment and achievement in mainstream settings (Goodall and Ghent 2014; Harris and

Goodall 2008; Jeynes 2012; 2014; See and Gorard 2015; Wilder 2014). Managing and

supporting parental engagement is acknowledged to be difficult for schools (Goodall 2015;

Goodall and Montgomery 2014) but interventions to increase parental engagement have

had some success in improving educational outcomes for children in mainstream education

(Jeynes 2012; 2014; See and Gorard 2015; Sylva and Jelley 2017; Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford and

Taggart, 2008). However, there has been little research on parental engagement in special

schools, despite studies indicating that the challenges of parenting children with special

educational needs and disabilities (SEND) can negatively impact parental engagement

(Lendrum, Barlow and Humphrey 2015; Rogers et al. 2009). Children with SEND should not

be excluded from attempts to enhance their educational and social potential, therefore

understanding and supporting parental engagement in this context is an important area for

attention. The paucity of literature on parental engagement in special schools leads us to

firstly discuss understandings of parental engagement in mainstream education, before

considering parental engagement in special education (including education for children with SEND at both mainstream and special schools) and the implications of this for special schools.

Parental engagement in mainstream education

The parental engagement literature has evolved from earlier studies which referred solely to "parental involvement", for example Epstein's (1995) Framework of Six Types of Involvement includes parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with community. Parental involvement and engagement have more recently been conceptualised by Goodall and Montgomery (2014) as part of a continuum, with parental involvement with school at one end (focused on participation in school-based activities) and parental engagement with children's learning at the other end (focused on learning that takes place away from school). Parental involvement includes attending parents' evenings, meetings with teachers (Goodall 2013; 2018a), workshops, and social events (Torre and Murphy 2016; Watt 2016), volunteering in the classroom (Lewis, Kim and Bey 2011), and communication between parents and teachers (Goodall and Vorhaus 2011; Jeynes 2018). Parental engagement includes activities where parents directly engage in and support their child's learning, for example, reading together (Jeynes 2012; 2018; Watt 2016), helping with homework (Benner, Boyle and Sadler 2016; De Gaetano 2007; Jeynes 2012; Kim 2009; Piotrowska et al. 2017; Watt 2016; Wang and Sheikh-Khalil 2014), and taking children on cultural outings (Watt 2016), and to clubs, groups, and other activities (Goodall and Ghent 2014). It also encompasses a general positive attitude towards

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learning and education (Benner et al. 2016, De Gaetano 2007; Goodall 2013; 2017, Hill and Tyson 2009; Wang and Sheikh-Khalil 2014), a supportive home learning environment (Cabus and Ariës 2017; Jeynes 2018; Torre and Murphy 2016; Sylva et al. 2008, Sylva and Jelley 2017), high expectations for children's academic achievement (Wilder 2014), and encouraging children's educational and career aspirations (Benner et al. 2016; Hill and Tyson 2009; Pushor and Amendt 2018; Wang and Sheikh-Khalil 2014; Watt 2016).

Existing models classify a broad range of activities that parental involvement might include, but do not account for the way parental engagement is enmeshed in a range of activities with which it might co-evolve or compete. Although it has been previously noted that parental involvement is often an important starting point for parental engagement (Goodall 2013; 2017; Goodall and Ghent 2014; Watt 2016), this paper seeks to advance our understanding of the ways that parental engagement is connected with a range of other school and family practices. This paper therefore draws on ideas from theories of practice, which have been used for understanding complex practice interrelationships in spheres including education, sustainability, and health. In education, practice theory has helped conceptualise teaching and leadership practices in schools, in order to understand how these function alongside other interrelated and interconnected practices (Wilkinson and Kemmis 2015), and how desirable education practices can be created, sustained and reproduced (Wilkinson et al. 2013). We use theories of practice to conceptualise parental engagement as emerging from a range of connected school and family practices, enacted by a number of actors. Understanding parental engagement in this way offers new possibilities

for special schools to support parental engagement and drive beneficial outcomes for children.

Parental engagement in special education

There are differences between mainstream and special education that have implications for how parental engagement can be fostered. Mainstream education focuses on pupils' engagement in subject-specific learning, whereas in special education, schools support pupils' development in the broader areas of cognition and learning, communication and interaction, social, emotional and mental health, and sensory and physical development (Department for Education 2013). Similarly, parents of children with SEND may prioritise personal and social development over academic achievement in their child's education (Parsons, Lewis and Ellins 2009). The systems that parents of children with SEND have to contend with can constrain parental engagement, for example Ray (2003) found that these parents frequently have to deal with time-consuming bureaucracy in community, social care, and school systems, and often feel they have insufficient information to effectively care for their child. Rogers et al. (2009) found that parents of children with ADHD in mainstream schools felt less able to help their children academically, and perceived less time and energy for involvement in their children's academic lives, compared to parents of children without ADHD. Similarly, teachers across four SEND settings in the study by Blackman and Mahon (2016) believed that some parents found it difficult to cope with their child's disability and were unsure how they could assist their child. Burke (2012) notes that parent-teacher meetings about children with SEND's Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are

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designed to involve parents in their child's education, but that it can be difficult for parents to be active participants in these meetings and contribute to decision making, whilst also listening to the school's perspective and not appearing aggressive. In light of these challenges, and also given that children with SEND are at higher risk of experiencing poor outcomes in a range of areas (Department for Education 2011), encouraging parental engagement in special schools is particularly important (Lendrum et al. 2015), as a matter of social equality and justice for both children and parents.

Practice theoretical approach to parental engagement

Existing approaches to understanding and fostering parental engagement in mainstream education tend to focus on the agency of parents and barriers to their action, for example Hornby and Lafaele (2011) and Waanders, Mendez and Downer (2007) discuss parents' educational background, attitudes towards education, and self-efficacy, as factors in determining parental engagement, whilst Boag-Munroe and Evangelou (2012) refer to "hard-to-engage" families (p. 210). This has the effect of individualising parental engagement and responsibilising parents for the co-education of their children (alongside teachers), as noted by Ule, Živoder and du Bois-Reymond (2015). Other authors have called for alternative approaches, for example, Crozier and Davies (2007) propose that schools, rather than parents, can be hard to reach, and Pushor and Amendt (2018) argue that schools should look inwards to explain perceived low levels of parental engagement. Lewis et al. (2011) explore how teachers' classroom practices could encourage parental engagement in mainstream education, and in special education, Burke (2012) notes that barriers to family-school partnerships can come from within the school, including teachers

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not understanding their students' SEND, teachers using jargon that parents do not understand, and power imbalances in parent-teacher meetings. Although an important advancement, there is still some degree of responsibilisation in Lewis et al. (2011) and Burke (2012)'s accounts, albeit focused on teachers rather than parents. The Toolkit for Parental Engagement project (Goodall 2018a) has made significant steps away from an individualising approach, by seeking to embed parental engagement processes into school 'culture', and found that schools saw the greatest benefits from parental engagement work when "they were no longer treating it as 'a project' but had absorbed it into their everyday working practices" (Goodall 2018a p. 234). Taking this lead, we draw on theories of practice to further unravel the conceptualisation of school 'practices', and the potential of fostering parental engagement through an approach which decentres individuals and foregrounds the practices which make up the everyday life of the school, parents, and children.

Practice theories are a family of approaches to understanding the social and cultural world that center on the notion of practices - ways of saying, doing, and relating (Kemmis et al. 2013) that are performed as routinised activities (Reckwitz 2002). Practice theories offer a way to avoid the emphasis on individual choices and actions, which can lead to a discourse of blame and deficiency. The theory of practice architectures, for example, foregrounds the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements which enable or constrain the emergence of particular practices (Wilkinson 2020). Practices are often interrelated or clustered together (Reckwitz 2002) - for example, they may be in harmony or conflict with one another (Schatzki et al. 2002; Meier, Warde and Holmes 2017), in that they

can either support and afford the enactment of related practices, or compete for practitioner time and energy (Southerton 2012).

Practice theories have been useful for explaining the interrelated socio-material, temporal, and spatial factors that underpin certain patterns of activity in institutions and communities, including schools (e.g. Spotswood et al. 2020). Practice theories explain institutions as configurations of practices connected in spatiotemporal networks (Schatzki 2002) – for example schools are configurations of practices and are connected to families and local communities, which have their own configurations of practices. The focus on practices rather than individual choice has set the scene for a number of streams of educational practice theory research, including exploring English education practices (Edwards-Groves and Grootenboer 2015), SEND practices in preschools (Bahdanovich Hanssen 2019), and school leadership practices (Salo, Nylund and Stjernstrøm 2015; Spillane, Halverson and Diamond 2004; Wilkinson 2020; Wilkinson et al. 2013; Wilkinson and Kemmis 2015). The temporal and routinised nature of schools, where activities happen in recognizable ways (Wilkinson 2020), and at certain times throughout the days, weeks, and terms, makes practice theories particularly well suited to bringing insight into school life.

Practice theories emphasise the practice configurations that frame the everyday way that people do things, providing a novel starting point for thinking about intervention (Spotswood et al. 2017). As such, practice theories have been used to unravel the complexities of consumption in the context of health, sustainability and other social issues, with a view to reframing the way interventions are managed (Maller 2015) – for example,

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studies on alcohol consumption (Ally et al. 2016; Meier et al. 2017; Supski, Lindsay and Tanner 2017), smoking (Blue et al. 2016), exercising (Blue 2017) and pro-environmental behaviour (Hargreaves 2011), have each worked through the implications of practice theory for intervention.

In order to reimagine school-based interventions to foster parental engagement in special schools, we explore the practice architectures that hold parenting and school practices in place (Wilkinson 2020). Practice architectures are the conditions that make practices possible, and they shape the way practices flow and unfold in each practice landscape (Kemmis 2019). The practice architectures on which we focus come about from the way a range of school and family practices interrelate and co-evolve in the special school context. These enmeshed practices prefigure parental engagement, guide its course and make its enactment practices possible (Kemmis, Mctaggart and Nixon 2014). Our practice theory framing sets an agenda for special school-based interventions designed to foster parental engagement by advancing from responsibilising assumptions about teachers' or parents' choices, and rather acknowledging the multiple factors constituent in the practices from which parental engagement might emerge, and the entanglement between school and parenting practices. This framing also situates the configuration of practices as the sites of intervention and opens the question as to how special schools can shape their everyday practices to support the emergence of strong parental engagement. The focus of this paper is therefore two-fold; to understand how special school practices can connect with parental engagement practices, and to explore the ways in which special school practices successfully and unsuccessfully trigger parental engagement practices.

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Materials and methods

The study was developed in conjunction with a multi-academy trust (MAT) in the South West of England with which the first author had a prior connection. The research was undertaken with two special schools in the MAT, which we have given the pseudonyms of Oakland and Ashwood. Oakland catered for around 120 pupils aged 2-19 with severe, profound, and multiple learning difficulties (SPMLD), and Ashwood catered for around 130 pupils aged 7-16 with complex learning difficulties (CLD). Oakland was rated 'Outstanding' in the most recent Ofsted[1] inspection and Ashwood was rated 'Good'. Qualitative data was collected in two stages during January to April 2019, the first stage involving school staff and the second involving parents. A qualitative approach, based on group discussions and depth interviewing, was appropriate due to the lack of research on parental engagement in special schools, and to interrogate school and parenting practices. Although there are well-documented methodological obstacles with using talk-based methodologies for researching practices (e.g. Bissell 2010; Halkier and Jensen 2011; Halkier, Katz-Gerro and Martens 2011; Hitchings 2012; Macpherson et al. 2010), there is also a growing recognition of the importance of discursive interaction in the constitution of practice (Keller and Halkier 2014; Warde 2005), and exploring participant discursive reflection about their own engagement with practices has been identified as a valuable methodological approach (Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont 2003). Institutional ethical approval for the study was obtained, and all

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[1] Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, the UK body that inspects schools.

participants were provided with information sheets and signed consent forms prior to data collection taking place. Participants were guaranteed anonymity for themselves and any individuals referred to during the data collection.

In embarking on our field work, we felt it was necessary to revise our terminology when introducing the project to families and schools, and referred to 'family-school engagement' rather than 'parental engagement' in our invitations to potential participants, and on information sheets. 'Parental' engagement is commonly understood in the literature as the engagement of any adult who has a caring responsibility for a child, (Goodall 2017), but the term 'parents' is usually taken to imply the child's mother/father in practice. Referring to 'families' ensured that the research was inclusive for the multiple people who may have caring responsibility for a child, and engage with a child's learning, for example, grandparents, other family members, carers, or foster parents (Goodall 2013; 2017; 2018a; Goodall and Ghent 2014). We also wanted to capture our interest in the role of schools in fostering parental engagement, so referring to 'family-school engagement' helped to gain the interest and participation of school staff in the research, and for parents to understand our focus on the connections between home and school. Within the focus groups and interviews however, we introduced the term 'parental engagement', asking participants' views on what this meant to them, and then explaining how this was currently conceptualised in the academic literature, to ensure consistency in participants' understanding of our interest in this area.

In stage one of the study, the first and fourth authors conducted focus groups at each school, held during a school inset day, and in after school sessions. All school staff were invited to the focus groups, as we wanted to make the research as inclusive as possible within the schools, and staff self-selected to participate. We held 17 focus groups of up to 10 staff in each, with a total of 129 participants. This represented over 80% of staff in the schools, and a breakdown of participants is presented in Table 1.

[Table 1 around here].

The range of participants reflects the staff base at each school. At Oakland, participants included teachers, as well as teaching, support, and care assistants, whereas participants at Ashwood were predominantly teachers and teaching assistants. Oakland caters for children with greater SEND, in both number and severity, than Ashwood, and many children also have medical conditions. The children at Oakland therefore require support for their personal and medical, as well as learning, needs, and so the school has a more varied staff base compared to Ashwood. We deemed it important to include staff in these roles in the focus groups, as they all have potential connections with parents. The focus groups aimed to explore staff understandings about the configuration of practices from which parental engagement emerges, and how these are situated within a wider configuration of school practices, to make up the practice architecture for parental engagement. The researchers used a moderator's guide to lead the focus group discussions around these topics, which was developed based on the parental engagement literature and the researchers' experiences in conducting interventions in schools, guided by a practice theoretical

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framework (see Spotswood et al., 2020). Audio recording of the focus groups was not possible, so data consists of the researchers' notes from the observations of depth discussion, and participants' notes of the discussions written at the time. Data was entered into NVivo 12 to facilitate thematic analysis.

For stage two of the study, the schools sent all parents a letter, email, and text message inviting them to participate in an interview with a researcher to share their views on family-school engagement, alongisde the study information and sign up details. Information sheets with sign up slips were also used to recruit parents at school events. Using this range of recruitment methods facilitated inclusion of as wide a range of parents as possible. All parents who provided their details in response to the invitations were contacted by the researchers, and a total of twenty interviews were carried out. Fourteen interviews had one participant (all female), and six had two participants (all husband and wife). A summary of the interview participants is presented in Table 2. Face to face interviews were the most appropriate method of data collection given the range of different, and sensitive, family histories each family had experienced, to enable the interviewer to build a rapport with participants, and broach questions about the family's everyday routines and how parents got involved with their child's learning. All the interviews were carried out by the first author, following an interview guide, and lasted an average of 50 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and transcripts again uploaded into NVivo 12.

[Table 2 around here]

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We used thematic analysis (Braun and Clark 2006) to analyse the focus group and interview data, using social practice theory as a lens to sensitise the data. Data coding was carried out inductively by the first and second authors in two stages, guided by the research aims. Firstly, data was coded for school practices and parental engagement practices. Secondly, data was coded for connections between these practices and the successful and unsuccessful ways in which school practices could foster parental engagement practices. The two authors coding the data met regularly to discuss and agree the themes identified from the coding process. The results are presented below, illustrated with data from the focus groups with staff and interviews with parents. In presenting quotes from parents, we have noted which school their child attended, to give a sense of their child's SEND (with children attending Oakland having SPMLD and children attending Ashwood having CLD), and their employment status (to facilitate discussion of parental engagement in relation to family and work commitments).

Results

Parental engagement was made possible by a number of practices enacted by parents, which were interconnected in different ways with school-based practices. We explored the ways in which this interconnection fostered parental engagement and how parental engagement might be constrained. To organise the findings and more easily tease out their implications, we will discuss these below in terms of the four groups of school-based practices that we identified in the data; formal meetings, school events, one to one communication, and homework.

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Formal meetings

Formal meetings included parents' evenings and review meetings for children's IEPs and in some cases Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Parents' evenings are embedded into the collective cultural convention of schooling (Hargreaves 2011; Southerton 2012) in both mainstream and special education, whereas IEP and EHCP meetings are only held for children with SEND. Parents' evenings were held at the school on a termly basis, and their regular and anticipated occurrence and sequencing with most parents' work schedules (with the majority of parents working during the day), facilitated attendance and, as such, parental involvement. Parents' evenings could also trigger parental engagement by providing parents with ideas for supporting their child's learning at home, as this parent noted:

> Nina (Ashwood, self-employed, part-time) **"**when we went in on the last parents evening, [teacher] had said we're going to start talking about money and I said ok well he's got a till at home, do you want me to start doing sort of shopping with him…and [teacher] did give me some pointers on doing role playing in the shop".

Parents evenings also enabled parents to share what they were doing at home, as explained by this parent, "I do catch up with them in meetings and I've said this is what we're trying to do at home, particularly like cooking and personal skills" (Clarissa, Ashwood, employed, part-time). This interaction creates a sense of collaboration in the child's learning and opportunities for shared insight into the child's school and home life, providing connections or 'glue' (Vihalemm et al. 2015) between practices which form the practice architecture

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supporting parental engagement. Parents' evenings therefore fostered a connection between learning activities at school and home by creating opportunities for interaction, collaboration, and mutual learning.

Barriers to parental engagement

Parents' evenings and other meetings were not always successful at triggering parental engagement through interaction around shared experiences though. Sometimes parents and staff had conflicting expectations about the child's schooling, particularly where the child had complex behavioural and medical issues:

> Jackie (Oakland, homemaker) "his first teacher was quite problematic, I think just because she wasn't very accommodating. [Child] has a carer with him and he has a lot of equipment with him and he has a lot of health issues".

These charged emotional experiences, associated with the practices of parenting children with SEND, changed the interactions and the nature of the parents' evening discussions (Molander and Hartmann 2018). Burke (2012) notes that emotionally charged conversations between parents and teachers are common in special education, where the nature of the childrens' SEND mean that parents may be accustomed to receiving more negative than positive information about their child's behaviour and progress. The mainstream education literature acknowledges that parents' evenings and meetings can be sites which involve the negotiation of power relationships and dynamics (MacLure and Walker 2000), and this can be heightened in the context of special education, for example Burke (2012, p. 203) argues that "decision making at IEP meetings seems to be dominated by school personnel (…)

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parents are frequently reduced to listening roles". Parents also felt the quality of their conversations was compromised by the amount of time allotted for meetings. As this parent explains, they felt this was insufficient for parents to gain real insight into what their child was doing in school:

> Susan (Ashwood, employed, part-time) "I did say to them at parents' evening what topic are you doing…we're really keen to support this at home but without knowing what they're doing we have no idea where to start…a fifteen minute parents' evening isn't enough".

School staff also noted that parents' evening could be improved if there was more time available, "parents' evening could become more interactive, beyond just what the child is learning" (Staff group 1, Oakland). The time allocation for discussions at parents' evening is a convention of these meetings, but acts as a barrier to parental engagement where parents are approaching the practice with sets of requirements which the time allocations can not satisfy, and with experienced and anticipated adverse emotions.

School events

Parents and teachers described a whole host of school events designed to encourage parental involvement, including assemblies, concerts, plays, sports days, coffee mornings, and fairs. Many events were temporally located in line with seasons and cultural celebrations, such as harvest festivals and nativity. There are collective conventions (Hargreaves 2011; Southerton 2012) around school events in both mainstream and special schools, where parenting a school age child brings with it sets of expectations about

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attending culturally normative events, and schools similarly expect to hold and invite parents to events on an annual basis. Nonetheless, attendance can prove problematic when events compete with parents' other practices, such as work or other caring responsibilities. Parents explained that when the school publicized events with plenty of notice, parents could then sequence these with their work schedules:

> Susan (Ashwood, employed, part-time) "this year…[the headteacher] did a school calendar, so we knew for the whole year when the events were going to be and that was brilliant so they were all in my diary and I could book work around things".

The combination of anticipated attendance and the school's effective communication combined to facilitate considerable parental involvement with school events.

Events also provided opportunities for parents to interact face to face with each other and with school staff, creating more 'glue' between home and school, and between parents' and school practices (Barbour et al. 2018; Goodall 2018b; Sylva, Jelley and Goodall 2018). This was particularly important for making parents feel connected to the school community, as most pupils were bussed to school on the local authority transport, so parents did not have the opportunity to network with other parents and teachers during pick ups and drop offs, which Nockolds (2016) emphasises as important for parents to be "part of and know their child's world". As one parent explained, "you get to mix after as well, not only with the other parents but with members of staff" (Natalie, Oakland, employed, part-time), and school staff also noted this, "…chance to socialise and to get to know other parents…parents get to know staff" (staff group 4, Ashwood).

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interactions between parents and teachers at events triggered parental engagement by providing opportunities for informal discussions about the child's learning and for parents to ask questions about helping with learning at home:

> Susan (Ashwood, employed, part-time) "I asked (teacher) what could we be doing and he said well you get him to practice his writing because he needs more help with that, so he copies his key words when he does his reading, we get him to do birthday cards and things like that".

Interactions between parents at events could also trigger parental engagement practices by leading to opportunities for children to learn, socialize, and develop friendships outside school. For example, some parents had set up class social media groups, using Facebook or WhatsApp, which they used to send out birthday invitations and arrange play dates, often from meeting each other at welcome events when their children first started at the school. Others had set up groups which met for social events and outings:

> Nina (Oakland, self-employed, part-time) "we put together a group…we did fund raising and we've got this group every Monday now from six months until secondary school…so [child] was doing that once a week and that was really, really helping him".

Parents noted the difficulties faced by children with SEND in socialising with peers and forming friendships, so facilitating social occasions via connections with other parents was an important parental engagement activity to support children's social development. Parents also explained how groups would share tips on navigating the complexities of education, social, and health care systems and on gaining support and funding for the
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children: "there's a level of communication on that Facebook group which is really helpful that we don't get from school" (Susan, Oakland, employed, part-time). More knowledgeable parents passed information down to those who were less experienced, recruiting them to the practices of parenting a child with SEND and helping them move through their careers as parent practitioners (Maciel and Wallendorf 2016).

Practice architectures which create the conditions for parents to feel supported are particularly important in the special school context given the struggles that parents often have to get their child a place in a school. The recent history for parents in this study included years of complex liaisons with local authorities, schools, and health and social care professionals. Parents reported feeling stressed and disheartened before their children even started their school journey. One described the experience as "a stressful battle to get them into a place…it takes its toll on the whole family…" and went on to explain that "I thought 'I'm giving myself a break'. I'm not even going to think about what he's doing next for at least a couple of years, because that was so horrible" (Yvette, Ashwood, homemaker).

Difficult funding applications and anxieties over limited provision are therefore an important context when considering parental engagement in the special school context. These challenges may be traced back to the meta-practices that shape practice architectures (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008), often at some distance. For example, mainstream educational policies "influence the conditions for educational practice" (Kemmis et al. 2009, p.9), forming an 'Education Complex', including interconnected practices of leading, teaching, professional learning, student learning, and researching, that underpin mass education systems (Wilkinson 2020). These meta-level practices for a special school context

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will also include applying for funding and arranging healthcare. This broader Education

Complex will interrelate with parenting practices as well as having a significant impact on

the way that staff perceive and relate to parents (Gillies 2005, Goodall 2019), particularly in

terms of whether training has been prioritized in relation to engaging parents in learning

(Mutton, Burn and Thompson 2018). Events fostering informal and supportive social ties

between parents are a crucial way to create positive associations between parents and

school, and infuse school-family practices with positive emotion and purpose (Molander and

Hartman 2018).

At the other end of a child's school career, parents with children preparing to leave were

often anxious about their child's future:

> Clarissa (Ashwood, employed, part-time) "we still don't know his placement for post-
> 16 so that's really difficult…the council I think feel that living at college is cheaper,
> three days a week, so we're in this sort of battle".

This parent is acknowledging the meta-practices that condition their everyday family life,

and ultimately their child's future. Policies, power, and inequality in the dynamics of

practice are never very far from sight and it is important not to sideline them (Wilkinson

2020). Against this backdrop, parents reflected on the importance of careers evenings,

where parents were able to meet staff from colleges and careers services. These events

provided opportunities for parents to learn about and explore possible options for the next

stage of their child's life, and could trigger parental engagement activities, as this parent

notes: "I'm going to look at a college next Wednesday and [child] will come with me" (Belinda, Oakland, full-time foster carer).

Barriers to parental engagement

Parents reflected on the difficulties in attending school events however, for example, fixed work schedules and other childcare responsibilities could colonise evenings and compete with event attendance. This was particularly the case for events scheduled for weekdays: "they do put on events like coffee mornings and stuff like that but the problem is it's usually during the day…when you've got kids at home and you can't go anywhere" (Paul, Oakland, homemaker). Parents also reflected that last minute notice of events or changes to dates could make them impossible to attend:

> Sally (Oakland, employed, part-time) "when they've got their Christmas performance or their harvest festival, we might know one or two weeks before when it's going to be, and that's so difficult for parents to attend as they can't rearrange their work or whatever they've got booked in… the harvest festival was changed at the last minute and that was annoying".

The incommensurability between practice architectures involving parenting, working, and childcare practices with school-based practice architectures illuminates the complex inter-relationships and competition between bundles and complexes of practices. Attending school events is clearly important for creating the conditions for parental engagement, but does require negotiation and navigation with other practice ecosystems which parents'

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everyday activities are drawn from, including employment and household management practices (Meier et al. 2017).

School staff explained how events could compete with their everyday teaching and behaviour management practices. Although they acknowledged the importance of regular events to engage with parents, they were also felt that events interrupted school routines which were important for learning and behavior management, requiring staff to "come out of class to organise and run the events" (staff group 9, Oakland) and could "make the staff's days very difficult" (staff group 7, Ashwood). Here, it is important to acknowledge the children's practices which intersect with those of teachers. Children in a SEND setting may exhibit behaviours that requires teachers to engage in skilled behaviour management practices. Events competing for teachers' attention can therefore create challenges, particularly when teachers had to "manage [pupil's] behaviour in front of parents" (staff group 4, Oakland). Staff also explained that events were a "lot of hard work for staff" (staff group 1, Ashwood), and could intrude on their home life, requiring them to "give up our own time" (staff group 5, Ashwood), if preparation for and the event itself took place outside their usual working hours. Events that were difficult for staff to engage with were less likely to gain their support, and a lack of volunteers to organise and run events were noted in both schools: "one member of staff organises the events, it's too much work" (staff group 1, Ashwood). This was then compounded by "disillusionment if no-one turns up" (staff group 2, Oakland), where some events had seen low attendance by parents. A view from staff of school events as 'add ons' to their 'real jobs', rather than an integral part of

learning and teaching, creates a barrier to using events to foster the conditions for parental engagement.

One-to-one communication

One-to-one-communication practices between school staff and parents were fostered via channels including home-school diaries, school apps, telephone, and email. The completion of home-school diaries was a well-established practice in both schools, whereas the use of apps had only been introduced in the past year and was just starting to become more widely adopted by parents and staff. Teachers described writing in the diary or posting pictures on the app on a regular basis, as a way to "communicate the day to parents who aren't at the school gates" (staff group 7, Oakland). Both parents and school staff described how these communications could foster parental involvement by keeping parents informed about what their child was doing in school: "I rely on the home school diary to tell me what he's done in the day because [child] does tend to forget" (Belinda, Oakland, full-time foster carer), " [home-school diaries are a] lifeline for parents to know what their child has done, due to difficulties in communication" (staff group 4, Oakland).

This could then trigger parental engagement by providing a focal point for conversations between parents and children about their learning:

> Hannah (Ashwood, employed, full-time) "[The app is] absolutely brilliant, having those pictures of what they're up to…when we discuss her day and whatnot, if she's not very talkative then you've got the photos or you know well you've been up to this today…you've got that prompt".

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This was particularly important in the special school context, as parents explained that the limited communication skills of many of the children meant they often relied on the school for information and insight about their child's day. This could then trigger their own ideas for outings and activities at home: "last term they were learning about Egypt and stuff so…we'll go to the museum because there's mummies and things there" (Mark, Oakland, retired). This supported the interrelationship between school and home, creating a mechanism for linking teaching, parenting, and childrens' practices, and holding the practices together in the practice architecture.

Furthermore, regular communication from teachers encouraged parents to write in the diary as well, or to send messages through the app, fostering a relationship between parents and teachers: "I will write notes in (the home school diary) and say 'what can I do with regards this?', and they'll answer back and give me responses and give me advice" (Nina, Ashwood, self-employed, part-time). The written communication mechanisms fostered a collaborative effort to overcome challenges and concerns. One parent explained how the diary interactions helped her manage her child's behaviour:

> Donna (Oakland, employed, part-time) "His teacher has started to write in the book a lot, for example…he absolutely loves swimming but the last couple of times he's struggled going…she asked us to prepare him over night that that was going to be happening".

Parents also used the diaries and apps to inform teachers of the range of activities they undertook with their children, which supported children's development and learning in

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ways that would not necessarily have been recognised as parental engagement. One parent explained, for example; "we'll take him around shops … he'll take things to the counter and we encourage him to pay for it" (Donna, Oakland, employed, part-time). Using the communication mechanisms to feed reflections about these activities back to the school could then prompt collaborative learning between teachers and parents about the best ways to encourage the child's learning:

> Nina (Ashwood, self-employed, part-time) "they'll ask me about things that we've done and they'll say maybe you could do this, like this week they've given him a teddy bear with some paper where he's got to write some stories about when we go to the shops".

The diary and apps therefore create a dynamic mechanism which links teaching, learning, and parenting practices, enabling the practice architecture to include multiple practitioners in different sites and foster parental engagement through collaboration.

Barriers to parental engagement

However, as with school events, teachers reflected that the practices of writing in the diary and posting on the app could compete for time with their other classroom activities, and one group queried "is it meaningful or a waste of time?" and saw that it could be a "distraction from leading the class" (staff group 2, Oakland). This again illustrates that some members of school staff were not seeing parents' engagement with learning as an integral part of their teaching and learning activities, but rather as an additional, and sometimes burdensome, task. In some cases, this competition resulted in irregular communication and

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perfunctory messages from teachers through the diary, which created a barrier to parental engagement:

> Jolene (Ashwood, homemaker) "if I write in there, they'll just tick it, they don't write anything…I get they've got a load of kids, they can't do essays for each one when they're leaving for home, but when I've asked a specific question I get really frustrated".

Some parents reflected that they avoided writing in the diary or using the apps, and did not read them for messages from the teacher, which undermines their potential as a mechanism for fostering the conditions for parental engagement.

Homework

There is a collective cultural understanding that homework is an integral school practice in mainstream education, and some parents of children in the special schools shared this expectation. This was also sometimes infused with emotion, when parents enjoyed engaging in their child's homework, as in the case of this parent:

> Anita (Oakland, homemaker) "I wasn't aware that he could read certain words at all, so they've now started sending home just the very basic reading books and that's really lovely for me to be able to share that with him".

Furthermore, homework could successfully trigger parental engagement when it was embedded into the routines of family life:

Belinda (Oakland, full-time foster carer) "he writes in a diary when he comes home from school. So he has to write three things that happened, one that's happened in the morning, what he had for lunch and then what he had in the evening…all the rest of the kids have got to do homework so it just gives [child] a little bit of the same".

In this instance, the child's homework colonised the same timeslot as the homework practices of the parent's other children, creating a collective practice amongst the family which was anticipated and shared by all family members. The nature of the SEND child's diary homework also created the opportunity for the parent to understand more about their learning that day. This illustrates the potential role of homework in creating a point of connection for parents with their child's learning (Goodall 2020).

Barriers to parental engagement

It was apparent though that the performance of homework practices depended on individual teachers rather than being embedded into school culture. Some staff at both schools saw homework as inappropriate for their pupils due to the nature of their SEND. Parents explained that homework was often provided sporadically: "we did kind of have fits and starts of homework" (Jane, Ashwood, employed, part-time), and so it struggled to become synchronised within existing family routines (Southerton, 2012). The parental engagement literature has highlighted that schools need to act holistically in embedding parental engagement in teaching and learning policies (Goodall 2015), and so providing homework sporadically makes this less effective for encouraging parental engagement.

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Furthermore, not all parents welcomed homework: "he won't read his schoolbooks to me…I don't pursue it because I don't want to have a fight over it" (Patricia, Ashwood, retired), "we don't get a lot of homework because I have always stressed with them that [child] thinks this is down time when she comes home and it's her time" (Sandra, Oakland, employed, part-time). Homework as a potential cause of conflict in the home has been noted in the literature (Goodall 2020), and several studies in mainstream education have found that parental monitoring of or helping with homework does not have a positive impact on a child's achievement, and can indeed have a negative impact (Goodall 2020; Hill and Tyson 2009; Jeynes 2005; Wilder 2014).

For some parents, the time that would be required for undertaking homework competed with the time that the child needed to recover after their day at school, and with their behavioural, medical, and caring needs. As an example, one parent described the time that bedtime demanded:

> Anita (Oakland, homemaker) "Bedtime takes quite a long time for him…medications and things, up in the lift, up to bed, hoist him out of the bed, change him and then hoist him onto the toilet. Clean teeth, hoist him back into bed, sort him out, and I must admit although I don't work I'm normally really shattered by that time in the night".

Homework may provide further opportunities for parental engagement in some circumstances, but in the context of special schools, it can create demands on children's and

parents' time which they cannot afford, potentially infusing school-home relationships with negative associations.

Conclusion

Formal meetings, school events, one to one communication, and homework all provide opportunities for special schools to foster parental engagement, in line with research which has identified these as key activities for fostering parental engagement in mainstream education (such as Benner etal., 2016; De Gaetano 2007; Jeynes 2012; Kim 2009; Piotrowska et al. 2017; Watt 2016; Wang and Sheikh-Khalil 2014). However, the connections afforded by these practices, and how they trigger parental engagement, are in many cases different in special schools compared to in mainstream education, as proposed by Burke (2012). For example, the lack of a 'school-gate culture' means that everyday interactions between parents and school staff predominantly take place via diaries and apps, and school events have a crucial role in facilitating connections between parents, staff, and other parents.

Our analysis has illuminated how each of these groups of practices creates different types of connection between the practices performed by children and parents in the home and in their leisure time, and practices performed at school by school staff and children. The four groups of practices were able to create links between these dispersed home and school practices by providing opportunities for interaction between staff, parents, and children. Interaction is the 'glue' which holds the practices together (Vihalemm et al. 2015) and allows them to co-evolve. The interactions afforded by the four groups of practices we

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identified hold these practices together to form a practice architecture that creates the conditions in which parental engagement is possible.

Our analysis also illuminates the challenges and barriers to the formation of a practice architecture supportive of parental engagement. These are characterised by the competition between practices which seek to colonise the same time slots. In some cases, this competition is the same in special schools as in mainstream schools, for example parents unable to attend school events due to work commitments (Harris and Goodall 2008; Hornby and Lafaele 2011). We also found particular challenges for parents and teachers in special schools, for example school events competing with behaviour management practices, and parents struggling to find time for homework alongside meeting children's medical and care needs.

Implications for research and practice

This study has made two important contributions to the conceptualisation and management of parental engagement in special schools, with implications for both researchers and practitioners. Firstly the practice theory focus of our analysis has advanced the way that parental engagement is conceptualised, building on Goodall's (2018a) approach which begins to focus on school practices rather than individual actions as the site of analysis and intervention. By drawing on ideas from theories of practice, we draw attention to the ways that schools can foster a practice architecture supportive of parental engagement. Specifically, we have illuminated the wide range of practices which are important in framing and overcoming the particular challenges of fostering parental engagement in special

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schools, whilst avoiding the responsibilisation of individual school staff or parents in grappling with this problem. Secondly, we highlight the need for schools to provide mechanisms for interaction between school staff and parents, in order to hold together the dispersed practices and allow them to co-evolve productively, whilst also noting the ways that these mechanisms can fail to link practices together and fail to foster parental engagement. This offers a wide range of practices and connections between them as potential sites of intervention for special schools seeking to support parental engagement.

Finally, it is important to highlight a key limitation of our paper. Due to the focus of our research being on the practices themselves, we have not been able to interrogate the meta-practices that underpin the practice architectures we have investigated. We have only briefly been able to explain some of the parents' reflections on their experiences of finding school places for their children as illustrating the significance of funding, power, and inequality in framing their engagement with their child's learning. The wider SEND Educational Complex is therefore an important part of understanding the experiences of parents and teachers in the SEND context, and future research on this would be valuable to further understanding of the ways in which parental engagement can be supported.

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Supplementary material

1. **Moderator's guide for focus groups**
2. **Interview schedule for parent interviews**

1. **Moderator's guide for focus groups**

Introduction to the family-school engagement project
Provide study information and obtain consent. Overview of the 4 discussion areas.
1. What does parental engagement mean to you?
Discussion - how does a engaged/disengaged parent behave and what would that parent do or not do? Give the group the 'Engaged and disengaged parent' poster to write on.
Follow up to clarify what we mean by 'parental engagement' – we're thinking about parental engagement as how parents can support their child's learning outside school, as research has found that this really benefits children's development.
2. What do we do to encourage parental engagement?
Discussion - what things are 'done' by the school to encourage parental engagement, e.g. parental engagement with the school, and parental engagement with their children's learning? Give the group the 'What do we do?' poster to write on.
3. What do we get from parental engagement?
Discussion – what value comes out of parental engagement e.g. what is in it for the school, teachers, parents, and children? Give the group the 'What do we get?' poster to write on.
4. What could we do differently/more of to encourage parental engagement?
Discussion - what could be done to encourage parental engagement, and what could enable and constrain this? Give the group the 'What could we do?' poster to write on.
Wrap up
Thank staff for taking part and ask if anyone has questions.

2. **Interview schedule for parent interviews**

1. Introduction

Provide study information and obtain consent.

Warm up questions:

a) Please tell me a bit about you and your child.

Prompts if necessary: How old is your child? How long have they been at the school?

b) Tell me a bit about your home life with your child.

Talk me through a typical evening/weekend. What do you do during school holidays?

2. Engaging with parents and families

a) What does parental engagement mean to you? Where does it happen?

Follow up to clarify what we mean by 'parental engagement' – we're thinking about parental engagement as how parents can support their child's learning outside school, as research has found that this really benefits children's development.

b) What sort of things do you do outside school with your child that you think might help their learning?

c) What do other family members do with your child that might help learning?

c) Are there things that you would like to do but don't feel able to? (and why?)

d) What does the school do already that helps you support your child's learning at home?

e) What else could the school do to help you support your child's learning at home?

f) Is there anything else you'd like to comment on?

Closing

Thank parents for taking part and ask if they have any questions.