Chapter 2- Parental Engagement: Problems, Possibilities, and Pandemics

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This chapter will explore the meanings attributed to the phrase, 'parental' engagement'. It will problematise the way the concept has been constructed and applied. The chapter will also use emergent research about engagement with learning through the Covin19 pandemic in 2020: how families engaged with learning, how school staff and parents have been portrayed and understood during the Covid-19 crisis. The chapter concludes with recommendations toward change.

Parental engagement with learning

As an academic in this field, I give frequent presentations and public lectures on the topic of parental engagement and sometimes feel that I am repeating myself endlessly. I suspect I share this experience with many authors in this book. Yet, in spite of all our work, we are frequently disheartened to hear yet another announcement of policy, or speech from someone, which seems to have missed all of the research cited here (and in many other places).

The disappointment, however, is offset by the sparks of enthusiasm one sees in teachers and senior leaders when they do finally encounter the literature. More important, however, is the enthusiasm when school staff come to understand that they have a tool at hand which can support many of their most vulnerable students, those who are not well served by the current schooling system. That tool is partnership with parents, centred on learning (Goodall, 2017).

In this chapter, I will explain (briefly) what I mean by 'parental engagement with learning'. I will go on to examine some of the reasons this remarkably supportive tool is not more widely known and used, by problematising the discourses surrounding it. I will also examine of the way parents, parenting and learning at home have been portrayed and understood (and misunderstood) during the Covid-19 lockdown. All of the foregoing will allow me to discuss the need for systemic change and some of the ways forward for practice, research and policy.

Parental engagement with learning – the importance of language

There is little need to spend a great deal of time discussing the nature and value of parental engagement, as this is amply covered elsewhere in this volume. I will, however, offer a definition of parental engagement with learning, as being parents' engagement in the broad sphere of their children's learning (Goodall, 2017). This definition, however, requires further explanation of terms.

By 'parents' here, I mean any adult with a significant caring responsibility for the child or young person; for many young people, this role is shared between parents and others, with grandparents often sharing an increasing amount of child care and learning support.

There is another term in need of explanation as well, which is 'learning'. I have deliberately not used either the word, 'education' or 'schooling' here. These three ideas may be understood as concentric circles, beginning with 'learning' on the outside. Learning begins at birth and goes on through life: I hope that you are engaged in a process

of learning in reading these chapters, just as a baby in their earliest days is learning about their world. Within that large circle of learning is education, which is learning that is focused to a particular end (Hadfield, 2005), undertaken for a specific purpose (Biesta, 2012). Schooling, as the final, smaller circle entirely surrounded by the other two (at least in an ideal world), may be defined as those elements of directed learning which come under the auspices of schools.

And why we should care about it…

Quite rightly, school staff are often quite reluctant to take on anything new; their workload is known to be remarkably busy and adding to that is not an attractive option. And, for many teachers and teaching staff, 'dealing with parents' is one more thing to do, one more burden to undertake. It's understandable that good reasons have to be given for any new initiative.

Fortunately, for those of us interested in parental engagement in learning, we have the best of all possible incentives: supporting parental engagement in learning is one of the best ways of supporting students' learning and achievement. Again, the literature is clear on the benefits of parental engagement (I repeat: in learning); supporting parents to support learning can improve rates of learning performance, skills in reading and maths, and overall achievement (See Boonk et al., 2018 for a comprehensive overview of impacts).

Moreover, parental engagement in learning can be of particular support for those students who are not best served by the schooling system we have in place at the moment. Children from affluent backgrounds achieve better in our schooling systems than do their peers from disadvantaged backgrounds (von Stumm, 2017), and the gap between the two groups does not appear to be getting smaller (Chmielewski, 2019). This, I believe, is an issue of social justice and indeed, it has been pointed out that the reform of schooling may be the most important social justice issue of our times (Gibb, 2015). Children are leaving schools with outcomes which are directly related to socioeconomic status, which seems iniquitous.

Parental engagement with learning is not a panacea, and will not solve the issues in the system which lead to the gap between children from different backgrounds (Johnson, 2015). It may, however, help those children in the present, as we, collectively, work to change the system for the future. Again, there is neither the space nor the need to reiterate here the value of parental engagement, as this is adequately done elsewhere in this volume. However, there is a need to highlight the fact that although this is a potentially powerful tool for the use of every school, it would seem that practice lags far behind potential (Addi-Raccah and Ainhoren, 2009, Addi-Raccah and Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008); while schools and systems may give lip service to the need for parental engagement, the reality is often far different; it is fairly easy to enunciate a need for change but far more difficult to effect that change in practice (Ladwig, 2014).

Engagement with learning

It is also important to understand what the term, 'parental engagement with learning' does not mean, as well as what it does mean.

It does *not* mean contact with schools, coming into schools, attending parents' evenings; in short, parental engagement with learning is about precisely that, parents' relationship to the learning of their children and young people, rather than parents' interactions with the school. It is this element of parental activity which has been shown

to be the most effective form of parental work to support learning, particularly as children age (Jeynes, 2014).

The other sort of activity, centred on the school, seems to be highly prized by school staff, and is often mistaken for parental engagement with learning. However, these actions are more properly understood as parental involvement with schooling, rather than directly with learning (Goodall and Montgomery, 2013). There is little wrong with this sort of involvement and may in fact be a great deal of good in it, but it has little or no direct impact on achievement. Moreover, seeing parental involvement with schools as equivalent to parental engagement with learning can feed into an iterative cycle of deficit thinking about parents, and, as we shall see below, actually widen the gap between learners from different backgrounds. The difference between parental engagement with learning and parental interactions with schools, needs to be kept in mind.

Problematising Parental Engagement

The research – and practice, from which the research ultimately derives – it is clear that parents' engagement with the learning of their children is a powerful force to support achievement and outcomes (See, among many others: Boonk et al., 2018, Jeynes, 2012, Jeynes, 2005a, Jeynes, 2005b, Fan and Williams, 2010, Fan and Chen, 2001). This is hardly news, yet the practice of supporting parental engagement is not embedded in the schooling systems of either the US or the UK, in spite of official recommendations about its importance. Communication with parents may have improved, but even when mandated by central systems and/or laws, support for parental engagement is often found to be lacking (Johnson, 2015).

It would seem that there are three barriers to be overcome, if we wish school staff to fully support parents to support learning, and these three barriers are embedded in the system within which school staff operate. These barriers will be treated separately, but it must be understood that they operate in an iterative and reinforcing cycle and relationship.

Misunderstanding (?) of the concept of parental engagement with learning.

It would seem axiomatic that it is difficult to do something well when one does not understand what it is one is attempting to do. This would seem to be very much the case when discussing parental engagement with learning, as it is so commonly misunderstood, as we have noted above. Efforts directed toward greater communication with parents, toward getting parents into school, and 'upskilling' parents to deliver content may improve results, but these efforts are likely to do more for students who are already advantaged in the current system (Borgonovi and Montt, 2012) than to help those most in need of support.

The reason for this is simple, as these actions build on parents' willingness and ability to interact with school staff, rather than with learning. This lack of understanding of the nature of parental engagement is not surprising, when we examine the second systemic barrier.

Lack of training

It would seem that few teachers have been adequately prepared to understand the nature and value of parental engagement, much less to support it (Willemse et al., 2018, Baum and Swick, 2008). It seems that all too often, when parents and families are mentioned in initial teacher training (if they are mentioned at all), the training centres on reporting, communication (generally one-way) and 'difficult conversations' (which of course prejudges interaction with parents as problematic from the outset) (Flynn, 2007). In asking teaching staff to support parental engagement, we are asking them to do

something which is perceived as above and beyond their remit, something which they have often come to believe is difficult and unpleasant, and something for which they have not been trained. If we wish to increase support for parental engagement in learning, out of a concern for justice to our young people, we must also increase training for teachers to do this work, in justice to teaching staff themselves.

Deficit discourses

The third barrier is actually an amalgam of different aspects, all of which combine to present, and underpin, a <u>deficit discourse</u> around parents in general and specific groups of parents, in particular.

Deficit theory is pervasive; it appears not only in public discourse and policy documents but makes its way into thinking, assumptions, presumptions and impacts on the way that teaching and other staff interact with parents. Deficit discourses inform us of what to expect of others and inform our judgements about what other people do (and why).

Deficit theory begins from a point of view of making good what is missing, of supplying that which is, for some reason, lacking. Salkind holds that what operates in the field of education is a cultural deficit model; that is, members of minority groups (or non dominant groups) are disadvantaged in the current system because their backgrounds, their cultures, are different from those of the dominant group. Difference here is to be understood as problematic: the difference is a deficit (Gorski, 2016).

This places students from minority (or at least, non dominant) backgrounds in the position of needing to be fixed, of needing measures to correct the deficits in their backgrounds[1]. The families and cultures of the students are framed as being inadequate to the work of supporting learning, and in need of input from 'professionals' and those more knowledgeable. (Even the language of 'professionals and parents' sets up a clear divide and power structure between school staff and families (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011) and also makes an unfounded assumption that there are not professionals within the population of parents).

The deficit discourse, of course, extends beyond education and into the wider reaches of society. Gorski pints out that, on a societal level, the discourse of deficit allows us to absolve not only the system but ourselves (as members of that system, who benefit from it) from blame for poverty and its impact. Gorski (2008) holds that the societal concept of deficit relies on two factors: the persistent use (and embedding) of stereotypes, and the tendency to ignore the systemic issues which may be at the root of inequality and poverty. This allows us (as members of an iniquitous society) to absolve ourselves, as the poor (and, by extension, all those suffering from injustice) are somehow to blame for their situation: they are morally, physically or otherwise deficient, or different from 'the norm'. (It will not be lost on the reader that, in the light of deficit theory, there is a linguistic link between the concepts of 'difference' and 'deviance', and between the concept of a 'poor' parent (one who is impoverished) and a 'poor parent' (who does not look after their children as well as one might hope).

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[1] It is worth noting that often in the literature, one will read of supplying social and cultural capital to families who lack these. In reality, of course, families do not lack social and cultural capital per se: what is lacking is social and cultural capital *that is valued by the current system.*

When considering parental engagement, the deficit discourse moves from students to families, and indeed to entire generations. Embedded within the deficit discourse is the concept of a culture of poverty (Ladson-Billings, 2017), which holds that families from working class backgrounds do not value education, and have low educational aspirations for their children and young people. The same absolving mechanism is at play, removing blame from a system which does not provide equal opportunities for all children and instead placing the blame on parents and families (Dahlstedt and Fejes, 2014).

This is a comfortable discourse, because it does three things simultaneously. In the first instance, it informs those who are not a risk that we are not at fault, it assures us that our success in the system is down to our own merit and hard work (based on the concept of meritocracy (Gillies, 2005, Goldthorpe, 2003, McNamee, 2014)) – after all, if the system itself offers everyone the same opportunities, then those who succeed must do so because of their own merit. And finally, it allows us, with the best of intentions, to ameliorate the issue, because it has a simple solution. The problem, under this deficit conception, is clearly located in the behaviour of parents: if we fix that behaviour, through parent training courses, parent education, etc., then the problem will go away.

This view, however, is a very superficial assessment of a deep seated, entrenched set of societal issues, as seen in the educational gaps between children from different backgrounds. Educationalists have been saying for decades that 'Education cannot compensate for society" (Bernstein, 1970) or at least cannot do so to any great extent (Gorard, 2010). We cannot absolve society by the simple expedient of training parents about how to do maths with their children.

The reach of the deficit discourse is pervasive. Studies have shown that school staff, who tend to come from middle class backgrounds themselves, may hold preconceived views of parents in poverty, expecting parents from lower SES bands to struggle with language, be unengaged with learning and not to value education (Johnson, 2015, Berkowitz et al., 2017). Research has also shown that teachers may undervalue, ignore or simply not recognise the ways parents are already engaged in their children's learning (Hamlin and Flessa, 2018). This creates a self fulfilling prophecy: teachers hold assumptions that parents from particular groups will not become engaged in learning, and thus parents in these groups are not encouraged to become involved.

Further, the discourse allows us to hold families in general and parents in particular, responsible for the educational outcomes of their children (La Placa and Corlyon, 2016, Romagnoli and Wall, 2012, Saltmarsh and McPherson, 2019), again displacing responsibility away from society (that is, all of us) onto particular groups. This is comforting but it not effective (Hartas, 2011, Hartas, 2015)

To those who have… The Matthew effect and parental engagement
Like many other entities, societies tend toward self-perpetuation, and in particular, those in power in a given society tend to work to ensure that they stay in power, and pass that power down to their children. Merton (Merton, 1968) suggested that the Biblical verse, 'For whoever has will be given more' (Gospel of Matthew, 25:29) explained this concept well. Although Merton was describing citations among scientific papers, the term has been expanded and now is used in relation to societies, and may be simply expressed as 'the rich tend to get richer and the potent more powerful' (Perc, 2014, 1).

We can see how the Matthew effect relates to the relationship between school staff and parents. Parents whose social and cultural capital align to those of school staff will find it easier to interact with staff, and often easier to visit the school and to act in direct

support of their children (Crozier et al., 2011), and will thus be judged (by misaligned understandings of 'parental engagement') to be engaged, involved, 'good' parents. Parents whose backgrounds do not align with those of school staff, however, or with what is expected by schools, do not have this ease of access. The Matthew effect works as an iterative process: school staff hold deficit views of marginalised parents, which leads to lower expectations of and judgemental attitudes toward those parents, and often a lack of acknowledgement of the work that these parents are already doing at home to support learning.

This process plays out as a Matthew effect at the student level, as well. Children and young people who are already advantaged in the current system, by coming from families who possess the social and cultural capital expected by the schooling system, are able to derive greater benefit from interactions between their parents and school staff. Borgonovi and Montt have warned that many projects to support parental engagement may work in precisely this manner, by giving greater advantage to those who already benefit from the system, and indeed, could work to widen the gap between different groups of students (Borgonovi and Montt, 2012). Figure one shows how the issues raised in this chapter interact.
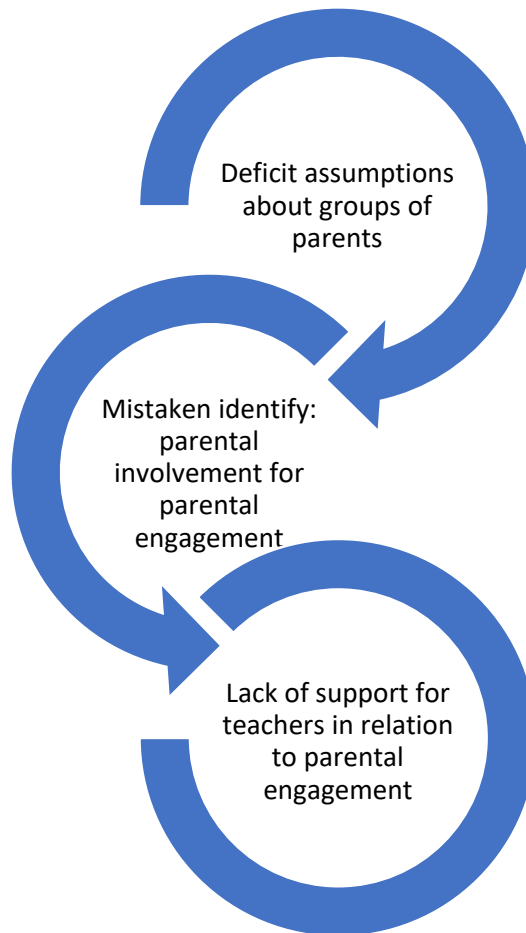
Deficit assumptions about groups of parents

Mistaken identify: parental involvement for parental engagement

Lack of support for teachers in relation to parental engagement

Figure 1 The Matthew Effect in relation to parental engagement

In light of this understanding of the workings of this effect, it would be well here to note Ladson-Billings' reformulation of the concept of the 'achievement gap' between children from different backgrounds. Ladson-Billings has suggested that instead of a gap

arising between different children (which locates the issues to be addressed within individuals), we should be using the term. 'educational debt', which rightly locates the problem within the system, rather than the child (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This way of understanding the difference in achievement between children from disparate backgrounds also firmly places the need for actions with those who have not fulfilled the debt owed to those children, that is, with all of us.

The impact of Covid-19

In March of 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, children and young people around the world were affected by the closure of their physical places of learning; the changes to learning caused the physical closure (or reduction of delivery) in schools in 188 countries and impacted the learning of over 1.7 billion children around the world (Home, 2020). Learning for most students (and teaching for most teachers) moved into the home, supported by either online resources (live (synchronous) or recorded (asynchronous) or physical materials (workbooks etc) from their teachers – or a combination of both. Teachers, young people and parents had to move to online or other distanced means of learning support overnight.

Schooling in the pandemic

By September of 2020, after at least five months of lockdown, 98% of teachers in a survey (of almost 3000 total respondents) in the UK said that their students were behind where they would have expected them to be the end of the previous school year, and over half of the respondents felt that the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students had been widened by the experience of lockdown Teachers in schools in the most deprived areas of the country were more three times more likely to say that their pupils were four or more months behind where they might have been expected to be (Sharp et al., 2020).

Interestingly, many teachers blamed the lack of progress for their students not only on the experiences of lockdown and remote learning but also on the 'quality of pedagogy when schools reopened' (pg. 5); teachers said that the strictures imposed for safety, such as social distancing and the need to wear masks, has impacted negatively on their ability to teach effectively; 74% of teachers reported that they had not been able to teach to their usual standard (Sharp et al., 2020). Further, staff absences coupled with the fact that many teachers are themselves parents and were having to juggle provision of teaching with caring for their own children (and supporting their learning) meant that overall, school leaders reported that they had only 75% of their usual teaching capacity available (Walker et al., 2020). Interestingly, almost 3/4s of teachers in this survey (72%) said that they spent up to five hours each week communicating with parents (Sharp et al., 2020).

Parents in the pandemic

As with school staff, the research on parents' activities during lockdown is only starting to emerge and firm conclusions will not be possible for some time; however, there are indications from a number of sources of how parents have acted – and adapted – through the various cycles of lockdown in 2020 and 2021.

The organisation Parentkind has conducted a series of surveys in the UK. Perhaps the most significant finding from their third survey is the 53% of respondents felt very engaged with their children's learning, and 35% felt quite engaged – meaning that 88% of all parent respondents felt very or quite engaged with their children's learning. This would seem to be a remarkably hopeful finding, since 53% of the respondents felt more

engaged with their children's learning than before lockdown began (and only 10% felt that their engagement had diminished over the period of lockdown) (Parentkind, 2020b).

In a different study, Eivers et al reported – in direct contradiction to the assumptions which arise from a deficit model of parenting, parents and parental engagement – that parents from households with the lowest incomes spent the most time supporting their children with schoolwork. The authors go on to point out that, again, in the face of what one might expect (if informed by deficit models and the culture of poverty discourse), that levels of parental engagement were 'largely unrelated' to the amount of time that parents spent supporting learning in the home during lockdown (Eivers et al., 2020).

Problematizing the pandemic discourses

That the lockdown presented problems for parents, school staff and young people is undisputed; concerns continue to be expressed about the mental health of students (Singh et al., 2020) and teaching staff (Aperribai et al., 2020); parents have had to juggle working from home with child care and supporting learning (including parents who are themselves professional teachers); many families are facing reduced incomes or loss of income due to changes in the economy. In problematising the discourses around the changes to learning arising from the pandemic, I do not wish to ignore or diminish these concerns. However, I do wish to examine the discourse in light of the effects mentioned above, particularly in relation discourses of poverty and assumptions about parents, and to highlight the systemic issues at play[2].

In spite of data which show that overall, many parents are satisfied with the support they have received from schools (67% of parents in one survey said schools were doing a good job managing during COVID-19 (Eivers et al., 2020) and 7 out of 10 parents in a different survey said that their child was receiving some or all of the support needed to catch up any lost learning (Parentkind, 2020a)), almost from the outset, there has been a persistent negative discourse centred around the 'loss of learning' experienced by children and young people during the lockdown.

The dominant discourse around schooling in the pandemic lockdown has been one of loss: lost learning, lost time, the need to 'make up for' what has been lost, and to 'catch up to'… something, although this goal is often not clearly specified; from context, it generally appears that the standards by which this loss is judged are arbitrary goals – ideas of what young people should be able to do or know by set times, either through general understandings or standardised testing regimes. Various groups have spent a great deal of effort in estimating the extent of this learning loss, even to computing the loss of earnings to be endured by the learning deficits of the pandemic. It is, however, worth noting that the OECD, having an overview of the situation across the world, has stated that it is not yet possible to know the impact on of the pandemic on learning (Home, 2020)

Overall, emergent literature has generally been pessimistic about the impact of lockdown on learning. These are, of course, all estimates, based on previous closures such as those due to teacher strikes (Eyles et al., 2020), which result in ill effects for students, especially in the realm of mathematics. Interestingly, the same author goes onto point out that a planned reduction in instructional time in West Germany in the 1960s had no long

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[2] Those issues must also be acknowledged in the disproportionate impact of the disease itself on members on members of marginalised communities KIRBY, T. 2020. Evidence mounts on the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on ethnic minorities. *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine,* 8**,** 547-548.

term ill effects in terms of employment or earnings. The explanation given is that this reduction was planned and supported.

The lockdown certainly wasn't planned in the same way, but one could make an argument that this situation is actually much closer to the changes in West Germany than it is to the effects of strikes (by teachers in Canada or students in Chile). Almost by definition, teachers were not working in the way ways to support learning during a strike as they have been doing over the period of the lockdown, which means it is difficult to extrapolate one to the other.

Other literature compares hours spent in home based and school based learning, and finds that many students are spending substantially less time engaged in learning activities during lockdown than they would have done at school (Andrew et al., 2020a, Andrew et al., 2020b). This again, however, could be seen as a problematic comparison, as there is no accepted assumption that the two are equivalent.

It may also be useful to note that China and Hong Kong, having experienced wide spread closures in 2003 due to SARS, were perhaps more prepared than other schooling systems who were experiencing their first major lockdown in a technologically enhanced age. From the outset, the Chinese Ministry of Education severed the conceptual link between attendance at physical school and learning, entitling their directive to elementary and middle schools as 'School's out, but class's on'. Within this document, it was made clear that there should not be an assumption that remote learning should duplicate the 'classroom teaching methods, duration and teaching arrangements' (pg. 503) of in-person classes, and sought to ban teachers being required to provide live lessons and refuted attempts to make children 'clock in' to online sites (Zhou et al., 2020).

In the UK and the US, public discourse around learning in the pandemic seems to emerge almost entirely from the assumption of an unbreakable connection between learning on the one hand, and the physical classroom on the other. This is perhaps best exemplified by the refrain which is a constant of both the general press and research, of the 'closure of schools'.

Like many who work in this field, I have visited hundreds of schools and spoken to thousands of schools staff. And in almost every institution, I have been assured in one way or another, that 'the school' is the people, not the building. Yet what closed in March of 2020 were the physical school buildings (and to be absolutely accurate, many of the buildings never completely closed, as they were used to provide on-site schooling for particular groups of children (Department of Education, 2021)). The collective efforts of those who were employed to (usually) work in those buildings continued apace.

It would be foolish to argue that teaching and learning continued without interruption as the processes changed to due lockdown, but it is also at least as foolish to assumed that they stopped altogether. Schools did not close, and teaching and learning did not stop. The form they took changed, perhaps radically, but they did continue.

And it is worth considering just how teaching and learning continued. Overnight, school staff went from being providers of education – the 'sage on the stage' (Morrison, 2014) to being partners in the provision of learning. Particularly for younger students, there was an expectation that parents would be involved in learning, even engaged with it. Although it has always been the case that students tend to do better when their learning is supported at home, the need for teachers to work in partnership with parents has never been either more needed or more clearly demonstrated.

This is particularly the case if we consider that a model of partnership between parents and school staff is centred on the learning, not just of students but of everyone involved, staff and parents as well as young people (Goodall, 2017). Teachers were learning how to use online resources and tools; parents were learning how to use these and how to support the learning of their children as the same time.

Yet here, again, we must note systemic issues impacting the learning of children from less advantaged backgrounds (Bayrakdar and Guveli, 2020). Children from less affluent homes are less likely to have electronic devices to access learning and may not have stable internet access with which to connect to such opportunities (Reay, 2020). Students may also be sharing devices with siblings or parents attempting to work from home; studies are emerging that chronicle differences in the time children from different backgrounds are able to spend on learning activities during the lockdown (Andrew et al., 2020a, Andrew et al., 2020b).

The need for systemic change

Although this chapter hopes to be – with the others in this work – a clarion call for the importance of supporting parents' engagement with learning, it should be obvious that simplistic, quick fix, light touch approaches will not go far enough to address the issues raised here. This is not a matter of a new 'interventions for parents', nor is the onus on parents (alone) to solve the issues raised here.

Hutchinson et al point out that without systemic change, that is, upheaval on a system wide level, we will not make a significant change to the gap between our most and least advantaged learners (Hutchinson et al., 2020). Reay calls for a 'revolution in the national psyche' (Reay, 2020, 319). While Reay is speaking here of the English system, their words are much more widely applicable. I stated at the outset that my main interest in parental engagement is one of social justice, of supporting the achievement of the children and young people least well served by the current system. To put it simply, the status quo will not do, not if we wish to support all of our learners.

On a societal level, we must work against and constantly challenge the concepts of meritocracy and the use of deficit discourses and theory. These are deeply embedded in policy and practice, and will not be easy to shift, requiring us to look within and without our own practice. I offer a list of questions to begin this process, as a starter…

- Am I perpetuating these discourses in my own work? In what I write, and what I say and do?
- How does a deficit discourse operate in my classroom, in my relationships with students, families and colleagues?
- Do I perpetuate the message that all one needs to do to overcome adversity is determination and strength of will? (the danger of such a message during a global pandemic, with its personal – bereavement, illness, long term impacts- and financial - job loss, reduction of income- should be obvious).

On a no less personal but more wide ranging scale, there is change which must be undertaken at a systemic level, which is easy to say and extremely difficult to put into practice (Ladwig, 2014). Yet all systems are, in the end, made up of individuals. Change to our own practices is always the first step in systemic change

Changes to teacher training and development

In relation to teaching staff, change must be effected throughout the career course. Perhaps the most pressing aspect of this will be the introduction of the nature and value of

the engagement of parents in learning as an essential element of teacher training and certification programmes. As seen above, many teachers begin their careers with little or no knowledge of this subject. The gap is unfair to teachers (who are expected to do something for which they are not trained), to families as teachers are unprepared to offer support or even understand what support might be needed, and to students who miss out on a vital element of their learning process. This change in initial teacher training must be matched by ongoing training for serving members of school staff. In this way, staff will be able to understand the benefits of supporting parental engagement; research has shown that understanding the benefits of an action can lead to changes in teacher practice (Guskey, 2002).

Beyond this, training and support for teachers must challenge the pervasive discourses they encounter in other areas of policy and practice. If we wish teachers to work in ways which are contrary to these discourses, to the benefit of all students, then teachers must have the chance (and space) to encounter, discuss and understand not only the discourses themselves but how they are embedded and played out in policy and practice.

Moving forward

Parental engagement with learning is not a panacea; it will not solve the systemic issues which impact on the achievement of children and young people, nor should it be approached as if it could do so. Those issues require our attention in their own right.

However, there are macro and micro level issues at play here. The societal issues: racial inequality, gendered pay gaps, marginalisation of and discrimination against particular groups – are all macro level issues which require macro level policy solutions. These issues do not, however, deny the existence and importance of the micro level issues. That is, the academic journey and achievement of individual students. We need not choose between these. But we also must not neglect one for the other (or expect micro level solutions to solve societal level problems).

We must support today's students (with interventions such as those mentioned in other chapters of this book) while *at the same time* doing the work needed to confront deficit discourses and open the way for ever more positive partnership with all parents.

I would like to end on a hopeful note. Throughout the last year, we have all experienced rapid and continuing changes to teaching and learning, on a global level. The pandemic has proven yet again that teachers are dedicated professionals, able and willing to adapt and change practices are quired by changes in circumstances. Teachers are, by nature and professional practice, agents of change; every time we step into a classroom (virtual or physical) we have clear ideas about the changes we wish to see as a result of our efforts and those of our students; that's what a lesson plan and learning objectives are for, after all. If we can clearly demonstrate, in preservice and ongoing training for teachers, the value *to students' learning* of partnership with parents, we can be hopeful about the creation of those partnerships (and their impacts on student learning.

None of us are the same as we were a year ago, and nor should we be. We need not – we must not – 'return to normal'. Too much has been lost, but also, *too much has been learned*. We must seize the opportunities arising from what we have learned and experienced and move toward a new, and away from the old' normal'. The old status quote failed far too many of our students, and we must take this opportunity for change.

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