

## Article

# Parent Involvement Through a Practice Theory Lens

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## Abstract

This paper suggests the use of practice theory as a lens for considering the interactions between parents (or those acting as the main support for children) and school staff. Practice theory, arising from separate strains of philosophy, was first used to look at parental engagement by Spear et al. in relation to children in designated special schools. In this paper, we expand on their previous work, widening the application of practice theory to interactions between all parents and school staff. This paper examines the concepts of parental involvement and engagement, and of practice theory itself. It highlights the importance of school culture related to the interactions between school staff and parents, and then concentrates on the two main themes arising from practice theory: actions create society, and those actions then create the architectures in which actions take place. This highlights the possibilities of change. The final section of this paper sets out the parameters schools can use to scaffold these processes of change, suggesting that the two groups (parents and staff) be considered instead as members of one group, ‘adults supporting learning’.

**Keywords:** parent involvement; practice theory; school culture

## 1. Introduction—Parent Involvement and Engagement

Parent involvement, for all its prominent place in policy and (in some forms at least) in practice, remains undertheorized in many aspects (Bailey, 2011; Goldberg et al., 2017; Goodall, 2019; Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Jones & Palikara, 2023a). This is not surprising when one considers the dynamic and complex nature of the phenomenon, taking into account, as it does, the relationships between individuals (parents, young people, school staff, and the wider community), between individuals and institutions<sup>1</sup> (all of the individuals mentioned above and the school as an entity, which is itself nested within the wider institution of a schooling system), and all of these as parts of, and therefore influenced by, (and in turn influencing) society (Chao, 1994; Goodall, 2023, in press). All of the above may now also need to be reconsidered in light of the prevalence of digital means of communication (Jones & Palikara, 2023a).

In this paper, we concentrate on the interactions and practices that take place between school staff and parents, which may cover both the concepts of ‘parent engagement’ and ‘parent involvement’ as used in a well-known framework (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). Parent engagement relates to parents’ engagement directly with the learning of their children, while parent involvement describes the relationships between parents and school staff, related to that learning (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). It is true that the term ‘parent involvement’ has been rightly critiqued in the literature, as it is often used to denote a school led and orchestrated process of bringing parents into the fold, as it were (Pushor, 2012); however, in this article, the term is used to denote interactions between parents and staff,



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rather than between parents and children/young people, while noting and understanding the intricate interplay between the two. Therefore, the term ‘parent involvement with staff’ will be used.

While parents’ engagement with learning outside of school may well be the most effective support for learning (Boonk et al., 2018; W. Jeynes, 2005a, 2010, 2012, 2015), this engagement can be supported by work (and, hopefully partnership) between school staff and parents (W. H. Jeynes, 2018); involvement with the school may be a necessary precursor for home-based engagement (Mapp et al., 2014). At the very least, it would seem necessary to both broaden and reform such interactions and practices to best support all parents to support learning in the home. Placing our focus on staff/parents interactions does not however, place the focus on the school, per se. The end point is still the support for young people’s learning, rather than support for the school itself (Mandarakas, 2014), and the creation of an effective partnership between families and school staff (W. H. Jeynes, 2018).

In this article, we do not propose to offer ‘a theory’ of parent involvement with staff. Rather, we suggest a lens through which this involvement can be re-theorized and understood in a new light. This reframing of the concepts around parent involvement with staff allows a greater understanding and foregrounding of problematic discourses which prevent effective support for these interactions, and aids in their deconstruction by both parents and practitioners, in order to have a more solid basis on which to build future practice. Or, rather, this allows all involved to recognize the essentially fluid, changing and importantly, changeable field in which this all takes place.

The literature, as well as experience in practice, has been clear for some decades about the value of parent engagement and involvement with staff (Addi-Raccah, 2024; Boonk et al., 2018; Castro et al., 2015; Centre for Disease Control, 2019; W. Jeynes, 2012, 2015, 2023; Jones & Palikara, 2023a). The benefits of parental<sup>2</sup> engagement in learning include academic achievement (Castro et al., 2015; Povey et al., 2016), emotional and social development (Fantuzzo et al., 2003) and a range of other areas are also supported (Jones & Palikara, 2023a). Metanalyses and literature reviews have shown ample evidence of the value brought about by parent engagement in and support for young people’s learning (Boonk et al., 2018; W. Jeynes, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2012, 2015, 2023).

Parent engagement and involvement in learning is a dynamic enterprise, for all that it is often treated as a static phenomenon to be captured and measured in tick box exercises (de Oliveira et al., 2019; Goodall, 2022; Hamlin & Flessa, 2018; Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Marchand et al., 2019). While earlier definitions of parent engagement could more realistically be seen as parent–school relationships (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Johnson, 2015; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006), the research at least (if not practice), has moved toward a more inclusive understanding of the phenomena. For example, the Centre for Disease Control (2019) defines parent engagement as ‘parents and school staff working together to support and improve the learning, development and health of children and adolescents’. This definition highlights the intersection between parents’ relationships with staff and their support for learning at home. Cyr et al. (2022) have noted this trend toward an understanding of parent engagement as a ‘co-constructed process’ (p. 10) brought about by the joint, mutually supportive actions of families and school staff. This presents an ideal, and perhaps idealized, vision of parent involvement with staff, and is the focus of our attention here. Partnerships between families and school staff have been found to be ‘one of the most vital ways of raising the school outcomes of children’ (W. H. Jeynes, 2018, p. 151).

In reality, it would seem that most of the enacted work in this area is different—rather than being co-constructed, it is school led (de Oliveira et al., 2019), aimed at supporting the school (Fenton et al., 2017; Li & Fischer, 2017; Rapp & Duncan, 2012) and often both

conceived of and measured by parents' physical presence in the school (Weiss et al., 2010). This form of interaction has been characterized by Weiss et al. as 'random acts of family involvement' (Weiss et al., 2010), lacking an overall vision and underpinning understandings. Such activities would seem to deny parents the agency which is an important element of their engagement with learning overall (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). While we concentrate on the relationships between staff and parents in this paper, we do this in view of supporting parental engagement with learning as a whole, rather than parents' presence in school on its own: we see parent involvement with staff as a means, rather than an end, as a part of an overall process of support for learning.

While the value of parent engagement and involvement has been clear for some years, practices seem to lag behind, continuing much the same practice which has been shown to be ineffective (for many parents) in the past, with staff often finding that few parents respond to initiatives (Gonzalez et al., 2018). The fact that theory often does not translate into practice is relatively well known (Goodall et al., 2022; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Senge, 1999); this may be particularly the case in relation to teachers' work with families (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010). This may be because theories are not holistic enough (Cooper et al., 2010), not taking into account everything needed to actually understand what is taking place; it may be because there remains a lack of shared understanding about what is being put into practice (Jones & Palikara, 2023b). As McLean et al. point out (McLean et al., 2023), merely providing people with more information is not generally enough to effect changes in behavior (Wenzel & Stjerne, 2021). This is hardly a new thought in relation to the professional development of teachers and school staff (Guskey, 2002).

There are, however, obstacles in the path of this movement, which is partially as a result of a well-documented lack of training for school staff around the issue (Goodall et al., 2022; Ingleby & Hunt, 2008; Jones et al., 2025; Mutton et al., 2018; Willemse et al., 2016), as well as a lack of clear impetus for school staff to engage with the issue (Heydon & Reilly, 2007). This remains a dominant point in many schooling systems, in spite of the longstanding acknowledgement of the value of parent engagement and involvement.

Parent involvement in schooling is messy; it does not follow set tracks and is different for every school and every family. Practice theory is particularly suited to understanding complex, emergent situations (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). In dealing with parent involvement with school staff, every encounter between parents and staff can be thought of as a new instance of the practice, constantly recreated and reconstituted, hence the lack of any universal solutions or plans of action.

To put it simply, what we are doing has not had the desired effect, so it is necessary to do something different. One element of the drive to do things differently may well be to understand what it is we are trying to do, in a different way. To this end, we propose an examination of parent involvement with staff through the lens of practice theory. Practice theory as a lens allows us to contextualize the experiences of those engaging in parent involvement experiences. This will allow us the opportunity to move away from a school-centric view of parent involvement to one that concentrates on the processes and practices involved. It will also allow us to recalibrate parent involvement efforts around learning, rather than around the school.

Building on the work of Spear et al. (2021), in this article, we suggest bringing a practice theory lens to bear on the field of parent involvement with school staff. The application of practice theory to parent involvement is a relatively new idea; Spear et al. suggested its use in relation to parent engagement in special schools; here, we expand the argument to the realm of parent involvement work in general. The use of this lens is not proposed as a panacea, but rather as a new tool for school staff and parents to use, among many others.

We will first examine practice theory itself, and then apply it as a lens to come to a different view of parent involvement with school staff. This different view, which suggests the removal of some of the dichotomies that have impeded work around parent involvement in the past, will allow us to suggest ways forward.

## 2. Introduction to Practice Theory

A practice-based approach suggests that the basic units of analysis for understanding organizational phenomena are practices, not practitioners (Nicolini, 2012, p. 7). With roots in the pragmatic approach to solving real-world problems, practice theory is rooted in the realities in which actors find themselves (Korte, 2022).

Arising from the work of theorists as diverse as Heidegger, Giddens, and Bourdieu (Gherardi, 2022), practice theory proposes a different way of understanding why human actions come about as they do. Rather than looking first to an institution (such as a school), a structure (such as a schooling system or even a society), or individuals (such as school staff or parents) as being ‘responsible’ in some way for actions (McLean et al., 2023; Nicolini, 2012), practice theory argues that such delineations are not useful in understanding how people act.

Rather, human practices are considered to arise in relation to other actions and social structures (McLean et al., 2023), and people’s relationship with those structures, structures which are, in turn, created by human interactions. Understandings of practice theory highlight the importance of ‘background knowledge’ (Gherardi, 2022; Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249). It is these relationships that enable action to take place. Practice theory, in essence, suggests that the structures around us (in terms of society, if not in terms of buildings) are in fact created by people’s ‘everyday actions’ (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 124). This immediately leads to the conclusion that such institutions are open to change, if and when the relationships and interactions of those who constitute those institutions change.

Practice theory allows us to see and understand structures and institutions, such as schools, education systems, and families, as things which result from complex interactions and relationships, with, as Nicolini points out, boundaries which are far from impenetrable or permanent (2012) (See also: Goodall, 2017).

Structures such as families, schools, and schooling systems are kept in existence by ‘recurrent performance of material activities’ (Nicolini, 2012, p. 3); that is, in existing, they cause their own continued existence. They maintain (or disrupt) the status quo. Cultures, and in our case, school cultures, are a case in point. Culture has been defined as ‘the ways of feeling, thinking, and doing, shared by a group of people that are apprehended, interpreted, produced, and reproduced over time by the members of a collective and that ascribe certain patterns of regularity and predictability’ (Serpa, 2016, p. 51). One of the valuable elements of practice theory is that it allows us to recognize that even the seemingly most durable elements of our experience, things which might be considered ‘the natural order of things’ or ‘just the way things are’ or, in terms of schools, ‘the way things are done here’, that is, the culture of the school, are actually the result of the actions and relationships of the people within them (Nicolini, 2012; see also, on the ‘grammar’ of schooling: Scanlan, 2008).

### 2.1. Schools as Reproducers of Society

The idea that schools are sites of the reproduction of society is well known (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu spoke of schools having a ‘logic of practice’, that led to the continuing reproduction of the current system in which differences among students (and, from our point of view, families) are acknowledged as existing, but the social factors which have led to those differences are not themselves acknowledged (Grenfell & James, 2003). That this has been the case in relation to parent involvement programs has been shown in the

literature for some time (Reynolds, 2010); learning support from parents from marginalized backgrounds may be overlooked or not understood by school staff (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Ho & Cherng, 2018), and teacher resistance to work with parents has been highlighted as a significant barrier to parent engagement and involvement practices (W. H. Jeynes, 2018). Those coming into teaching often hold stereotyped, deficit views of parents (Amatea et al., 2012; Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010; Jones, 2025), and standard training methods may not be enough to shift these perceptions (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010).

Practice theory holds that practices are reproductive; they are informed by previous practice, they inform future practices, and in the present, practices are enacted in view of both the past and the culture (Nicolini, 2012). This is particularly true in the work around parental involvement with staff, which, as research has noted, is often framed around the practices and expectations of white, middle-class families (Baxter & Toe, 2023; Fenton et al., 2017; Goodall, *in press*). Rather than acknowledging the factors (culture, history, ethnicity, and social economic status) between and among families, much work around parental involvement is assimilationist, in that it seeks to ‘help’ all families behave in the best ‘the best way’ which might be better noted as ‘the way that works best in the system we have now’ (Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015; Yull et al., 2014). As Bourdieu points out, this internal logic allows the perpetuation of privilege (Grenfell & James, 2003). While the stated aim of much work around parent engagement and involvement is greater equality of outcomes for all children (Jones et al., 2025), such work neglects the differences between families and may actually increase gaps by cementing privilege rather than dismantling it (OECD, 2024).

Practice theory, along with many other theories which have been applied to parent involvement and engagement (feminist theory, critical race theory, etc. (Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015)) allows us to foreground the workings of power and the relationships that the exercise, or even the perceptions of, power, create. Perhaps the most important of these is the exercise, or even the demonstration of power, (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011) as it is enacted by each of the agents involved, including the schooling system and society more widely considered. Power may be conceived as the ability to enact change (Giddens, 1984); understanding differences in power is essential to the use of the lens of practice theory.

In this paper, we align with an increasing trend in the literature which argues against such a one-size-fits all, school centered approach, and instead suggest that greater success in support for learning will be found in acknowledging and valuing what families already do to support learning, and meeting families authentically rather than holding them to imposed and inappropriate norms (Nakagawa, 2000; Reynolds, 2010; Yull et al., 2014).

The concept of practice theory has its origins in the understanding that we are not separate from the world we inhabit, but rather relate to that world in a constant series of interactions which have been characterized as entwinement (Thomson, 2010). This means, for our purposes, that parent involvement with staff exists as, and is given meaning, only as it exists in connection with (and as entwined within) all of the other relationships and transactions which take place around it, between members of staff, staff and families, and all actors within a wider society. Knowledge has a non-deniable practical component; we know what we should do and how we should do it as a part of practical activity (McCourt, 2016).

These institutions exist because of (and through) and are shaped by the actions of those within them (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). While it might be argued that these actions are undertaken freely, actions are always configured by the structural conditions within which they take place (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Our homes, families, schools, and schooling systems, then, are always in a state of becoming (and therefore, are always open to change).



This should not be surprising for anyone who has undergone any form of educational training; it immediately harks back to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of the influences around the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Practice theory extends the concept, however: the child (and parent and members of school staff) is not just *influenced* by all the concepts and relationships, but these relationships are integral in *shaping*, and indeed, constantly *creating*, the structures within which they take place.

By using the lens of practice theory, we take Bronfenbrenner's ideas a step further; it is not just that the elements of the ecology around the child influence them, but also that the actions taken by those in these fields bring the situation in which the child, their family, schools staff and to a great extent, the school, exists, into being.

Practices need to be examined holistically, not in isolation from everything that surrounds those practices (McLean et al., 2023). This means that we cannot examine practices around how parents and school staff interact without taking into account a myriad of other ideas and practices, those that constitute the entire experience of all the actors involved. Each new encounter has transformational possibilities. Parent involvement and its support are not isolated phenomena; they take place within the overall milieu and community formed by school staff and families. As such, the work around parent involvement with staff is based on and enmeshed in all of the understandings and assumptions, conscious and unconscious, which pervade such communities and on how all of those involved understand the processes involved, and their own roles.

While, almost by definition, there is a lack of agreement on one, set definition of practice theory (Schmidt, 2018), Feldman and Orlikowski suggest that there are three elements that constitute practice theory, which may be characterized as follows:

1. People's actions matter;
2. Why people do what they do?;
3. People's actions create the society that influences those actions;

We suggest that these three can be collapsed into two general elements for our purposes: in the first place, it is necessary to seek to understand why people act as they do, and in the second, that those actions in turn create the society in which those actions take place (and this society then influences those actions, in a reciprocal, and ongoing, set of interactions).

## 2.2. Understanding the Reasons for Action—Practice Architectures

This area of practice theory has deep roots in the philosophical tradition, reaching, as Feldman and Orlikowski (2011). note, as far afield as Bourdieu and Ortner, and back through to Wittgenstein and Heidegger. In fact, untangling why people act as they do has been one of the main debates in philosophy. We do not intend to attempt to settle this debate, but rather to highlight some of the influences that impinge on the actions of those adults who seek to support the learning of others. In understanding the influences on actions, we will be better able to understand and support any necessary changes in those actions.

According to practice theory, actions take place within 'architectures', which may be understood as the conditions and the situations that enable practices to take place (Kemmis & Kemmis, 2019); while these architectures do not constitute the actions of, in our case, family members and school staff, they are the conditions which surround, influence and indeed scaffold those actions. As Spear et al. (2021) pointed out, 'These enmeshed practices prefigure parent engagement, guide its course and make its enactment practices possible' (1247). Therefore, as parent involvement with school staff is about relationships between parents and members of school staff, to fully understand how these actions come about, we

need to examine the influence of (school) culture on parent involvement and those who enact and support it.

### Culture, Parent Involvement, and Practice Theory

The importance of culture (or ethos) in schools is well known (Day, 1999; De Gaetano, 2007; Eilers & Camacho, 2007; Gorski, 2016; Higgins-D'Alessandro & Sadha, 1998; MacNeil et al., 2009). Culture can be understood as the collection of assumptions which underlie action (Leonard, 2011) in a specific group or situation. That is, culture can be understood as the 'patterns of behaviors, knowledge, and beliefs acquired through socialization processes' (Mesman et al., 2016, p. 386). Culture might also be simply defined as 'what we do here', not because of clearly thought-out norms or rationales, but as a result of experience (McCourt, 2016). We can see the reciprocal dynamic underscored by the concept of practice theory: culture is created through socialization, by drawing people into a culture, but that culture is itself constituted by the actions of those within it.

School cultures, along with other concepts such as family culture, form a significant part of the architecture around parental involvement with school staff. This is true even for actions which take place outside of school, such as parental decisions to attend, or not, school-based events. These architectures also frame not only actions but attitudes (which, of course, directly influence actions). In our case, this would include the way school staff perceive and react to parents and vice versa.

### 2.3. Actions Create Society

Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) articulate this principle by saying that through the lens of practice theory, 'the social world [is] brought into being through everyday activity' (1241). One of the values of practice theory is that it highlights the fact that the situations in which we find ourselves are ones which are 'routinely made and re-made in practice, using tools, discourse and our bodies' (Nicolini, 2012, p. 2). As we have noted above, this means that these structures are not static, and cannot be so—in point of fact, they are re-created, and re-formed, by every action within and around them.

Practice theory suggests that the world, as we experience it, is a result of all the interactions taking place with and around us, what Nicolini describes as being a 'fundamentally processual' approach, meaning in essence that 'the world we live in is a result of processes' (Nicolini, 2012, p. 3). However, this does not mean that the world itself is not real, merely that we experience the world through our interactions with it. One of the important insights of practice theory is that much of what people do is unconscious, or at least unconsciously directed or motivated. This means that through this lens, we must start not with grand theories of what should be, but rather with what is. This is particularly important as there has recently been shown to be a lack of connection and coherence between policies and practices around parent involvement and engagement (Jones et al., 2025).

Practice theory highlights the embodied nature of our reality. We have learned how to behave, that is, how we are expected to behave, through interactions with others, and therefore act accordingly (Nicolini, 2012). As Nicolini points out, 'Becoming part of an existing practice thus involves learning how to act, how to speak (and what to say) but also how to feel, what to expect and what things mean' (Nicolini, 2012, p. 5). Practices create meaning within a given context. It is important to note that these practices impinge on everyone involved. As Grenfell and James note, people enter situations already primed, as it were, for what they will find and experience, even what can and cannot be thought, by their prior experience (Grenfell & James, 2003)<sup>3</sup>.

Practice theory holds that sense-making, that is, understanding of situations, interactions, and reality, arises from practices, rather than the other way around (Nicolini, 2012).

We understand how things do and can work as we experience those things. This means that, as has been noted, organizations and structures are not, in fact, monolithic; they are, in fact, constantly created and recreated, as people within them interact with each other and the structure itself.

This is both a frightening and a liberating thought. It is frightening, or may be, as it can remove a sense of stability, of knowledge of what one is likely to encounter and experience, or what one should do in any given circumstances.

On the other hand, it is liberating, in that, understood through the lens of practice theory, the phrase ‘the way we do things here’ holds much less force or sway. The way things have been done can and probably will influence what happens in the future, but it need not enforce or determine it. Practice theory is decidedly non-deterministic; practices are created anew in every instance.

#### 2.4. *The Practice Architecture of Parent Involvement with Staff*

Practice architectures are the frameworks, the scaffolds, that allow actions to take place (Kemmis & Kemmis, 2019); we would go further, particularly in relation to parent involvement with staff, and posit that these architectures allow those operating within them (through them) to conceive of what action might be possible. Moreover, as seen above, these actions actually create the architecture they inhabit.

In relation to parent involvement with staff, these frameworks will consist of a great many ideas: on a higher, abstract level, this would include what a school is, and is for, what it means to be a parent or a member of school staff (or both), or a child. In more grounded examples, these frameworks-of-the-possible will not only inform but *construct* understandings of parent involvement with staff—what it is and what might be its value. And these frameworks are, themselves, constructed by the actions, understandings, and interactions of all those involved directly and indirectly in the process, in a continuously evolving circle.

Practice theory would therefore suggest that how parents and school staff react to each other, and interact, is neither a set ‘given’ nor yet a merely random set of actions. Rather, practice theory would suggest that these relationships are impacted by the conditions, the architectures, in which they take place; every interaction is new in this sense, while still influenced by a myriad of factors; ‘they are ongoing accomplishments (re)produced and possibly transformed in every instance of action’ (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1242).

There are frameworks that impact the way parent involvement with staff is enacted, some of which are direct and obvious, such as the interactions between parents and school staff, some of which are also direct but less easily seen, such as school and home culture and ethos. Other elements of the framework which surround parent involvement with staff are less direct but perhaps even more powerful; it is worth reiterating the point that, through a practice theory lens, structures are not so much existent as constantly in a state of becoming; so the phenomena we might term parent involvement is one that is not only *enacted* but *created* in each instance.

This means that it is necessary for all actors to take account of the cultures within which the interactions take place, and, if and as necessary, to challenge and change those cultures. Research has been clear about the need for such change for some time (Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2013) but this change is unlikely to be successful if imposed by external actors (Jones et al., 2025). Change, according to a practice theory lens, is much more likely to be successful if enacted directly by those involved, by those at, as it were, the chalk face, the street-level bureaucrats who must translate policy into action (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977).



### 3. Parent Involvement with Staff Through a Practice Theory Lens

Spear et al. seek to use this framing to move on from ‘responsibilising’ discourses, which blame parents (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014) or school staff for a lack of parent engagement or a lack of support for same; building on this, we seek to suggest ways in which the practice architecture of schools and schooling systems can be reconfigured to support authentic parent involvement with school staff (in support of overall parent engagement with learning, of which involvement with staff forms a part).

Parents are only constituted as such in relation to their children and school staff, in relation to the institution of the school, yet under the auspices of parent involvement, these two sets of people also constitute groups which, as we have seen, are frequently considered in juxtaposition to one another. However, as Gherardi points out, in reality, they are constituted in these roles ‘by the same means they express themselves as actors, Gherardi (2009, p. 31). Many teachers are, in fact, parents themselves, and the experiences of supporting their own children through the home learning experiences of the pandemic may go some way toward breaking down this barrier (Jones & Palikara, 2023a).

It has been argued that parents’ engagement with learning is most effective when it is not seen as, nor yet considered, to be a ‘project’ or a series of interventions, but rather has been ‘absorbed’ into the ‘everyday working practices’ of schools (Goodall, 2018, p. 234). We take this argument a step further; not only should parent involvement with staff be absorbed into the working cultures of schools, but it should also be understood as being *created* in and by those working practices.

In fact, it could be said that taking practice theory as a means to understand parent involvement with staff frees the discussion in many ways, enabling us, and the actors involved, to consider new ways of working and being-in-relation to each other. Each new instance of a practice, such as interactions between parents and staff, is indeed that, a *new* instance of that encounter, newly constituted by actors who are agentic in the process, and who are, at the very least, subtly different from what they have been in previous encounters. Change is not only possible, but also inevitable.

#### *A Rejection of Dualities*

It was when the boundaries between school, home, and community became permeable and multidirectional that the creation of a new story of school that honors and enriches children’s lives was realized (Pushor, 2012, p. 472).

A practice theory lens brings to the study of parent involvement with staff the possibility of the rejection of dualism (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Often, practice theorists have set their sights on more esoteric oppositions, such as the distinction between the objective and the subjective (Reckwitz, 2002), and the individual and society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This distinction is particularly important for our purposes, as is Giddens’ rejection of the separation of the agent and the structures within which that agent functions (Giddens, 2004). The two are not separate, distinct entities, but rather each continually creates and recreates the other.

The overall field of parent engagement with young people’s learning is riddled with bifurcations, oppositions, and juxtapositions—home and school, family and institution, and parents and teachers. In this article, and building on previous work we use the concept of practice theory to not overcome these dichotomous groupings in relation to parents’ interactions with staff but rather to show that none of these entities whether human (parents and teachers) institutional (school and home) or conceptual (in and out of school learning) exist without the others (for example the concept of out of school learning would make no sense if there were no schools). All of these things combine to create the complex web of interactions that support (or not) young people’s learning. More than that, they act upon

each other singly and together so that the situations which are created are ever changing and evolving.

The most obvious of the dualisms in parent involvement work is the delineation between parents and school staff. There are others, as well, which also mitigate against effective support for parents: in/out of school learning, for example. As long as these concepts are seen as being in opposition—rather than a concomitant part of an overall learning process for young people—parent engagement in learning and involvement with staff will continue to be seen as peripheral to the work of schools. This ‘clear delineation’ between home and school, which has been characterized as a ‘four walls approach’, allows school staff to ‘keep parents at bay’ (Cooper et al., 2010, p. 761). What this delineation seems to ignore is the fact that young people inhabit both of these spaces (school and home) and move between them on a nearly daily basis, and learning takes place in both locations. In seeing the two as separate, we may be placing artificial barriers in the path of that learning.

This view of learning sets up a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders (Cooper et al., 2010). Such barriers are both physical (school gates, entry procedures) and ephemeral (but not less important), even down to the language used (c.f. denoting the two groups as ‘professionals’ and ‘parents’, with no allowance that many parents are, in fact, professionals, and many staff are themselves parents) (Unn-Doris Karlsen, 2010).

A less obvious but important element of this concept of separateness is the belief by many in schools that parents are not able to support learning at home, or have little interest in doing so (Cooper et al., 2010; Goodall, *in press*; Jones & Palikara, 2023a)

Much of the previous work around parent support for learning has seen the process as one which relates mainly to parents (those who are ‘hard to reach’) or to school staff (who are responsible for supporting parent engagement). While such approaches are understandable, they perpetuate, by their makeup, a division between actors which we argue here is both artificial and unhelpful. We would argue here that both parents and school staff belong to a group which might be best designated as ‘adults supporting learning’. Our suggestion for the use of a practice theory lens as applied to parent involvement with staff seeks to avoid the ‘responsibilisation’ aspect of much previous work (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014), as it rejects the idea that one group or the other is responsible for the process; rather, it is constantly recreated by all actors involved.

In considering parent engagement and involvement, some definitions have begun to synthesize the two as noted above, and thus begun the work of dismantling the binary opposition which is posited between parent involvement and parent engagement, or school and home-based (out of school) parent work (Centre for Disease Control, 2019). This move away from separate, arguably dichotomous understandings of a differentiation between parent involvement with staff and engagement at home is an important one, which can be further understood and supported by being examined through the lens of practice theory.

This moves our understanding of parent engagement closer to more recent definitions, such as that offered by Cyr et al. (2022), who understand it as being ‘co-constructed and comprising parent voice and presence’ (10). It is worth noting that by ‘presence’, the authors mean both the formal and less than formal space within which parents and school staff ‘share responsibility for children’s learning, as one group of ‘adults supporting learning’.

This sharing of responsibility moves away from a conception of these processes as something which are done to parents, and closer to an idea of working with them (Hammond & Ferlazzo, 2009; Manzon et al., 2015), and closer to the optimal idea of partnership working among all the adults involved (W. H. Jeynes, 2018).

#### 4. Practice Theory as a Lens for Moving Forward

As noted at the outset, if we wish to support all of the students in our schools, and perhaps particularly those who are currently more likely to be failed by the system, then we need to support families and parents to engage with and support young people's learning (W. H. Jeynes, 2018).

However, this is not a straightforward or easy task, nor is it a short-term solution or one that is easily instituted. Supporting effective parent involvement with staff, especially for those groups currently poorly served by the schooling system, requires a fundamental reconfiguration of the practice architecture not only of schools but of school/family relationships. And such a reconfiguration cannot be imposed from without; practice architectures are, as the very name implies, created by the practices of those within them. Moreover, as we have shown above, imposing policies (which are often unclear and incoherent) (Jones et al., 2025) on practice is unlikely to change that practice.

The tenets of practice itself mitigate against proposing a universal plan of action or set of activities to be used by schools. In fact, the tenets of practice theory make it clear that any such imposition will be uniquely understood and enacted in each instance.

Therefore, rather than suggesting a specific program or outline of activities, we suggest instead what might be considered the concomitant building blocks of an effective architecture for parental involvement, leading to support for parental engagement.

Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011) suggest that, under the auspices of practice theory, we can adopt what they term a 'practical-rationality' approach, which reverses the usual dynamic of the application of theory to practice. Rather, they suggest, we should *derive* theory *from* practice. This will go some way to eliminating the gap between the two, as instead of an imposition of an external (theory) to processes (practice), the process itself is used to create the external theory. This process is not so much about observing a phenomenon as about explaining it (and, if necessary, supporting change).

This means that there are a number of stages to enacting change. We would suggest that these stages are undertaken by school communities, that is, with parents and staff involved in taking them forward.

##### 4.1. Audit Current Practice

As in planning any journey, the first step is to establish the 'where from', the starting point. In the case of parental involvement with school staff, this would mean a clear and honest evaluation not only of the current rate of parent involvement in the processes of schooling (attendance, etc.) but a much deeper and more important audit of beliefs, understandings, culture and expectations, on the part of parents, school staff and where appropriate, young people.

It is clear from the research that parents often support learning in ways that are not known to or valued by school staff (Amatea et al., 2012; Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010); therefore, understanding what parents already do is a good starting point.

##### 4.2. Cultures Can, and Should Change

Practice theory makes clear that culture is constantly being created, as well as enacted. Changing the cultures around parent involvement with school staff will take time and authentic effort on the part of everyone involved. It will include reflective work around teacher views of parents, perhaps particularly for those new to the profession (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010). However, as many school staff are already undertaking such work in relation to classroom practice, (Boyle et al., 2020; Rubie-Davies et al., 2012), extending such work to encompass families could have a significant impact on perceptions and, therefore, relationships.

Parent involvement has often been enacted, as noted above, in a school-centric way, as each of the actors continues to behave in scripted, accepted ways of working (Pushor, 2012). Yet practice theory makes clear that those ways of working can change—but this will require a disruption to routine ways of working and a will toward change. There are examples throughout the literature of how this can come to pass, although interestingly, many of these examples have to do with teacher preparation rather than ongoing teacher development (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010; Eick & Ryan, 2014; Pushor, 2012).

#### 4.3. Focus on Learning

Learning is the focal point of the partnership between parents and school staff (Goodall, 2017; Goos & Jolly, 2004; Kambouri et al., 2022; Willemse et al., 2018) and should therefore also be at the heart of such relationships and interactions, building on what has been found about current support for learning in the audit phase.

The audit mentioned above should include policies as well as practices around parents' engagement in the schooling and learning processes of their children. Where are parents mentioned in school policies (and where are they not mentioned?).

With a focus on learning, one of the dualities listed above can be deconstructed: learning is learning, whether it takes place in or out of the home, in or out of the school.

This focus also allows the beginning of the deconstruction of another duality discussed above: that between parents and school staff. This is not to suggest that teachers are de-professionalized, or that the home and school situations should be similar. Rather, it is to acknowledge that both sets of actors *are* actors precisely because of a focus on learning: that is what they have in common, and that is the basis for any relationships and interactions between them.

Finally, through a practice theory lens and a focus on learning, the duality between parent involvement (with the school and/or with schooling) and parent engagement with learning (generally taking place outside of school) can be dismantled; the dichotomy between the two as the literature stands, suggests separate spheres and separate ways of working, when in reality, they are all parts of the same process, with the same focus.

Removing these dualities, or at least working toward their removal, along with the recognition of all involved as being members of one group (adults supporting learning), will go some way to ultimately providing the best support for young people's learning.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It should be noted that, particularly in view of the idea of practice theory as discussed in this article, 'institutions'—schools, schooling systems, universities, local authorities, etc.—exist only because they are inhabited and enacted by human agents.
- <sup>2</sup> By 'parents' we mean any adult with (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014) a significant caring responsibility for the child.
- <sup>3</sup> By 'cannot be thought' here, we speak literally. It is not that some thoughts are not allowed, but rather some thoughts are simply impossible within a person's mind, constituted as it by all of their prior experiences and knowledge. That is, it is not that one should not think of a particular place, for example, but that one simply cannot think of New York if one is not aware that New York exists.

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