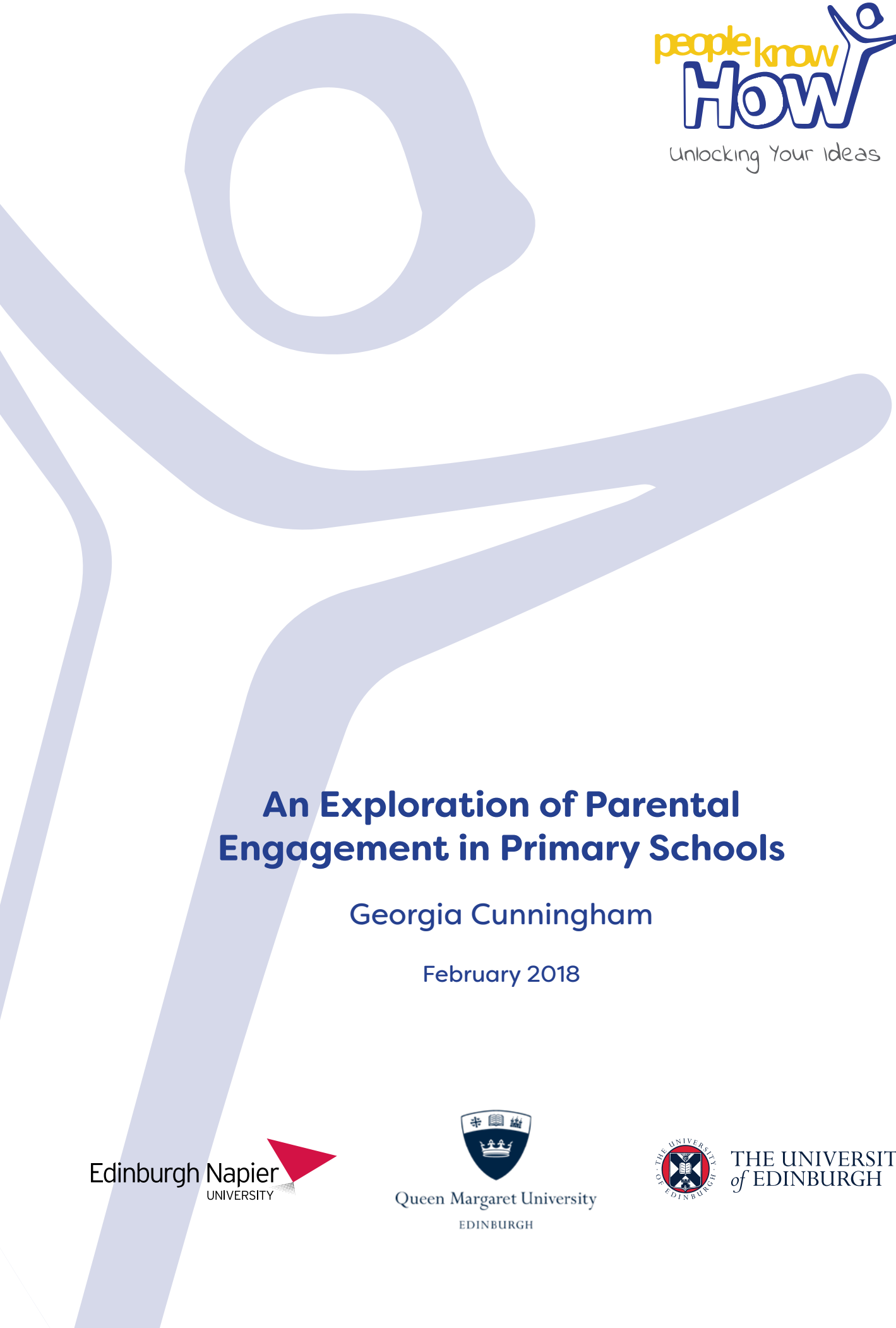

# An Exploration of Parental Engagement in Primary Schools

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## Abstract

This literature review aims to critically explore the literature on parental engagement in primary schools in the UK and Ireland, looking specifically at the barriers to engagement and how these could possibly be overcome.



## Keywords

Parental engagement, parental involvement, primary school, education, children and young people


## Key Points

- Engagement with a child's learning is the most powerful form of engagement.
- Parents see education as the key to their children being able to move beyond present circumstances.
- Barriers to engagement include; socio economic status, cultural and language issues, family circumstances and parents own experiences of schooling.
- School staff interpret 'good parental engagement' based on what they experienced themselves.
- Schools should have a knowledge of the parents and families that form the school community.
- The most effective method of communication is talking to parents at the school gates.
- 'One size fits all' approach does not work as not all parents are the same, share the same needs, barriers or understanding of engagement.

# Background

Research has shown that family engagement has a bigger influence on a pupil's achievement than socio-economic background, parents' education level, family structure and ethnicity. The Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 places a responsibility on local authorities to improve parental involvement in three ways: learning at home, home/school partnerships and parental representation.

Despite this, many schools within Scotland still struggle to get parents involved. This review will discuss the main themes within parental engagement literature: defining parental engagement and the barriers and strategies to improve engagement.

## Findings

### 1. Defining Parental Engagement

In some contexts, the terms “parental engagement” and “parental involvement” and even “parental participation” are used interchangeably whereas in other cases the terms are clearly defined, but there is no consistent definition within the literature (John-Akinola and Nic Gabhainn, 2014). Goodall and Montgomery (2013) have proposed that the term parental engagement is most appropriate. They argue that engagement requires greater commitment and ownership of action than involvement. Watt (2016) defines parental engagement as “any activity through which a parent, or other family member, is engaged directly in the learning of his or her child”, whereas parental involvement may have nothing to do with a child's learning. In addition, Goodall and Montgomery (2013) suggest that not only do the two terms have significantly different meanings, but that they actually form a continuum. They argue that parental involvement with the school is at one end and engagement in a child's learning is at the other, with parental involvement in schooling somewhere in between. However, the authors recognise the risk that comes with this 'one size fits all' approach as not all parents are the same or share the same needs, barriers or understanding of engagement. Not all schools or parents will follow the same path, therefore making comparisons can be difficult (Goodall and Montgomery, 2013). Examples of parental engagement may include reading with the child, discussing educational aspirations, helping with homework or even taking them on cultural excursions (Watt, 2016). Previous research has shown that parental engagement with a child's learning, specifically discussion, moral support and guidance, are the most powerful forms of engagement and the benefits can include enhanced literary rates, improved school attendance and homework rates, changes in behaviour and reduced family tensions (Goodall, 2015).

### 2. Barriers to parental engagement

Throughout the literature, parents, children and schools describe various barriers to parental engagement. One of the most cited barriers is socio-economic status (SES). Watt (2016) found that levels of parental engagement differ by socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and class. Although the association between socio economic status and parental engagement is not perfect, it is suggested that a lack of material resources and a negative attitude towards education, often due to a parent's own experience of schooling, are reasons why those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to be engaged in a child's learning (Watt, 2016). A study by Sime and Sheridan (2014) set out to capture the experiences of parents in an area of high social and economic deprivation in Scotland. The study found that despite parents' low levels of education they wanted the best opportunities for their children and they saw education as the key to being able to move beyond their present circumstances. They recognised that because of limited resources or educational qualifications, their ability to support their children's learning was limited. Many of the parents stated that the desire to pursue educational activities was hindered by the pressure of trying

to meet the everyday needs of their children including clothing and feeding them and supporting their general development (Sime and Sheridan, 2014). This study highlights the effect of marginalisation, but it is important to note that this small-scale study only looked at the resources and social capital available in one area in Scotland, so it is therefore difficult to generalise the findings. Sime and Sheridan (2014) also point out that parental engagement can be seen to have two strands, one that involves home-school community links and early school leaving interventions and is directed at working class parents and one strand that is directed at middle class parents and involves parent councils and fundraising activities. By targeting particular parental engagement interventions at 'hard to reach' parents, we are reinforcing the existing educational inequalities around ethnicity, class and gender (Sime and Sheridan, 2014).

The term 'hard to reach' is often used within parental engagement literature. Sime and Sheridan (2014) argue that this implies a sense of inadequacy and little opportunity for dialogue and genuine parental participation. This perception of 'hard to reach' parents focuses on a deficit model, creating a barrier for parents rather than focusing on what schools can offer to the families in order to reach them (Goodall, 2015). Goodall (2015) recognises that despite the criteria for parental engagement mentioning parents who find working with school difficult, it may be the school that is difficult to reach. Physically, the school building can be a barrier to parents who were apprehensive about schools from past experiences (Watt, 2016). Goodall and Montgomery (2014) highlight that not considering the needs of families when planning meeting times and locations can also be a significant barrier to parental engagement. This is further demonstrated by John-Akinola and Nic Gabhaain (2014) who found that 7% of parents in their study were unable to take part in school life because of work commitments.

Teachers have acknowledged that engaging parents is not always easy because of the 'barrier' between schools and parents (Watt, 2016). Watt (2016) interviewed teaching staff in five schools, following the inclusion of parental engagement in OFSTED school inspection criteria. Many held the opinion that some parents feel alienated and are therefore reluctant to engage, especially those from low SES backgrounds. Although research has shown that the majority of parents from low SES backgrounds do not have low aspirations for their children, teachers suggested that parents may experience a lack of motivation to become engaged because they place little value on education (Watt, 2016). Furthermore, teachers are likely to interpret 'good parental engagement' based on what they experienced as children themselves, which may be highly inappropriate for families within their schools (Goodall, 2015).

There is a growing body of literature that shows that ethnic minority parents are among those who find it most difficult to be involved in their children's education (Goodall, 2015). Parents involved in the study by Conteh and Kawashima (2008) stated that they see schools as monocultural, monolingual environments and therefore, the main barrier to engagement is the lack of shared social and cultural views. However,

the parents did recognise that their own lack of confidence in speaking English and about their cultural, social and educational backgrounds is a barrier that they must overcome. Research has shown that some parents are unable to take part in school life because of a language barrier, suggesting that an inability to speak or write in English may create communication issues (John-Akinola and Nic Gabhainn, 2014). This brings into question whether an inability to read or write in English may have prevented some parents from responding to this written, self-administered survey, which may therefore mean the results do not accurately represent the parent population. Evidence has shown that despite language difficulties, ethnic minority parents have the potential to help their children's learning using the languages and skills they already possess (Conteh and Kawashima, 2008). For example, for children of South Asian heritage learning does not end at the end of the school day, they are expected to learn about their heritage languages and religion in community schools, at the mosque and from their parents (Conteh and Kawashima, 2008).

John-Akinola and Nic Gabhainn (2014) found that gender played a role in the level of parental engagement, showing that the level of engagement was higher among mothers than fathers. The only explanation the researchers offer for this is that the fathers believe it is not their place to be involved in schooling. However, 72.2% of the respondents were mothers so it is likely that the findings are more representative of the views of mothers. Furthermore, this study only involved a small sample of primary schools in Northern Ireland, so it is possible that this view is not shared with the rest of the UK and therefore should not be generalised.

In recent years parenting issues have become a key area within policy intervention in the UK and government and schools have been set the task of encouraging resilience amongst families with a lower socio-economic status (Sime and Sheridan, 2014). Within Scotland, the Parental Involvement Act (2006) places a duty on Scottish Ministers and Education Authorities to promote the involvement of parents within schools. It was reviewed in 2017 to reflect the current focus of policy-makers: 'closing the gap' in educational achievement and raising aspirations with the aim of achieving positive outcomes for children, families and schools. However, due to the complex interaction of numerous variables that affect educational achievement, it is very difficult to identify the specific impact that parental engagement has (Watt, 2016). Conteh and Kawashima (2008) point out that the language used in policy documents can promote a particular way of thinking about parents, contributing to assumptions that are made about 'hard to reach' or less engaged parents. This in turn informs the way in which policy makers, schools and teachers view parents and parental engagement. For example, a number of policies refer only to “parents” whereas in many communities a wide variety of family members are engaged in a child's learning. Goodall (2015) promotes a holistic view of parental engagement, going beyond the immediate home or family to embrace the community in which the child lives. Evidence shows a clear link between the quality of the community in which the child lives and their school performance (Sime and Sheridan, 2014).

## 3. Suggestions to improve parental engagement

Previous research has implied that educational outcomes can only be influenced by direct engagement in a child's learning, but research by Watt (2016) has shown that strategies that attempt to dispel parent's negative attitudes towards education, and therefore encourage involvement and engagement, are vital when attempting to change the culture of achievement and aspirations for learning.

OFSTED criteria states that in order for effective engagement with parents to occur, the school must have a broad, holistic understanding of parental engagement and a knowledge of the parents and families who form the school community (Goodall, 2015). Despite the fact that the most effective form of parental engagement with children's learning takes place in the home, schools still have a responsibility for parental engagement within schools (Goodall, 2015). Watt (2016) carried out a study of five schools that were ranked by OFSTED as 'outstanding'. Although these schools had a high proportion of parents that were described as 'hard to reach', they had a great deal of success in getting parents involved and improving parental engagement. They identified 5 strategies that they used in an attempt to improve parental engagement; caring and firm communication, regular communication, regularly inviting parents into the school, teaching parents how to teach and educating parents to raise aspirations (Watt, 2016). However, it is impossible to measure the individual impact that each of these strategies has on parental engagement or educational outcomes, meaning evaluation can be subjective.

In order to overcome the physical barrier of the school building schools can create an 'open door policy', by regularly inviting parents to events and activities at school and making them feel welcome and comfortable. Once parents are in the school the aim is to teach them how they could better teach their children at home, sometimes done through social events and other times through formal workshops (Watt, 2016). Providing educational opportunities for parents is thought to increase a parent's personal aspirations, which in turn increases their aspirations for their children (Watt, 2016). Although, evidence has shown that low expectations for their children is not a characteristic of lower SES groups (Sime and Sheridan, 2014). Sime and Sheridan (2014) describe one example of an educational opportunity for parents; a parenting programme designed to give parents ideas for how they could better manage their children's behaviour and support their learning. Furthermore, John-Akinola and Nic Gabhainn (2014) suggest that parents should be invited to support teachers within the classroom and schools could provide further information to parents on how to better engage with homework. However, to ensure the applicability of these findings it would be useful to investigate the views of teachers and school management (John-Akinola and Nic Gabhainn, 2014).

Parents are described as 'prime educators', as children spend more time at home than at school, so it is vital that parents and teachers communicate with each other and work as a team (Watt, 2016). Keeping parents informed facilitates a dialogue between parents and teachers and can include letters, text messages, learning logs and parent teacher evenings. However, the most

effective method was talking to parents at the school gates at the beginning and end of the school day (Watt, 2016). This was previously identified by John-Akinola and Nic Gabhainn (2014) who found that parents wanted an 'open door system'. However, as only 9.4% of respondents suggested actions that could be taken to improve parental participation it is difficult to generalise these findings to the wider parent population. Furthermore, teachers have acknowledged that the language and tone they used to communicate is important to overcome social barriers. In particular, avoiding jargon and talking in a way that parents can understand but without being patronising or intimidating and also being firm about certain things, such as parents evening attendance (Watt, 2016). Sime and Sheridan (2014) found that parents appreciated positive relationships with school staff as this helped them to access support and information about how to engage with their children's learning experiences. Parents also commented that they felt valued whenever they were consulted and given credit for small successes, as this helped them to realise that they had the ability to make a difference in their child's education (Sime and Sheridan, 2014).

Sime and Sheridan (2014) suggest that family and educational policy needs to tackle social disadvantage by addressing the achievement gap among children from deprived backgrounds. They go on to suggest that policy makers need to recognise the power relationships and structural inequalities that prevent parents from getting involved, otherwise some parents will continue to be seen as unwilling and unable to engage in their children's learning (Sime and Sheridan, 2014). The evidence suggests that while engagement is more influential than involvement, often schools can use the latter to facilitate the former (Watt, 2016). As suggested by Goodall and Montgomery (2014), parental involvement to engagement is a continuum and schools may find themselves at different points of the continuum depending on the activity or parental cohort.

## Limitations

Due to time constraints, the literature chosen included only that which had taken place in the UK and Ireland, between 2003 and 2017, and that involved primary schools. The only databases that yielded productive searches were educational databases, which meant that a large proportion of the literature was written by the same author. It is important to note that other research has taken place outside the UK and with other ages ranges, this research may have provided a wider perspective of parental engagement.

## Conclusion

The aim of this literature review was to critically explore the literature on parental engagement in primary schools in the UK and Ireland. The literature has shown that there is no standardised definition of parental engagement, nor is there any standardised practice for 'good' parental engagement. Numerous barriers have been identified including; socio-economic status, cultural and language issues, family circumstances and parents' own experiences of schooling. There is the general assumption that white

middle class parents demonstrate better parental engagement than working class or ethnic minority parents, which shows the influence of class, ethnicity and gender within the discourse of parental engagement and reinforces the idea of 'hard to reach' parents. It has become clear that the 'one size fits all' approach does not work within parental engagement as no parental cohort is the same. Research has suggested some initiatives to improve parental engagement such as improving communication, educating parents, improving parent/staff relationships, changing policies around parental engagement and generally dispelling negative beliefs and attitudes.

In conclusion, although there have been some examples of attempts to break down barriers and improve parental engagement, more work needs to be done to dispel the negative beliefs of parents, schools and policy makers.

## Conclusion

There is a growing need to dispel the negative attitudes that parents, teachers and policy makers hold about parental engagement. Family education policy needs be reviewed, as often language used can contribute to the negative views that are held around education and parental engagement.

Although there are suggestions made about how to improve parental engagement within schools, there is no way to measure the impact of these strategies. Therefore, more research into the evaluation of parental engagement interventions is required.

The majority of literature around parental engagement looks at the impact of parental engagement on a child's academic achievement, more research into the overall benefits for a child would prove useful when demonstrating the importance of parental engagement.

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