

**Engaging parents in children's literacy:
an investigation into the *Impact in
Writing* programme as a strategy for
parental engagement**

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Suzanne Sarjeant

Abstract

This thesis investigates the literacy programme, *Impact in Writing*. The study's focus is on the effectiveness of the programme as a parental engagement initiative and whether it improves children's writing skills. Drawing on an action research approach, the study utilised a two-phase mixed methods explanatory design frame. The first phase used quantitative data which assessed children's progress in writing; the second phase was qualitative, using focus groups with parents and school staff to understand how this programme worked as an engagement strategy. Using convenience sampling, three schools participated in the study, with 90 children and 11 parents / family members and 8 school staff providing data. The findings of this study suggest that adopting the *Impact in Writing* programme can result in improvement in children's literacy. However, the levels of success differed between the participating schools and indicate that for parental engagement strategies to be successful and have the maximum impact, schools must have certain structures and attitudes in place. These findings challenge deficit models of parenting and illustrate that the majority of parents want to be engaged with their children's learning if the requisite structures and support are in place. However, the findings indicate that the practice around parental engagement is inconsistent and lacks a cohesive approach and that it is those schools who adopt specific parental engagement strategies that are successful. The main recommendation from this study is that the *Impact in Writing* programme should be considered as an effective literacy intervention and as a catalyst for developing parental engagement.

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List of Abbreviations

Acronym	Term
BECTA	British Educational Communications and Technology Agency
BERA	British Educational Research Association
DCFS	Department of Children and Family Services
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DfE	Department for Education
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
EEF	Education Endowment Foundation
EPPE	Effective Provision of Pre-School Education
EPRA	Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement
FEO	Family Engagement Officer
FSM	In Receipt of Free School Meals
eFSM	Eligible for Free School Meals
nFSM	Not Eligible for Free School Meals
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
JRF	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
NAEL	National Academy for Educational Leadership
NCDS	National Child Development Study
NCSL	National College for Teaching and Leadership
NFER	National Foundation For Educational Research
NLT	National Literacy Trust
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OWCS	Oxford Writing Criterion Scale
PDG	Pupil Development Grant
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PTA	Parent-Teacher Association
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
SPOKES	Supporting Parents on Kids Education in Schools

Table 1: Abbreviations

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This study arose out of a life-long interest in education and the role that families can play in that. I have been fortunate to work in many schools, in different sectors and areas, where I have had the opportunity to get ideas, learn from others and shape my thinking. Over the years I have worked with many inspirational colleagues, wonderful children and supportive families. This study is dedicated to them all.

Chapter One: Introduction and Rationale

The Seventeen Year Itch

Throughout my 27-year teaching career, I have always had a keen interest in helping and working with the parents of the children within my care. As a newly qualified teacher, starting in London, I particularly enjoyed the beginning and end of the day when I had the opportunity to speak to the parents and carers as they collected their children. I enjoyed sharing the things that their children had done throughout the day, giving them an insight into their children's development in school. As a teacher specialising and working within the early years, I felt honoured that the parents trusted me with their child's education and I worked hard to create a partnership with them. I found it easy to develop purposeful relationships with parents - an aspect that some colleagues seemed to struggle with – and I valued deeply this part of my role as a teacher. However, although I enjoyed this aspect of my role, I had no concept that the building of these relationships constituted an element of parental engagement, what this was or what benefits it could bring; I did it because it felt like the right thing to do. My formal understanding of parental engagement did not come until almost ten years later in 2003, when I attended a seminar on family learning delivered by Professor Charles Desforges. I had been sent by my then headteacher (as often is the way) with little prior knowledge of what I was about to hear and little understanding of the impact that it was ultimately going to have on my pedagogy or my vision for leadership – nor that it would ultimately lead to me undertaking this study and producing this thesis.

Listening to Professor Desforges talking so passionately about parental engagement ignited a spark in me, thus marking the beginning of my own journey and a deep-rooted desire to seek more information about the research, evidence and practice of parental engagement. This seventeen-year journey has resulted in me seeking out best practice in both the UK and overseas, with educational trips to New York and Ottawa allowing me to explore best practice internationally. It has involved me reading extensive research around the subject and developing parental and community engagement so that it is central to my current school's practice, ethos and pedagogy.

When I attended Professor Desforges' seminar, I was a deputy headteacher working in an Infant school in Enfield. The school was in an area of high deprivation and served a culturally diverse area with a high percentage of pupils for whom English was an additional language. As a school, we encouraged links with parents and family members and ran various family learning groups in order to develop closer home/school links. I was responsible for delivering SHARE family learning, which was an approach to developing parental involvement promoted by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), by running joint activity sessions attended by both parents and children. I had enjoyed delivering the programme and saw first-hand some of the potential benefits of developing closer links with parents. In addition, as my teaching background and predominant experience was in early years teaching, specifically teaching children between the ages of 3 and 6, I was aware of the importance of working with parents. This was promoted by the statutory curriculum at the time, where parents were acknowledged to be children's first and most enduring educators (Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, DfEE/QCA 2000). Therefore, making a partnership with parents and carers was deemed to be essential for successful early years practice.

However, what I did not understand at the time was the extent to which parental engagement affected children's attainment and therefore how fundamental it was to wider school improvement and pupil success beyond early years practice. The research that Professor Desforges (2003) presented on that day ignited my interest in parental engagement and has provided the foundation for everything that I have subsequently achieved in this area. I have heard Professor Desforges say on numerous occasions that if a child is not doing well academically, then as much focus needs to be given to the parents as the school. This is not to say that schools are not important, but rather illustrates and highlights the importance of the role that parents have and their ability to make a difference to their children. As a senior leader first listening to this message, I felt a sense of enlightenment from having a deeper understanding of the wider factors which influence children's development. Rather than feeling a sense of resignation borne out of the fact that schools have a limited impact, I felt encouraged by the proposition of working with parents and families and being able to make a difference by adopting parental engagement strategies.

There is a universal desire for schools to be as successful as they can and for children to fulfil their potential. There is an ever-increasing demand to improve standards, raise the bar and build on performance indicators. However, from listening to Professor Desforges, I realised that one of the most important elements necessary for improving the attainment levels of pupils sat with the parents and not with the school. From when a child is born, they are interacting with and learning from their parents and should continue to do so; parents are fundamental to their children's learning (Goodall, 2015). A common misconception has been to think that learning can only happen in school, but of course learning is not only confined to what is accessed in school. Studies have shown that the time children spend in school is relatively limited. Valerie and Foss-Swanson (2012) suggested that between birth and eighteen only 11% of a child's time is spent in formal education in school, highlighting the critical importance of parental engagement and the wider concept of children's learning.

I understood that my focus as a school leader had to be on developing parental engagement with the school and with their children's learning and a key part of this was to ensure parents fully understood the important role they had, in order to ensure that they were able to maximise the positive impact they could have on their child's learning.

When I became a headteacher in 2012, I was in the position of being able to implement and act upon my vision for parental engagement and develop it within my primary school setting. Never one to reinvent the wheel, I contacted Professor Desforges to ask him where, in his considered view, I should go to see examples of the best parental engagement strategies and practice in operation at that time. I wanted to find out more about how I could develop parental engagement in my own setting and was keen to see a range of strategies in action, working in schools and settings like my own. He suggested that I visit Bradford, so I made links with a representative from the local authority and visited two primary schools to observe their practice. Working alongside these schools, as well as liaising with local authority officers, was hugely inspiring and gave me a clear idea of what could be achieved. I returned to Wales thoroughly motivated and began to implement my vision.

The first thing I did in my own school was to appoint a Family Engagement Officer (FEO). What I had witnessed in Bradford was that the parents particularly valued having a 'go-to'

person who they trusted and recognised. Allocating a designated role showed that the school was taking parental engagement seriously; that it was worthy of a stand-alone position as opposed to simply being an 'add-on' to an already stretched teaching workforce. The FEO at my school was required to support and interact with parents and family members, giving them support as required and develop a programme of strategies that would support the parents' engagement with the school and with their children's learning. I wanted the FEO to be seen by the parents as approachable, more 'one of them', who could bridge the gap between home and family life and school-based practice and education. The role was initially part-time but quickly snowballed into being a full-time position and had an immediate positive impact on the school. The FEO began to co-ordinate and organise family learning programmes as promoted by the local authority, such as Language and Play and Number and Play, along with building relationships with parents through informal support such as coffee mornings and drop-in sessions. As a school, the benefits of promoting parental engagement started to become apparent. Standards began to rise, as measured by the end of the key phase and stage teacher attainment data, attendance improved, and the school's general categorisation (Welsh Government, 2017b) changed from an amber category to green in consecutive years. I was keen to ensure that parents were feeding into the strategies being adopted and that these strategies were aligned to parental need. I regularly undertook questionnaires to gather information from parents and sought regular feedback from them. The more the school promoted parental involvement and engagement the happier the parents seemed to be.

As confidence in parental engagement grew, I began to ask more specific questions about what was working in my school, how it was working and why it was working. I devised my own family engagement programmes tailored to meet the needs of the parents and pupils in my own setting. I ensured that I had a way of evaluating all the programmes I ran and began sharing my practice on parental engagement, with a view to influencing the wider education system and developing greater parental engagement across schools.

However, although I regularly evaluated the practice within my own school, much of the evidence I had to draw upon was anecdotal. When speaking to other headteachers and local authority officers, I found that some schools had differing ideas of what 'engagement' involved and that the practice in this area was widely differing and inconsistent. I realised

that I needed to find out more about parental engagement in a broader sense to assess more accurately whether the approaches that I had adopted in my own school were effective. It was at this point that I began to consider undertaking my professional doctorate, with the idea that my thesis would focus on parental engagement. I began to reflect on the specific area of parental engagement that I wanted to study and the type of research that I wanted to undertake. Central to my research was the desire to gather empirical evidence on the impact of parental engagement on children's learning and to understand how parental engagement could best be developed at school level.

There are many parental engagement programmes available to schools that focus on supporting children's learning. However, I felt that I wanted to focus on a parental engagement programme which developed particular skills through the engagement. I felt that this would provide me with the opportunity not only to measure children's progress in a specific area when a programme was implemented, but also to evaluate a programme as a parental engagement strategy to learn more about the engagement from both a school and parental perspective.

Having investigated several options, I felt that the *Impact in Writing*¹ programme, which uses parental engagement strategies to specifically improve children's writing skills, would be an ideal choice.

The *Impact in Writing* programme is a programme designed to be used by schools to promote parental engagement in their children's writing. The aims of the programme are to:

- Encourage parents/carers to work in partnership with the school in order to improve the quality of children's recount writing;
- Demonstrate to parents/carers some of the ways in which school's support children to develop their writing skills;
- Share with parents/carers some of the 'tools' used in order to help children in their writing;
- Make these tools available for use at home;

¹ <http://www.impactinlearning.co.uk/index.html>

- Give parents/carers the opportunity to work with their children in a supportive environment, and
- Empower parents with new skills and understanding in order that they can better support their children with their recount writing at home.

The programme involves parents attending a workshop at school where they work alongside their child/ren completing a writing task. The children then complete home-based writing tasks, having on-going support and guidance from the school when needed. A more detailed breakdown of the programme and how it was implemented as part of this study is given in Chapter 3, when discussing the quantitative methods adopted.

In addition, I wanted to have the opportunity to gather research on the wider strategies that could help and support the development of parental engagement within schools. I wanted to determine how parental engagement programmes are carried out by parents and children and how they are incorporated into existing family educational practices; identifying the features and mechanisms the programmes used, as well as how these explain any impact on outcomes. Therefore, the research questions which underpin this study are:

1. Does the '*Impact in Writing*' parental engagement strategy improve children's writing skills?
2. What lessons can be taken from this programme for wider parental engagement in children's learning?

The desire to undertake research in this area of interest coincided with the promotion of research-based practice by Welsh Government. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identified the need for a workforce that engaged in professional learning which has direct impact on practice and practitioners undertaking enquiry, in all forms was promoted (OECD, 2016). I realised that undertaking a Professional Doctorate would enable me to develop my skills and understanding as a researcher, which in turn would impact my effectiveness in my role, thus enabling me to support my colleagues in my setting to undertake their own research challenges. I also realised that I would be able to focus on the area of provision which excited and engaged me the most.

In my experience schools learn from each other and a self-improving system, as promoted by Welsh Government and regional consortia, is one which encourages the sharing of effective practice. I see this thesis as being my contribution to the sharing of research which will ultimately inform practice.

Study Overview

Chapter Two begins with a detailed review of the theoretical and empirical literature in the field of education which relates most closely to my study on parental engagement. During this review, I draw out pertinent themes which I use to frame my own research, to explain why this research is needed and how it sits within current research. **Chapter Three** outlines the methodological approach that I have undertaken, and a description of the research methods adopted. **Chapter Four** details my findings from the study and within **Chapter Five** I discuss these findings more broadly, placing them within a framework of current research on parental involvement and engagement. In **Chapter Six** I make my recommendations and **Chapter Seven** contains my conclusion.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

The previous section presented my rationale for undertaking this research and placed it within my own professional context and experience to date. This chapter is a critical review of the relevant literature on parental and family engagement in order to ground my own research and highlight where my research sits within the wider context.

The research study will investigate the efficacy of parental engagement through a literacy writing programme. The chapter will begin by considering general debates around engagement/involvement and will then consider the specific literature on parental involvement at home, as well as the impact that this has on children's learning. The policy implications for education in light of research on parental involvement will be discussed at a UK national level and also within the Welsh context. The current research on parental engagement and family literacy programmes is detailed, leading into an examination of those specific family learning programmes that focus on writing. The chapter will end with what I believe to be the perceived gaps within the current research, leading directly to the research questions which I have developed as a result. The literature review begins with a summary of the history of parental involvement.

A History of the Concept of Parental Involvement

There has been a long-established importance attached to parental involvement within the educational process and there is widely available evidence on how this can have a positive impact on children's achievement. The education system in Reggio Emilia, Northern Italy, first adopted the approach of working alongside parents in order to co-construct schools when, following the Second World War, parents and communities worked together to build schools for their children. The Reggio Emilia philosophy is built on the premise that parents are their children's first educators and as such are to be involved in every aspect of their children's schooling, including participating in decision making within the school, helping to shape school policies, being able to share children's learning experiences at home and also participating in classroom activities (OECD, 2012).

Early widespread interest in parental involvement within the UK initially occurred following the publication of the Plowden Report (1967). This national survey highlighted schools that were seen as having outstandingly good relationships with parents and recommended ways for others to emulate this. The report argued strongly for the concept of a partnership between home and school (Cairney, 2000) and suggested practical ways of achieving this, including parents being welcomed into school, providing opportunities for regular communication, open days and having accessible information. Following the publication of the report, there was an increased awareness of and desire from schools to communicate and involve their parents more widely and educational researchers began to gather evidence on the benefits of parental involvement to children's learning, particularly their literacy and numeracy development (Crozier, 1997). This prompted a range of programmes being implemented during the 1970s and 1980s which were specifically designed to help parents support their children in their school learning (Cairney, 2000).

Up until the mid-1990s, parental involvement was seen as a choice; one that was recommended, but still a choice that the school and the parent could buy into. However, the introduction of the Parents' Charter (DfE, 1994) heralded an expectation for parents to become more involved in their children's education, with the Charter encouraging parents to become active partners with the school and its staff (Crozier, 1997). This was followed in 1999 by the requirement for all schools to adopt a home/school agreement, making parental involvement a statutory requirement. However, the emphasis of this and other education acts throughout the 1990s led to the development of parental involvement where the parent was seen as a consumer (Vincent, 1996) with the involvement of parents becoming an increasingly significant frame of reference within educational policy and practice (Wyness, 2020). It could be argued that rather than enhancing and promoting a partnership approach, these reforms promoted a climate which could potentially be damaging to teachers' professionalism as parents were encouraged to hold teachers to account and exercise their greater parent power (Crozier, 1997). In addition, it has been argued that too much influence by government policy has placed the focus and attention of parents away from developing relationships and made parenting little more than a set of skills which must be learned and adhered to, following a one size fits all model which does not take into account individual values and cultures (Goodall, 2019).

The Importance of Cultural Capital

Despite promoting greater parental involvement and encouraging this through education acts, not all parents are able to intervene in their children's schooling in the same way. To be able to intervene in a purposeful way requires parents to be able to identify what they want from the educational system for their child and to have the skills required to be able to get the best for their children. To be able to have the ability to engage with school staff and build a relationship with them, parents require agency. However, parents have differing amounts of agency. Research shows that the social class of a parent has a direct impact on their ability to act with schools on behalf of their children, with working-class parents being disadvantaged as they tend to not have the cultural capital required to engage with schools (Crozier, 1997). The research undertaken by Crozier highlighted some key issues which need to be accounted for when considering the parental involvement debate including parents' perception of their own role in relation to their child's education, parents' understanding of their child's educational needs and the parents' relationship with the school. All of these differed depending on the social class of the parents. This has been further endorsed by Vincent (2001) whose research acknowledged that differing social groups have the requisite social, cultural and material capital to foster the agency that allows them to become more involved in their children's school.

In Crozier's (1997) study, parents were interviewed about their parental involvement practices. On the face of it, parents from differing social classes seemed to see their roles in the same way and all parents saw a need to support their children and to ensure that they were happy (Crozier, 1997, pg. 94). However, when it came down to proactively engaging with the school concerning matters connected to the education of their children, there was a distinct difference in the actions of those parents from middle and working-class backgrounds. Middle class parents had the social, cultural and material resources to realise these aspirations, while working class parents either did not have access to these resources or felt unable to act upon them. Within the study, this resulted in the middle-class parents contacting the school more frequently, were confident doing this and saw themselves as being on 'an equal footing' with the teachers they were engaging with (Crozier, 1997, p.194). In contrast, the working-class parents were not able to access these resources and therefore often felt alienated by the school's milieu. Crozier (1997) attributes this

difference to the influence of cultural capital, which she claims is well-endowed with middle-class parents but far less so with working-class parents. This is a belief reinforced by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) who acknowledged that whilst there was a broadly held desire amongst all parents to become more involved in their children's schools, there were social, cultural and material barriers which prevented this from happening amongst different social classes. However, a lack of cultural capital does not mean that parents are less interested, or indeed want to be less involved, but it does mean they have less of an ability to be effective in their practices (Reay, 2010), which as a result has a direct impact on educational success. This is summed up and reinforced by Fenton et al.: "children and their families with cultural and social capital are in a better position to see educational success than those who lack this" (2017, p.216).

There is the danger, however, that approaches which focus on capital can reinforce a deficit narrative and a school-centric view. Goodall (2015) argues that parents do not lack social and cultural capital per se, but they lack the particular types of capital which are valued by schools and it is the cultural and social gap between groups of parents and schools which renders some parents less able to negotiate the school system and to make their needs known (Goodall, 2015, p.501). As such, rather than focusing on what the school sees as appropriate for parents and children, Goodall argues for a more co-operative and partnership approach with an understanding of how a school's practice and culture can alienate groups of parents and create barriers to engagement. However, there has been relatively little focus on how a school's practice and cultures can alienate groups of parents and how this can be overcome. Wyness (2020) undertook a case study of school engagement and detailed the inadequacies of the approach taken by the schools when dealing with parents whose values differed from their own. It is therefore important that school staff are aware of the complexities of social and cultural capital when engaging with parents and resist deficit understandings. Crozier (1997) promotes that parental involvement needs to be carefully considered, managed and nurtured by schools. Schools should promote parental involvement practices which are fully inclusive. These could include sharing information with parents, helping to develop the parents' skills, enabling them to have access to resources and supporting them to develop greater social control through home/school agreements (Lee and Bowen, 2006). For these to be meaningful

however, they must be in response to the parents need and not simply directed by the school.

The next section will summarise the different models of parental involvement and distinguish between involvement and engagement. This will provide a grounding for how parental involvement and engagement will be viewed in the context of this study.

Models of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is multi-faceted and is not a consistently defined term within educational literature. In many respects it has been presented as a unified concept; however, it is complex and diverse (Crozier, 1997) and has been interpreted in several different ways. As an overview, parental involvement has been referred to as parent activities that support children's learning (Fishel and Ramirez, 2005). However, other educationalists have sought to break down the concept into more detailed and structured behaviours and activities.

Epstein (2010) presents a partnership view of parental involvement which involves schools, families and communities working together to create the best programmes and opportunities for children. This echoes the Reggio Emilia approach detailed earlier. She identifies the school, family and community as the major contexts in which children learn and grow, discussing these as having overlapping spheres of influence. From this broad framework she then details six different types of parental involvement practices:

- Good parenting;
- Communicating;
- Volunteering;
- Learning at home;
- Decision-making, and
- Collaborating with the community.

Whilst identifying six distinct practices, she also acknowledges that these different types of involvement can and do overlap. However, they are useful in that they can be used to guide the development of the partnership and schools can use these six areas to provide ideas to their families to ensure greater involvement. For example, schools could ensure that they

communicate effectively with parents about their children's learning and could provide information to families about how to help their children at home.

Other educational researchers have identified similar components of parental involvement. Singh et al. (1995) identified four components; parental aspirations for children's education, parent and child communication about school, parental participation in school-related activities and home structure, routines and discipline.

Desforges and Abouchar (2003) also identifies parental involvement as being connected to high aspirations but broadens out the definition still further (debates around aspiration and 'good parenting' and how these can meld with deficit discourses are considered below – for a discussion of these see Goodall, 2019). He concludes that parental involvement cannot be narrowed down to one thing, but that it takes many forms which include:

- Good parenting in the home, which includes the provision of a safe and stable environment;
- Intellectual stimulation;
- Parent and child communication and discussion;
- Good models of constructive social and educational values;
- Contact with schools to share information, and
- Participation in school events, in the work of the school and school governance.

(Desforges and Abouchar, 2003, p.3)

This list of parental involvement indicators includes those practices that may manifest themselves both in the home and in school settings. Hoover-Dempsey (2005) identified three broad parental involvement areas: those things that manifested themselves in the home setting, those school-based activities and parent and teacher communication. This research also produced a model of why parents get involved, what forms their involvement takes and how this involvement subsequently affects children's outcomes and attainment.

This model is useful as an analysis tool and can be used to support schools to have a better understanding of parental involvement and to be able to develop their parental involvement strategies. The model suggests that there are three major sets of contributors to parental involvement and engagement:

- Parents' own motivational beliefs;
- Parents' perceptions of invitations to involvement, and
- Parents' life context variables.

It goes on to detail how parental involvement is closely linked to parents' own knowledge and skills. That is, if parents think that their skills are adequate, they are more positive about engaging in activities with their children. It further details that basic involvement decisions are based on parents' own role construction, their sense of efficacy for helping their child, general school invitations and general child invitations. These can be used to help shape decisions that schools take around their strategies for parental involvement.

From a UK policy perspective, there has been no universal agreement on what parental involvement is. The Department for Children, School and Families (DCSF, 2008) referred to parental involvement as having two components: the involvement of parents in the life of the school and the involvement of parents in the support of their child at home. It was reinforced that the greatest educational benefits occurred when parents were involved in their child's learning at home.

Although these definitions of parental involvement are useful in an academic sense, they may lack the necessary clarity for schools to apply them effectively within an educational context. Goodall (2013) used the term 'engagement' rather than 'involvement' and made the distinction between parental involvement with a child's schooling and parental engagement with children's learning, with the latter having the greatest impact and being measurable by the effect it had on a child's attainment. Her use of the term 'engagement' is helpful to distinguish between activities which involve parents interacting with or supporting the school, such as attending parents' evenings, and those activities which see parents engage in their children's learning, for example helping children to engage with their learning at home (Goodall, 2013). In this way, parental involvement is very different to parental engagement. The next section will summarise the models of parental engagement and provide a theoretical basis for this research study.

Parental Engagement

Acknowledging that parental engagement in children's learning secures the maximum impact on children's attainment, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) proposed a continuum that supports the movement from parental involvement with the school to parental engagement in children's learning (2014, p.399). It places the greatest emphasis on the relationship that parents have with their children's learning and moves away from the relationship that the parents have with the school. This process, or movement from involvement to engagement, is represented as a continuum which begins with parental involvement with the school. At this initial stage of the continuum, the relationship with parents is controlled and driven by school staff. Parents may be involved in some activities, but these are instigated by the school.

The next point on the continuum is parental involvement with schooling. This stage involves an exchange of information about the child's learning. This may include supporting children with their homework and represents a shift in the agency from the school towards the parents.

The final stage of the continuum is parental involvement with children's learning. At this point the parents are fully engaged with the learning of their child which is not controlled by the school, but rather driven by the parent. At this stage, parents' actions may be informed by the school, but the choice of action and involvement sits with the parents (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014, p.405). For engagement to succeed, parents must have the agency to proactively build a relationship with the school.

For parents to move from a point of involvement with the school to engagement with learning, it is argued that parents have to develop their social capital (Groves and Baumber, 2008). By involving themselves in networks and communities, the capacity of parents to be able to involve themselves and act in a beneficial way for their children's learning will increase. Parents and family members may get involved in activities, but these are organised and initiated by the school. If the agency transfers to parents, the parents' actions may be informed by the school, but the choice of action and involvement remains with the parent (Goodall and Montgomery 2014, p.405). Thus, parental engagement can be seen as more than just an activity: parental engagement requires a feeling of ownership by parents and

also a greater commitment. It is not something that is “done to” parents, as it is an active choice. Despite the recognition of parental engagement however, Goodall has stated that it lacks adequate support in many schools (Goodall, 2015, pg. 499). This is a key concept and one which has shaped my research. How can we support schools to move from a point of involving parents to a point where they are actively encouraging parents to become engaged in their children’s learning? Goodall (2015) states that in order for this to happen, schools need to adopt a consistent approach, supported and led by senior leaders. She also identifies the need for schools to show an understanding of the principles of parental engagement and that the needs of the parents must be taken into account (Goodall, 2015, pg. 500). However, Crozier (1999a) noted that schools generally did not take the individual needs of parents into account, constructing their parental involvement strategies from a teacher's perspective, with little or no relationship to individual parent circumstance or need. This results in both a discouragement and disadvantage to greater participation from working-class parents (Crozier, 1999a).

The OECD (2012) acknowledges that teachers and school staff are able to support parents moving to a greater degree of engagement and highlighted the need for teachers to begin this process by forming strong and trusting relationships with all parents. If teachers take the time to learn from their families and learn from the community which those families represent, it can help parents develop the social capital they need to successfully engage with schools (Fenton et al. 2017). The OECD made the following recommendations for schools to begin this journey;

- Survey parents on the ways they can and want to be involved. Therefore, meeting individual need and adopting a more bespoke approach to the strategies offered;
- Initiate frequent dialogue with parents;
- Diversify the forms of involvement to cater to parents' time and interests;
- Develop key staff who become a communication point for parents, and
- Provide teachers with the opportunity to engage in professional development programmes specifically orientated to parental involvement.

(OECD, 2012, p.61)

However, despite this guidance schools in Wales have consistently stated that they have difficulty in supporting parental engagement, as reported by Estyn (2009).

There is an alternative view to seeing parental involvement and parental engagement as separate ends on a continuum; one which suggests that aspects of both involvement and engagement can and often need to be present alongside each other. Jeynes (2018) has challenged the view that parental engagement is more beneficial than parental involvement and presents the argument that schools will not be as successful in engaging with their parents unless there is prior involvement. His research, citing 203 quantitative studies, reviewed the effectiveness of parental involvement and engagement activities and identified both family and school-based components which, he argued, needed to be encouraged and developed by school leaders; “the idea is that school leaders need to encourage parental involvement and engagement at both the school-based and home-based levels” (Jeynes, 2018, p.149).

Jeynes (2018) identified five family-based components as being important: parents having high expectations for their children; parents adopting supportive and informative communication with their children and having a loving but authoritative parental style; parents reading with their children regularly and adopting suitable household rules. Whilst there is an acknowledgement that schools can help with these elements, these are primarily voluntary parental actions and are therefore more difficult to influence. He also identified five school-based elements as being important: promoting a partnership approach between home and school, based on a relationship of mutual respect; creating multi-dimensional forms of communication between home and school; supporting parents to be able to understand and check homework; offering opportunities for parental participation and attendance in class activities, and developing and drawing on wider community resources.

Jeynes (2018) concludes that in order to maximise the contributions that parents can make, both home-based and school-based elements need to be encouraged, supported and developed by schools and that both parental involvement in school and parental engagement in home-based learning are valued and as such these guiding principles could form a basis for a school’s approach to developing their involvement and engagement and support schools in this.

To summarise, parental involvement focuses on parents getting involved in the life and work of schools, whereas parental engagement represents a greater commitment and ownership of action. It also refers most often to how parents engage with their child's learning at home. This study will use the term 'parental engagement' to mean parental participation in the educational processes and experiences of their children (Jeynes, 2005, p.245), acknowledging that the most effective parental engagement needs to be rooted in the home in an attitude that fosters learning in the home (Sylva et al. 2004). When using the term 'parental', it refers to any person who may have a parenting role for the child and therefore would include grandparents and wider family members as well as foster and adoptive parents.

The next section will look at research on the impact that parents have when they are engaged in their children's learning. As this research study uses a parental engagement strategy which is adopted within the home learning environment, it will specifically focus on the research which details the impact of being engaged in children's learning at home.

Research on the Impact of Parental Engagement on Children's Learning

A key study which detailed the impact of parental involvement and family education on children's attainment was undertaken in 2003 by Desforges and Abouchar. The research, which was commissioned by the DfES, reviewed all the available research that focused on the relationship between parental involvement, parent support and pupil achievement. It was commissioned with the intention of shaping the development of policy in England necessary to close the socio-economic gap in achievement. The findings of the research concluded that parental involvement is a significant factor in shaping educational outcomes, outweighing that of the school effect. The research concludes that for a child aged seven, the school effect size in shaping educational outcomes is 0.05, whereas the parent effect size is 0.29. The parent continues to have a greater effect size for a child aged eleven, with the school only overtaking this for a child aged sixteen.

The National Child Development Study (NCDS) explored the effect of parental involvement on children's achievement at sixteen in English and Maths. Their findings showed that high parental involvement was associated with better exam results when compared to children whose parents showed little interest (DCSF, 2008). Higgins and Katsipataki (2015) reviewed

the evidence about the extent and impact of parental involvement on academic outcomes in children. Within the review, they focused on three broad types of parental involvement;

- General approaches to develop parent and school partnerships;
- Specific family literacy interventions, and
- Targeted interventions that focus on those children identified as having a specific need.

They concluded that parental involvement in all three categories can impact children's school success and that their involvement can make a difference in terms of accelerated improvement from between two and eight months (Higgins and Katsipataki, 2015, p.287).

Whilst many types of parent behaviours have been cited by educationalists as being important for parental involvement, it is parental involvement in children's learning at home which has been seen as having the greatest impact on children's attainment (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Harris and Goodall, 2008). The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al. 2004) was the first major European longitudinal study of young children's development and provided empirical evidence on the importance of parental involvement at home. The findings showed that parental involvement in activities such as reading to their child/children, teaching songs and nursery rhymes etc., are significant positive influences which account for differences in attainment (Sylva et al. 2004, p.29). It also highlighted the importance of home learning and that the quality of the home learning environment had a stronger influence than parental occupation, education or income, reinforcing the belief that it is what parents do that is more important than who parents are (2004, p.5). This is an argument that has been reinforced by Dermott and Pomati (2016), whose research showed that those with lower incomes were as likely to engage in all of the recognised "good parent-child activities" as everyone else (p.135). Unsurprisingly, one of the many recommendations from the report was to ensure that educational settings engaged parents in their children's learning. This may seem straightforward; however, it is not unproblematic. Goodall (2017) has argued that when schools control and direct parental engagement then it suggests that the power, status and the agency within the relationship between schools and parents sits with the school. For parental engagement to be most

meaningful there should be an equitable partnership created where the agency, knowledge and abilities of parents is recognised and valued (Goodall, 2017).

Whilst it has been identified that engagement in learning in the home makes the greatest difference, schools still have an important role to play by supporting the development of, and promoting opportunities for, engagement in home learning to take place. There are several strategies that schools have used to support learning in the home, such as establishing home visits and providing resources. However, much of the research has focused on the implementation of specific literacy interventions and has identified the positive impact that these programmes can have on children's literacy skills (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011).

Senechal and Young (2008) conducted a meta-analytical review of sixteen family literacy interventions in the USA, which specifically focused on the acquisition of reading skills. This large study, involving research with 1,240 families, specifically focused on studies which had three types of parental involvement interventions:

- Where the intervention involved the parents reading to the child;
- Where the intervention involved the parents listening to the child read, and
- Where the intervention involved the parents teaching specific reading skills.

The difference in the impact each of these strategies had is important to note. The effect size of a parent reading to a child was found to be relatively small, whereas the effect size increased to 0.51 when parents were actively listening to their children read. The effect size, however, more than doubles to 1.15 when parents are involved in teaching specific literacy skills to their children.

Similarly, Sylva, Scott et al. (2008) reported on the *Supporting Parents on Kids Education in Schools (SPOKES)* project, which aimed at supporting parents with strategies to deal with behaviour management and literacy skills at home. This study involved working with 104 children aged 5 and 6, selected from 8 schools in London. The programme used *The Incredible Years* (Webster-Stratton, 1992) training for parents to support with behaviour management and delivered specific training around supporting reading based on the Pause, Prompt, Praise reading programme (Glynn, 1994). The findings showed that those children

involved in the project had improved their reading skills by an equivalent of six months on their reading age compared to those not involved in the programme.

These research findings are important because they can support schools in understanding what works in terms of parental engagement and help them to understand how to prioritise the strategies that are used within their schools, as well as understanding how these strategies will influence what happens in the home. For parents to be able to support in the home they must be able to understand the most effective ways that they can help. Parents need specific and detailed guidance in order to deliver family literacy projects in the most effective way and they also need to understand their expected outcomes (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011).

Jeynes (2012) completed a meta-analysis on the efficacy of parental involvement programmes to gather data on not only whether parental involvement programmes work, but more importantly the types of parental involvement programs that are the most effective. The study reviewed 51 studies that had been conducted in the USA focusing on parental involvement and academic achievement of pre-kindergarten to 12th grade children. It concluded that there is a positive relationship between school-based parental involvement programmes and the academic success of pupils (Jeynes, 2012, p.719). In addition, school-based programmes that involved promoting home tasks, such as reading together, effective communication with teachers and supporting homework, all had a strong relationship with academic outcomes. The study also went on to state that teachers had a crucial role in supporting parents to be able to get the best out of their children at home, for example including specific questions in the programme for the parents to ask at home. This suggests that parents and teachers working together in a collaborative and supportive way can have a positive impact that results in an academic benefit when the child works at home with the parent.

The research studies cited highlight that there is a correlation between parental involvement and attainment which has long been established. However, while much of the literature considered within this review promotes parental involvement as a key school strategy, the approach has been contested and critiqued. From a general perspective, it has been suggested that the foregrounding of engagement moves the focus of responsibility

away from the school and onto parents and, in so doing, reinforces deficit accounts of parenting, as previously discussed in relation to the work of Goodall (2019) and Wyness (2020). The second critique relates to the robustness of the empirical evidence upon which this is based. Gorard and See (2013) reviewed 68 studies in order to examine whether increasing parental involvement has the potential to raise children's attainment, noting that successive governments had invested significantly in this area. Their review concluded that there was no robust data to show that improving parental involvement would be effective in raising pupil attainment and they argued that much of the research cited to justify these approaches lacked the methodological rigour to substantiate claims of efficacy and, consequently, justify any policy interventions. However, that is not to say that all efforts to increase parental involvement should be stopped. They argued that more research should be undertaken as their review also highlighted some potential benefits of parental involvement. They acknowledged that parental involvement interventions were most likely to succeed when they involved the parents of young children and that the programmes most likely to be effective were those where parents received training and on-going support in specific skills (Gorard and See, 2013, p. 4).

A further review was undertaken by See and Gorard in 2015. This was a systematic review of 77 reports on parental involvement. In this review, a small number of intervention studies were shown to be effective in raising attainment with younger children. The review concluded that "there is promising evidence that intervening to improve parental involvement can be effective" (See and Gorard, 2015, p. 346) but that far greater, high quality evaluations are needed.

The Education Endowment Foundation (Axford et al. 2019) have also been critical of the number of high-quality evaluations of the approaches to improving learning through parental engagement and have stated that there is insufficient robust evidence of the impact of programmes that have tried to increase engagement in order to improve learning. Other prominent academics within the parental engagement debate have also highlighted this. Goodall (2015) acknowledged that it is very difficult to isolate the effects of any given parental engagement intervention from all of the other influences which impact the achievement of children. In addition, there has been an acknowledgement that there is a lack of high-quality evidence from a UK and European perspective, as many research studies

have been based in the USA (Russell and Granville, 2005). Despite this, parental engagement has been widely acknowledged as making a difference in children's learning and has been promoted as a means for school improvement (Harris and Goodall, 2008).

Parental Engagement as a Means of Closing the Attainment Gap

Children from poor families generally do less well in school than their more affluent peers and there is a strong statistical link which evidences this. This attainment gap between the poorest and those who are better-off begins very early and is already evident when children start school at aged five (EEF, 2018). In Wales, the performance of disadvantaged pupils is lower than their more affluent peers at the end of the Foundation Phase, Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 (Welsh Government, 2019). At all points throughout their progression in the education system in Wales, children from poor families underachieve in comparison to their peers (Cook et al. 2014). Despite improvements in equity and significant additional funding, Estyn (2019) report that this attainment gap has not narrowed over the last ten years, causing great concern for all those connected with education in Wales. Unsurprisingly, narrowing this gap and ensuring greater equity for all pupils has become a national priority and has stimulated research and debate from academics, politicians and school staff.

Power et al. (2018) argue that the pedagogical approaches adopted in schools can further influence the attainment gap. The Foundation Phase (Welsh Government, 2015a) became the statutory curriculum for all children aged three to seven in Wales in September 2010 and heralded a more child-centred approach to learning, focusing on an experiential, play based curriculum. However, research on the evaluation of the Foundation Phase has identified that working class children may be disadvantaged as their parents do not have the cultural and economic capital to be able to support this type of learning (Power et al. 2018) and that the Foundation Phase could be increasing that attainment gap. Welsh Government (2019) have reported that the attainment gap for children in the Foundation Phase increased between 2018 / 19, strengthening the argument that the curriculum offered to our youngest learners may favour those better off families.

Children eligible for free school meals (eFSM²) is used as a proxy measure for this disadvantage when referring to the impact it can have on attainment within schools and as such, has been very important in drawing attention to systematic differences in educational achievement due to children's socio-economic circumstances (Taylor, 2017). However, the reliability of using FSM eligibility as a true measure of socio-economic disadvantage has been questioned. Many headteachers report that they feel the FSM criteria does not accurately capture all the children who are deemed to be economically disadvantaged (Taylor, 2017). In addition, the use of FSM generally at school level only includes those children who take up their entitlement and does not encompass all the children who are eligible, which could be a far greater number (Hobbs and Vignoles, 2010). There has been a growth in poverty amongst families who do have working parents and, as such, using FSM as a measure of poverty based solely on benefit receipt is problematic: as Gorard (2012) argues, eFSM is a measure of engagement with the benefit system rather than a measure of poverty. However, despite these complexities, FSM remains a useful variable for pupil attainment patterns within schools (Gorard, 2012) and it still remains that there is a strong statistical link between poverty and low attainment. In Wales, the Welsh Government have expanded this further highlighting in more detail some of the differences which are most identifiable. They state that children who are disadvantaged:

- Receive little or no home help with their learning;
- Tend to have weaker language and communication skills;
- Are more likely to have difficulties in basic literacy and numeracy skills;
- Experience frequent behavioural difficulties, and
- Are less likely to believe that they can exert control over things that affect them.

(Welsh Government, 2014a)

Within early sociological accounts, there is an assumption that this attainment gap is a result of poorer families who do not engage with their children's learning, that they are in fact making "bad decisions" and therefore negatively impacting their children's attainment. This has been categorised as a deficit approach (Hattam and Smyth, 2014). It has been

² Within this paper where eFSM is used it indicates data that reflects entitlement, usually derived at a government level. Where school level data is used the paper will use FSM to indicate entitlement and uptake.

suggested that these parents may have fewer educational discussions with their children and lower aspirations for their children's educational achievement (Lee and Bowen, 2006). In this way, parents are seen as scapegoats and are blamed for their children's poor educational outcomes (Fenton et al. 2017; Goodall, 2019). However, research conducted by Gutman & Akerman (2008) challenges this, as they found that most parents have high aspirations for their young children but that these are affected as children grow older due to social, economic and cultural restraints.

More recently, attention has been given to how schools and school staff view parents in relations to this deficit model. Wyness (2020) highlighted that, rather than challenging this view, many teachers can often buy into and perpetuate this deficit discourse. His recent research study into school engagement in challenging environments highlighted the deficit discourse used by teachers when discussing their engagement with parents. This was articulated in terms of encouraging and persuading parents that they could do better (Wyness, 2020, p.174). Jeynes (2012) further supports this view. He also argued that many teachers themselves perpetuated the belief that many of the academically weakest students suffer from a dearth of parental support and engagement (p.731). Jeynes also commented that some teachers have claimed that reaching out to parents will yield little fruit because parents either cannot or will not become involved (Jeynes, 2012, p.732).

However, as previously stated, it is argued that some low-income parents may have lower levels of cultural, social and economic capital which influences their ability to impact on their children's education (Vincent, 2001). They may have restricted access to schools due to inflexible working schedules, lack of childcare or lack of transportation, preventing them from accessing the educational social capital gained from schools. This lack of economic capital has also been highlighted by De Civita et al. (2004) who suggest that parents living in poverty have reduced financial resources which may limit their ability to provide educational materials and opportunities. Reay (2004) commented that parents supporting their children's schooling can have a substantial economic impact on families, thus further compounding any existing educational inequalities which already exist. It has also been suggested that working-class parents may be intimidated about working with teachers or feel that they have a lack of shared discourse (Reay, 2010). Many working-class parents view schools as being very separate to, and different from, their everyday social and cultural

world. It has been argued that this discrepancy between the cultural practice of the home and school accounts for much of the variability in student achievement (Cairney, 2000).

It is important to ensure that the notion of 'good parenting' is not implying a cultural deficit approach where differing norms and values in parenting held by different classes are used negatively. Klett-Davies (2010) commented that good parenting is viewed as synonymous with middle-class parenting strategies. Dermott and Pomati (2016) have highlighted the simplistic approach to understanding parenting and argued that it is often used as if it refers to a single concept. They argue that parenting is multi-faceted, including many different aspects (p.128). Rather than promoting a cultural deficit theory, their research concluded that those parents with lower incomes or who saw themselves as poor were just as likely to engage in all of the 'good' parenting approaches as anyone else (2016, p.135). Goodall (2019) argues that using the idea of 'good parenting' allows families and the way that they function, to be seen as completely separate from other social factors e.g., reduction on the welfare state and lack of support. By doing this, it allows the wider system to be absolved of any responsibility and places the blame with parents for "not doing a good enough job" (Goodall, 2019, p.6). She challenges this deficit model and the belief that poor parents have poor parenting approaches and that they are less interested in their children's learning. This research is not looking to adopt a cultural deficit approach or to endorse the idea that middle-class parenting is good and that by association, working-class parenting is "bad" (Reay, 2010).

While some approaches to engagement can adopt a deficit account of parenting, research suggests that other approaches can be successful, not only in terms of raising general pupil attainment, but also as a means of narrowing the attainment gap (Goodall, 2017; Jaynes, 2015; Dearing et al. 2006). In Wales, the promotion of parental engagement as a strategy for improving the performance of disadvantaged children has been a policy focus of both Welsh Government and the school inspectorate, Estyn (Estyn, 2019). Estyn have stated that those schools which are most successful at raising standards and are closing the attainment gap encourage greater engagement with parents and with the community (Estyn, 2017).

However, as with research on parental engagement generally, claims around engagement in order to narrow the attainment gap have been debated and contested, with the lack of good quality evidence as most often being highlighted (Barbour et al. 2018; Gorard and See,

2013). Axford et al. (2019) also highlighted the relatively weak evidence base for parental involvement interventions as a strategy for narrowing the attainment gap. They stated that the evidence for these programmes was limited in both quality and in showing an impact on children's outcomes. However, they did highlight family literacy programmes undertaken in the home as showing some promise. They also highlighted the need to provide parents with specific actions, linked to the curriculum so that they are best placed to support their children's learning (Axford et al. 2019, p.165). However, longitudinal data collected from children from low -income families in America, from kindergarten to 5th grade, showed that increased parental involvement did result in children improving aspects of their literacy (Dearing et al. 2006). The report stated that:

These results support the argument that family involvement in school should be a central aim of practice and policy and solutions to the attainment gap between lower and higher income children.

(Dearing et al. 2006, p.653).

Within the UK, it is acknowledged that there is a positive association between parental engagement in children's learning and increased learning outcomes and that this holds regardless of the child's socio-economic status (Axford et al. 2019). It is clear that more research in this area is needed with greater information about the effects of different interventions in order to maximise the impact of parental engagement for our most vulnerable learners.

Parents' Views on Engagement

In various studies, parents have reported a number of barriers to their engagement with their children's learning, and to engaging with schools about that learning (Goodall, 2015, pg.500) which reflect economic, social and cultural perspectives. Goodall, (2015), has identified three main barriers to parental engagement. These are time, parents' own negative experience of education and the cultural and social gap which exists between many families and schools. Many parents express a lack of time as being a barrier, or difficulties with childcare which may prevent them from being more actively involved (Goodall, 2015).

From a social and cultural perspective, some parents may feel put off from getting involved in school as they have had a negative school experience themselves (Reay, 2004; Goodall, 2015). They may lack confidence or have a lack of knowledge about how to get involved (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Some families may not understand the role that they could play in their children's education and therefore schools need to empower them so that they feel more able to take an active role (Welsh Government, 2014b). Often parents are reluctant to offer to help their children with schoolwork as they feel they lack some of the skills that could make a difference (Welsh Government, 2013a). Research undertaken by Peters (2007) supports the premise that time can be a barrier to engagement. This research showed that 44% of parents felt that their work commitments were preventing them from becoming more actively involved, despite 28% wanting more opportunities to become involved. It also went on to detail that parents felt that their lack of understanding about teaching methods was identified as the main reason why parents were unable to help. This was further supported by research undertaken by the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) in 2010. This reported that 84% of parents reported that their children asked them for help and advice with homework at least once a week. However, even though 80% of parents reported that they wanted to help their children, 83% of parents said that they felt unable to help as they didn't understand the homework. More worryingly, 84% of parents felt that their children's school provided them with little or no resources to help support their child's learning at home.

However, intervention strategies have highlighted how these barriers to engagement can be mitigated by providing support. BECTA identified that parents themselves identified that they would like support and guidance on how best to support their children's learning at home, with 81% of parents saying that this would be welcomed (BECTA, 2010). This is a view that has been reinforced in Wales with Estyn³ reporting that a large proportion of parents are interested in being more actively involved but that they need clear, specific, targeted information from schools in order to do so (Estyn, 2018).

Parents are more likely to be involved if they see that supporting and enhancing their child's school achievement is part of their role as a parent and that this is expected and valued by

³ Estyn is the education and training inspectorate for Wales.

the school (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). If teachers actively encourage parental engagement then parents will understand that this is expected by the school (Epstein, 2001). However, parents' negative feelings about their own schooling can prevent parental engagement. Goodall (2020), suggests that in order to overcome these feelings, schools need to establish a partnership with parents which is built on trust. Parents are also more likely to become involved if they believe they that have the appropriate skills and knowledge to do so, therefore further endorsing the importance of the schools can do by providing effective communication and information about strategies which could help children's learning at home. Toomey (1993) evidenced that providing parents with written information containing simple, specific techniques for helping their children during parent/child reading sessions yielded greater benefits than providing parents with more general information. All these studies provide useful guidance for schools to adopt when looking to develop effective parental engagement strategies. Most importantly, parents are more likely to participate if they perceive a direct positive impact on their child as a consequence of their involvement, and this is a key message that should inform strategies for involving parents (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011).

Parental Engagement and Family Literacy Programmes

Literacy development is a major goal of education and one of the fundamental pre-requisites for academic success and participation in modern society (Burns and Griffin, 1998). A strong start in children's early literacy skills has been found to be a key predictor of later academic performance (Duncan et al. 2007). One way of extending and improving children's literacy is through the use and delivery of family literacy programmes, as we know that time spent engaging in literacy-based home activities has been found to have a significant positive effect on children's language development and their emergent literacy skills (Senechal and Young, 2008). Hannon defines family literacy programmes as "programmes to teach literacy that acknowledge and make use of a learner's family relationships and engagement in family literacy practices" (2003, p.100).

Family literacy interventions have several advantages over literacy interventions in an educational context. Home-based family programmes allow for one-to-one teaching to take place and individual feedback to be given to the child. They also have the longer-term aim of

changing the daily practices of family life and can build in routines which will continue to promote literacy skills after the programme has finished. Being conducted in the home environment, they also increase the programmes' ability to be sensitive and adaptable to social and cultural conditions (van Steensel et al. 2011).

Hannon (1995) suggests that parents are able to offer four key aspects which will enhance their children's early literacy development:

- I. **Opportunity.** If parents can offer opportunities to their children to develop their literacy skills this can impact on their literacy development. For example, are there a range of works and wider resources that support literacy development available within the home environment?
- II. **Recognition.** It is important that children experience feedback and encouragement for their efforts. However, for this to occur, parents must understand what literacy skills are necessary to acquire and recognize the small steps towards this goal.
- III. **Interaction.** Children and parents have to interact with each other.
- IV. **Model of Literacy.** Parents are able to model specific literacy skills to their children in order to support them.

Parents however must be able to realise how best they can help. The best literacy programmes are those where teachers are explicit and provide specific guidance to help parents function as partners (Colgate et al. 2017). Pedagogical approaches in education have been subject to rapid change and this is especially true in relation to literacy. The National Literacy Programme (Welsh Government, 2012) was adopted in Wales in 2012 and provided schools with a detailed and prescriptive framework for teaching literacy skills. Included within this guidance was the importance of phonics, notably the requirement to teach synthetic phonics. These specific approaches will not be known to many parents and may therefore hinder their ability to engage purposely in their children's learning. The evidence on literacy family learning programmes is generally accepted to be sufficiently robust and extensive to make the case that they should be considered as a priority for schools to focus on (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). There is also a need for schools to ensure parents are kept up to date with the many pedagogical changes which have occurred.

Family Literacy Programmes that Focus on Writing

Learning to write is crucial to literacy development (Valerie and Foss-Swanson, 2012), yet despite its importance, many children do not develop strong writing skills (Graham et al. 2015). In 2012, The Department for Education reported that writing was the skill with the worst performance in comparison to other key subject indicators at Primary School level. The report goes on to state that involving parents in teaching a range of writing activities can have a positive impact on the writing skills and development of children. This is due to the fact that much of a child's success as a writer is a product of their early writing experiences. Parents play an important role in the development of young writers, but they may not be fully aware of the best theories and practices regarding young children's writing development (Blasi and Beck, 2002). Whilst many family engagement programmes focus on improving reading skills, there are far fewer studies which have focused on developing writing skills through a combined home/school approach. It could be argued that little is known about family engagement in writing (Camacho and Alves, 2017) and there is very little information regarding what parents can do to promote writing development among their young children (Skibbe et al. 2013). As such, this is an area which would benefit from further exploration (McClay et al. 2012) and therefore highlights the importance of undertaking this research in this area.

During a review into the standards in children's writing in England, the Department for Education (2012) highlighted the importance of parents undertaking writing activities within their home with their children, they did not elaborate on the type of writing activities that could support development. Wollman-Bonilla (2001) conducted research which used family message journals and analysed the impact these could have on family involvement and children's literacy learning. This small-scale study included four case study families in the USA. Using the family journals, children wrote messages to their parents daily, with the support and scaffolding of the class teacher. The parents then responded to their child's message. The use of writing journals provides children with a reason to write and enables them to see the relevance of writing within the 'real world' (McClay et al. 2012). It also provides them with a genuine audience. The results showed that more than half of the responses by parents provided valuable instructional feedback highlighting that parents have significant knowledge to contribute to children's literacy learning processes even

though they may not always be aware of the potential impact of their contributions (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001, p.187). Therefore, not only were the parents scaffolding the children's writing, the children valued writing for different purposes.

However, for parents to be successful in their interventions with their children, they must be confident in their own ability to be able to support their children's learning (Sime and Sheridan, 2014). Some schools have supported this by offering parents an opportunity to develop specific skills through a workshop approach. Saint-Laurent and Giasson (2005) gathered data from a programme which had specific workshops for parents looking at the development of writing skills. Conducted in urban schools in Montreal and Quebec, the study included 108 children from 1st grade classrooms. Within the workshops, parents were given specific strategies by teachers to help their children at home focus on developing spelling and encouraging children's attempts to write. The results showed that the program had a positive effect on children's writing skills, resulting in longer texts, better vocabulary and improved spelling (2005, p.256). However, during this study there were no formal observations of the parents engaged in the activities with the children and therefore it is difficult to determine the specific interactions which generated those improvements. This inability to isolate exactly what causes the improvement has been acknowledged by others (Goodall, 2015; Axford et al. 2019).

Skibbe et al. (2013) gathered data on parents' ability to "scaffold" children's learning, observing whether children were able to develop their writing through interactions with their more skilled parents. This idea of scaffolding was first suggested by Vygotsky (1978) and explained in terms of the zone of proximal development. Within this zone, children are able to master more complex skills by accessing support and encouragement from someone more skilled. The study involved 77 parents and their pre-school children in the USA engaging in semi-structured writing activities in their homes during two consecutive summers. The support that was provided by parents was categorised as follows:

- **Graph Phonemic Support** - support to develop the ability to break words into individual sounds and then use corresponding letters to represent the sounds;
- **Print Support** - support for writing the letter, forming the shape etc., and

- **Demand for Provision** - the parent's ability to identify when a child has made a mistake and encourage them to correct the mistake.

The results of the research concluded that parental writing support can aid some aspects of literacy development, even if the support they provided does not correspond with best practices in the field (2013, p.397.) This suggests that if more guidance was provided to parents and family members so that they were able to give support that is considered to be best practice, the impact on children's literacy development would be even greater. It highlights the fact that many parents do not have the requisite knowledge or confidence to know how to best support their child (Russell and Granville, 2005; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). Therefore, there is a role for teachers, schools and education systems to explore how they can help parents play a more active role in their children's education both in and out of school (OECD, 2011, p.4).

Camacho and Alves' (2017) research conducted in America focusing on children in the 2nd grade, looked at a specific family engagement strategy called *Cultivating Writing*, which was a programme that lasted for ten weeks and involved children writing stories at home with their parents/family members. The programme began with a workshop session with parents and then involved a series of specific writing exercises which required the parents to scaffold their children's writing. The results showed that the children involved in the project that had support from their parents improved their writing in some measure and wrote longer texts compared to children who had no involvement from any family members. They concluded that parental involvement in writing was important and seemed effective in fostering children's writing skills (2016, p.253). It is important to note, however, that there were limitations to this study. The sample size was small, and the intervention was adopted by one school only. These limitations are also reflected in many of the wider parental engagement intervention strategies which have been researched.

Despite some research having been conducted, involving parents in writing tasks is still less commonplace than other literacy areas such as reading. Brashears (2008) identified reasons why teachers may not involve parents in developing their children's writing skills. She identified that there may be a lack of understanding by teachers on the positive impact that parents can have on children's attainment and that some teachers may see parents as being

indifferent to educational matters. She argued that some teachers either purposefully or inadvertently exclude parents from their children's writing instruction.

As previously stated, this is an area which lacks a great deal of empirical evidence. It has been highlighted that further research would be beneficial, particularly on how teachers encourage substantive parental involvement in their writing programs (McClay et al. 2012). This research will focus on the use of a parental engagement programme called *Impact in Writing*, which is aimed at supporting the development of children's writing.

The *Impact in Writing* Family Engagement Programme

The *Impact in Writing* programme is designed to support children develop and improve their writing skills through engaging the help of parents and family members. As a programme, it has a clear and consistent goal which is the improvement of children's learning – specifically their writing skills (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011).

The programme was devised in 2006 and grounded in the research of Desforges and Abouchar (2003). It aimed to develop parental engagement but to specifically focus on children's outcomes and ensure that the impact was long-lasting. The programme, *IMPACT – Involving More Parents and Children Together*, has six aims:

- To encourage parents to work in partnership with the school in order to improve the quality of children's writing;
- To demonstrate to parents some of the ways in which schools work when undertaking writing activities;
- To share with parents some of the tools we use in order to help children in their writing;
- To make these tools available for use at home;
- To give parents the opportunity to work with their children in a supportive environment, and
- To empower parents with new skills and understanding in order that they can better support their children with their writing at home.

These aims, delivered through the parents working collaboratively with school-based staff, accessing training and on-going support which focus on individual skills, mirror those highlighted as being most effective (Gorard and See, 2013, See and Gorard, 2015).

The programme was the basis for a Training and Development Agency (TDA) case study in 2006 and accredited with helping the school that implemented it move from special measures to outstanding, in the top 5% of schools, in under three years. The staff running the workshops credited the programme with having a significant impact on the standards of writing at the school and also of having parents engaged more fully with the work of the school and the progress of their child. However, despite this strong anecdotal evidence, no formal research was undertaken on the programme.

Parental Engagement Within a National Education Context

In recent years, schools have increasingly recognised the importance of involving parents in their children's learning (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011) and this is in no small part to the response and growing inclusion of parental engagement within the broader national strategies and policies which affect and drive school reform. In England, the *Children's Plan* (2008) set out to tackle low attainment amongst pupils and identified a plan to resolve this. At the centre of the plan was the belief that parental engagement made a significant difference to educational outcomes and that parents had a central role to play in raising standards (Harris and Goodall, 2008). Within the Welsh national context, there has been an increase in the awareness and understanding of parental engagement over the past ten years and subsequently, it has been given a higher priority in national policies, strategies and school-based practice.

As far back as 2006, Welsh Government identified the need for schools to promote themselves as a focus for their children, families and the local community, stressing that "community-focused schools have a positive impact on pupils learning and attainment" (Welsh Government, 2006, p.7). In a bid to prompt widespread and cohesive school improvement, the *School Effectiveness Framework* (Welsh Government, 2008) set out the characteristics required in order to improve children's learning and well-being throughout Wales. It stressed the need to provide a learning community for all those involved with school life placing children and their families at the core. Working with others was identified

as one of the six key elements needed to achieve this and schools were encouraged to engage with families and the broader community. It was noted that “congruence between home and school provides children with more effective assistance and encouragement” (Welsh Government, 2008, p.17).

However, poor international performance in the Programme for Student Assessment (PISA) results in 2009 led to criticism and a discourse that the Welsh education system was failing (Connolly et al. 2018). Leighton Andrews, then Minister for Education in Wales, referred to the PISA results in 2009 as “a wakeup call to an education system in Wales that has become complacent” (Welsh Government, 2012, p.4). As way of a response to these disappointing results, the *Improving Schools Plan (2012)* was adopted which set out the key priorities for securing improvement. Within the plan, reference was made to the need for empowering and engaging with parents (2012, p.15) and for developing a strong partnership with parents. It was noted that schools needed to adopt a flexible and bespoke approach to engaging with parents and needed to reinforce with parents that they mattered and that their involvement was necessary for improvement.

In a bid to assess the levels of parental involvement in schools, Welsh Government requested Estyn to report formally on this matter and in 2009, Estyn published the *Good Practice in Parental Involvement in Primary Schools* report. The picture they described was mixed, stating that there seemed to be no clear pattern in how schools were involving parents and no formal monitoring of the extent of parental involvement. In the few schools that were effectively involving their parents, it was as a result of the vision and commitment of the headteacher and not as a response to a more formal and cohesive national strategy. As such, Estyn recommended that local authorities should encourage all schools to plan more ways of involving parents; a recommendation that interestingly was to be repeated word for word almost ten years later in their follow up report (Estyn, 2018).

Further guidance was provided in the *Early Years and Childcare Plan (2013a)*, where the importance of parental involvement and the home learning environment was recognised (Siraj and Sylva, 2004). It stated that the focus was now to support parental engagement and set out plans to:

- Develop guidance on effective parental engagement in learning;

- Pilot approaches to family learning in the early years in order to improve understanding of the best ways to help parents support their child’s learning, and
- Increase funding for family learning programmes.

(Welsh Government, 2013a, p.31)

This led to an active campaign to encourage parental engagement (Education Begins at Home, Welsh Government, 2014) where the importance of early intervention in a child’s learning journey was stressed.

Improving Schools in Wales: an OECD perspective (2014) and *Rewriting the Future* (Welsh Government, 2014b) both identified parental engagement as a key factor for improving standards and provision. It stressed that family and community provide the context within which children and schools operate and that their influence on outcomes can be significant. The document concluded that “Schools need to find innovative ways to engage with families and their communities, and step in to mitigate the impact where learners are not well supported” (Welsh Government, 2014b, p.20).

However, these documents did not advise on how this would happen. This was in part, due to the fact that it was acknowledged that the evidence about how to increase involvement to improve attainment was much less readily available (Welsh Government, 2014b, p.20). Welsh Government did acknowledge that some schools would require guidance on how to engage parents directly in their children’s learning and more crucially on the specific types of activities which have the biggest impact on children’s attainment and well-being. They suggested that the work schools engaged in should cover improving adult basic skills, supporting parents/carers to understand what their children are learning in school and how to help them and providing positive role models (Welsh Government, 2014b, p.20).

Similarly, OECD (2014) identified that only a significant minority of schools were employing a broad enough range of strategies in which to engage parents in the education of their children. They stressed that there was much scope for schools to strengthen the engagement with parents to jointly support children’s learning (OECD, p.52). They too acknowledged that more guidance on parental engagement was required and that support should be given to schools in order to develop their parental engagement, identifying

crucially that the question some schools struggle with is how to engage with parents and where to start (OECD, 2014, p.58)

Practical advice and strategies for engaging parents did follow, with the Family and Community Engagement (FaCE) toolkit (Welsh Government, 2015b) being published in 2015. The toolkit provided guidance and resources to schools along with a framework to audit their current family engagement and set priorities for future developments. The toolkit covered five key elements of family engagement:

- Leadership;
- The need for a whole-school approach;
- Welcoming families to engage with the school;
- Helping families to actively support their child's learning, and
- Developing community partnerships.

The need to promote a whole school approach to family engagement is one which has been highlighted by further educational research (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011; National College for School Leadership, NCSL, 2010). Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) stated that for schools to be able to implement a successful parental engagement strategy they must carry out a needs analysis, identify mutual priorities and ensure that teachers and parents work together to understand the particular strategies that are required. This need for a vision and strategy, underpinned by core values, is one further endorsed by the NCSL (2010). They also acknowledged the need for any strategy to be driven by senior leaders within the school. Hornby and Blackwell (2018) recognised the significant influence that the headteacher can have in securing effective parental engagement within the school.

Whilst the origins of understanding and promoting the importance of parental engagement can be tracked back over the last ten years, the impact it has had at school level has gathered pace within Wales over the last five years and increased pressure has been placed upon schools and local authorities to ensure the development of parental engagement is a priority. For example, Estyn has included a section on parental engagement as a formal monitoring area and under the new Estyn Common Inspection Framework schools are now inspected against their capacity to:

Establish productive relationships with parents and ensure effective lines of communication with them so that parents can support their children well and raise any issues that may affect their child's learning and wellbeing. Inspectors should consider the extent to which the school is actively helping to develop parents' capacity to support their own children.

(Estyn, 2017a, p.21)

By including this as an area which is formally assessed and reported on during inspection, it should help to promote high quality and effective engagement with parents. However, the picture in Wales remains mixed.

What are the Barriers in Wales to Effective Parental Engagement?

Despite a strong commitment to the rhetoric of parental involvement (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; DCSF, 2008), within Wales, there still seems to be a disparity between the theory and the practice of parental involvement and engagement. The current situation in Wales as reported by Estyn reflects this. They have reported that parental engagement is often "bolted on" and not part of a wider strategic vision and is therefore less likely to succeed. In addition, schools' evaluation of their parental engagement work is poor and there seems to be very little evidence about which approaches are the most successful (Estyn, 2018, p.2). They concluded with the recommendations, much like those of 2010, that schools should strengthen their efforts to enable parents to engage directly with their children's learning. They also stressed the need for local authorities to provide the support for schools to enable them to develop their parental engagement strategies. On the surface, from Estyn's point of view, it appears that few advances had been made in parental engagement since its last report on this subject ten years earlier. One reason which could account for this is the lack of formal training given to school staff on parental engagement.

Teacher Expertise

Many researchers have highlighted the need for teachers and school staff to proactively engage with parents and that this should be an aspect of teacher's training and on-going professional development (OECD, 2012; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011; Epstein, 2018). However, very few teachers and school staff have received formal training in this area. The Teacher Survey (2017) highlighted that only 8% of teachers had ever received formal

continuing professional development on parental involvement and engagement. This lack of training may account for the fact that high-quality parental engagement does not seem to be consistently embedded across schools. Teachers and school staff may lack confidence and may not be appropriately prepared to be able to develop the key relationships needed to support parental engagement within schools (Epstein, 2013).

This could be a problem for those new to the profession who have not had the time to reflect and learn from more experienced colleagues. Graduates, in particular, could be unprepared to work effectively with families of students in the schools in which they are placed (Epstein and Saunders, 2006; Epstein, 2018). Teacher resistance has been stated to be the most persistent barrier to parental engagement in their children's education (Hornby, 2011). However, if teachers entering the profession are not trained in developing this important aspect of provision, it could account for the resistance in developing it. Particularly within a rapidly changing education sector, the danger is that teachers could focus solely on curriculum issues to the detriment of wider educational research including that of parental engagement (Jeynes, 2018).

The issue of teachers receiving specific training to ensure they have the appropriate skills to develop meaningful parental engagement strategies is one which has been reiterated by other research. Epstein (2010) noted that most teachers want to involve families, but many do not know how to go about this. Teachers need to understand how schools work beyond their own classrooms and how school-based teams and committees share leadership to create a welcoming school for all partners in education (Epstein, 2018, p.402).

A further indication of the lack of attention to developing parental engagement strategies can be evidenced through schools reporting on their current practices, policies and staffing arrangements. Only 19% of teachers surveyed indicated that their school had a current parental engagement plan and could identify their school's current engagement strategy towards parents (Teacher Survey, 2017). This suggests that only one-fifth of schools surveyed had a cohesive and whole-school approach to parental engagement. Furthermore, just under half of the respondents in this study knew who was responsible for leading parental engagement within their school (Teacher Survey, 2017). This is a concern as the role of leadership has been identified as crucial for successful parental engagement to

occur; the single most important factor in schools which were identified as having effective parental engagement was found to be the enthusiasm of the headteacher (Estyn, 2009). Parents are more likely to be engaged with schools where the principle leader is perceived to be welcoming and supportive of their involvement (Barr and Saltmarsh, 2014, p.491). In addition, strong leadership and a real commitment to parental engagement has been identified as a key factor in ensuring successful parental engagement (Sime and Sheridan, 2014).

Teachers overwhelmingly believe parental engagement has a positive impact on their school and want to find ways to engage parents; but this work does not always appear to be embedded within the school's strategic plan (Teacher Survey, 2017, p.6).

To summarise, over the past three decades, social science research has consistently established that parental engagement has a positive impact on academic outcomes for children (Jeynes, 2018). Most teachers want to involve families and create partnerships with parents in order to have a positive impact on the development of children, but many schools and teachers do not know how to go about this (Epstein, 2010). Schools in Wales are saying that they find parental engagement one of the most difficult aspects of their role (Welsh Government, 2015b). This could be due to the fact that school leaders understand the salience of parental engagement but do not fully understand the most important components of parental engagement (Jeynes, 2018). As a school leader, I would consider myself to be in this position, as the creation of a partnership between home and school is very complex. Whilst schools and leaders are in the position to understand what happens with the school-based components of parental engagement, it is more difficult to access and understand the home elements of parental engagement, yet we know that for parental engagement to be successful it must focus on the attitude towards learning in the home (Goodall, 2013). There is far less robust evidence and research available to support and guide school staff in this area, which, as detailed earlier has been recently highlighted by the Education Endowment Foundation:

Although parental engagement is consistently associated with pupil's success at school, the evidence about how to improve attainment by using parental engagement is mixed and much less conclusive.

(EEF, 2018, p.6)

The EEF goes on to stress the need for schools to review and monitor their parental engagement activities to ensure they are having the intended outcomes. Again, this lack of robust evaluation of parental engagement practice has been identified previously. Harris and Goodall (2008) stated that even though most schools are involving parents in school-based activities in a variety of ways, the activities are not having a great impact on the subsequent learning and achievement of the pupils (p.227), suggesting that they are focused on engagement with the school rather than engagement in the children's learning. The Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement (EPRA) research in 2007 highlighted that most schools did not judge the impact of different forms of parental participation or see a real difference between involvement in school activities and engagement in learning (Harris and Goodall, 2008, p.282).

The use of parental engagement programmes which focus on targeting specific areas of attainment has undergone some evaluation, but still very little is known on what types of parental engagement programmes would help children's attainment the most (Axford et al. 2019). Jeynes (2007) identified the need for more evidence on specific parental engagement strategies:

Social scientists should undertake more studies to determine which programmes work best and why. Qualitative research can also supplement the findings of this study by ascertaining the ways that teachers, parents and students perceive that parental involvement benefits students the most.

(Jeynes, 2007, p.104)

The focus on the need for qualitative research is important as it would help teachers, schools and other stakeholders understand how they could help parents play a more active role in their children's education (OECD, 2014). This would enable more discussion on not only what works from a parental point of view but also on what happens as part of the process. This is a view reinforced by Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) who suggested that there was a need for greater research to have a more detailed analysis of the mechanisms through which parental involvement influences student outcomes, and as part of this, a study should examine what goes on between parent and child during the completion of specific home tasks.

Although research evidence has showed that there is a strong association between parental involvement and educational attainment, there is a lack of evidence to establish whether intervening to alter parental engagement can subsequently have a positive impact on attainment, with a call for further large-scale research which uses standardised measures which focus on single, pre-specified outcomes (Gorard and See, 2013). In addition, it has been argued that there is a lack of high-quality outcome-focused qualitative research on parental engagement programmes specifically designed to improve children's literacy skills (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). While this study does not attempt to answer Gorard and See's (2013) call for a large-scale, longitudinal study, it does adopt many of the methodological recommendations within his report for an exploratory study of this nature. Hence, this study aims to focus on two broad questions which have emerged from the literature review:

- Does the '*Impact in Writing*' parental engagement strategy improve children's writing skills?
- What lessons can be taken from this programme for wider parental engagement in children's learning?

The first question centres around the use of a parental engagement intervention focusing on developing children's writing skills and the second question looks to expand and relate any findings from the analysis of this intervention and apply these to broader parental engagement within a school context.

Within the research covering these two questions, the following sub-questions will be covered:

- Is there a link between *Impact in Writing* and improved attainment in writing?
- What strategies are used in the programme to promote parental engagement?
- What are parents' attitudes to the programme and how could parental engagement be improved from a parental perspective?
- What are teachers' attitudes to the programme and how could parental engagement strategies be improved from a teacher's perspective?
- What lessons can be taken from this programme for wider parental engagement in children's learning?

Chapter Three: Methods

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the methods that I used to investigate and understand whether the *Impact in Writing* programme improved children's writing and to offer an insight into the ways to improve wider parental engagement. It begins with an explanation of my reasons for adopting a pragmatic research paradigm within my study and then discusses my research design and methods. I go on to provide an account of how I collected data for my study, giving reasons and justifications for the approaches used. I conclude with a discussion on ethical considerations, including my positionality within the research and the reliability of the research.

The Research Paradigm

There have been two main paradigms that have traditionally dominated methodological and epistemological debates within the social sciences: positivism and interpretivism (Thomas, 2017). These two paradigms are traditionally presented as being fundamentally opposed, with a positivist paradigm operating in a context which believes that there is one truth to be discovered; as opposed to an interpretivist approach believing that there is no such thing as a single reality (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). These polar positions have resulted in what has been called 'paradigm wars'. However, there is an alternative view of the world which is that reality is not fixed; it is constantly negotiated, debated and interpreted depending on the situation and context (Bryman, 2012). This idea heralds a departure from old philosophical arguments between the nature of reality and the possibility of truth (Morgan, 2014) and represents a pragmatic paradigm. This paradigm presents the epistemological position that knowledge should be examined using whatever are the best tools and methods to solve the problems considered. This approach foregrounds the questions that are being asked and thus is concerned with the practical implications of a concept and looks to determine what works, and why we have chosen to make the choices we have (Robson, 2011). It offers an alternative, flexible and more reflexive guide to research design and grounded research (Feilzer, 2010) as well as providing a rationale for mixed method approaches due to the utility of the instruments and the beneficial effect of their results.

The underlying principle in pragmatic thinking is that knowledge is consequential, generated after action and reflection on action. Pragmatism recognises there is a 'real' reality, but that it is open to interpretation and that knowledge is individual, related to experience, action and reflection. The work of Dewey (1916) provides a philosophical underpinning for pragmatism as he believed that we construct our own sense of reality formed by our experience of the environment (Hammond, 2013). Throughout his career he sought to promote pragmatism by orienting philosophy away from abstract concerns and emphasising knowledge as a human experience (Morgan, 2014). This epistemology of how knowledge is constructed, through on-going cycles of action and reflection, aligns itself closely to an action research-based approach (Noffke, 2017).

The following sections will give an overview of the principles of action research and clarify the justifications of why this research design has been adopted.

Research Design

The title of this research study is 'Engaging parents in children's literacy: an investigation into the *Impact in Writing* programme as a strategy for parental engagement'. This study stems from my position and experience as a headteacher and as such is grounded in educational practice. As headteacher, one of my key roles is ensuring that the pedagogical approaches adopted by the school are effective and that there is a continued and sustained focus on high-quality learning and teaching. Additionally, this study is primarily about improving practice; not just improving the practice within my school but also, through sharing any findings, improving the practice in schools more generally. As such, I am committed to bringing about change as part of this research (Brydon-Miller, 2003) and am committed to ensuring that I continue this process of self-reflection in order to continue to understand and refine practice moving forward. Thus, this research identifies all the key aspects of action research (Thomas, 2017).

The term 'action research' first emerged in the early part of the 20th century, initially adopted by Kurt Lewin (1946). He originally saw action research as a way of describing professional development in social situations (McNiff, 1988) and introduced an action research process which included a spiral of steps each incorporating four stages: planning, acting, observing and then reflecting. Kemmis (1982) further refined the original ideas of

Lewin and developed and encouraged a specific action research approach for educational practices. He specifically detailed the need to be self-reflective and incorporated re-planning at the end of the initial four stages as the basis of a problem-solving approach. In order to ensure that action research remained meaningful to those in education undertaking it, the action–reflection cycle was re-formulated by Whitehead (1989), who also adopted a set of prompts which, he felt, provided a basis for systematically tackling educational problems and would serve as a structure for teacher’s adopting an action research method approach. These were: identify a problem; imagine a solution to the problem; implement the imagined solution; evaluate the outcomes of the actions, and finally reformulate the problem in the light of the evaluation (McNiff, 1988).

During the last decade, there has been a significant growth in the visibility and acceptance of action research, and it has subsequently played a significant role in teacher education (Noffke, 2017). Using action research develops opportunities for generating knowledge about the profession, it allows individuals involved to become more skilful as they reflect on their professional problems and it can be leveraged for social change. In action research the ultimate aim is to develop practice; this means that researchers can make any required changes directly and immediately.

As Wales moves towards adopting a self-improving education system (OECD, 2017), there has been an increasing awareness of, and requirement for, school-based education staff to engage in action research as it is seen as a powerful method of bridging the gap between the theory and practice of education (McNiff, 1988). A key driver for undertaking this research was that it would lead to an improvement in parental engagement, both at a micro level within my own school and a meso level across Wales as a whole. Therefore, this research should:

- Provide empirical evidence on the impact of parental engagement on children’s attainment;
- Present schools with a programme that could be used to improve parental involvement and engagement, and
- Allow all stakeholders to gain a better understanding of the process schools should adopt in their approaches to parental engagement.

Following the principles outlined below, this study began by identifying a problem; how can children's attainment in writing be improved? This was then expanded into whether parental engagement was a successful strategy to improve children's writing; what lessons could be learnt and how these lessons could be applied in a wider context across schools?

Action Research Design Frame

This action research study adopted two-phased mixed method explanatory design frame (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). Pragmatist research chooses instruments based on their usefulness and on the appropriateness of their function in producing results relevant to the context (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). Therefore, these methods were selected as they represented the best ways to ensure the research questions were answered. Adopting a pragmatic epistemology allows for mixing quantitative and qualitative research approaches in order to best understand the research problem. The overarching research question aligned itself to using a mixed method approach. The first part of the research centred on whether the *Impact in Writing* parental engagement strategy can improve children's writing skills and therefore lent itself to adopting quantitative methods. However, the second part of the question focused on the lessons that can be taken from this programme in terms of wider parental engagement in children's learning and was more aligned to qualitative research methods. In this way, using a phased approach, the qualitative data allowed me to give a more detailed explanation of the findings generated by the quantitative data (Bryman, 2011) and build a greater understanding of the results (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). It also allowed me to draw on the strengths of both types of research and minimise the perceived weaknesses of both (Plano Clark, 2017; Burke-Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The methods used in the quantitative phase were an assessment of writing followed by focused groups in the qualitative phase.

As a lone researcher, I felt that the sequential explanatory design (Creswell et al. 2003) was manageable to adopt. The sequential design meant that the research was conducted in two phases, with only one type of data being collected at any one time. However, there were challenges to using this design, as I needed to ensure that I had the skills and understanding of adopting both qualitative and quantitative methods. I also needed to consider and plan carefully for the timings and resource implications in planning for and collecting two types

of data; the analysis and collection of the qualitative data were significantly more time consuming than that of the quantitative data - although there were less participants in that phase of the study.

Pilot Study

I completed a small pilot study within my own setting before finalising the planning of my research. As part of this pilot, I trialled aspects of both the quantitative and qualitative methods used within the study. The pilot study took place within my own school as I was already implementing the *Impact in Writing* programme and was therefore able to pilot a small study relatively easily. It was important to note my positionality within the pilot study. As a headteacher, I was very familiar with the research on parental engagement and the staff had led parental engagement sessions previously. In addition, the parents involved were more likely to be used to parental engagement strategies as they may have accessed them previously.

The quantitative aspect of the study was to undertake a baseline assessment of a piece of writing prior to a child starting the *Impact in Writing* programme. At the end of the programme, the child would complete another piece of writing and this was to be assessed again to see whether the child's writing had improved. The assessment method used for the writing had to be a standardised measure which would be familiar and known to teachers involved. In the pilot study, I used the outcomes from the Foundation Phase Framework (Welsh Government, 2015a) which align directly to the Welsh curriculum. I used these as they are the measures that are used by teachers to assess children formally at the end of the key stage and are consistent across Wales. However, I found that the outcomes were too broad to accurately assess the improvements in the writing and therefore reflected that this needed to be amended for the final research, adopting the Writing Scales (Wilson, 2015) instead. Although these are not aligned directly to the Welsh curriculum, because of the detail in which they assess children's writing skills and development, breaking skills down into very fine steps, I felt they were more appropriate to use. Again, this decision reinforced my pragmatic position as I selected the tools that were best suited to interpret the data in the most effective way.

I initially used a questionnaire to gather parental views, as I had originally thought about gathering data in this way to mirror the parental engagement questions asked in the National Survey for Wales (2016-17). It was then my intention to compare my results at a small scale to the responses about parental engagement nationally. However, I encountered several problems with using questionnaires. Firstly, although they were able to provide headline figures, such as how often do parents currently help their children at home with their writing, they were unable to provide me with any further information for wider analysis, meaning that I felt unable to draw any wider recommendations from them. In addition, I was concerned that some parents felt reluctant to complete a questionnaire, seeing it as almost a test. Although I asked parents to complete them in school, not everyone did and as a result my sample size was smaller than expected. I therefore decided that questionnaires would not be appropriate and decided to incorporate focus groups in the final research. I did not trial a focus group as this was a method that I was already familiar with, having undertaken focus groups previously as part of my professional doctorate modules. In order to gather the views of parents, in my role as a headteacher I had used an informal focus group approach in other scenarios, e.g. the Parent Forum, and therefore felt confident that this approach would provide me with an opportunity to gather data in an accurate and meaningful way.

Phase 1: Quantitative Methods

The quantitative methods adopted in this study were used to gather data to inform whether there was a link between the *Impact in Writing* parental engagement strategy and improved pupil attainment in writing.

Therefore, I will begin by presenting an overview of the *Impact in Writing* programme and then detail the quantitative methods used to measure whether there was an improvement in the standard of writing.

The *Impact in Writing* Parental Engagement Programme

As detailed earlier, the *Impact in Writing* programme was devised to support parental engagement in schools and increase attainment in writing. It is split in five component parts: recruiting parents for the programme by inviting them to participate; assessing children's

current standard of writing; teaching the children and the parents how to access the programme; providing home activities and feedback, and reassessing the children's writing to see whether an improvement has occurred. The quantitative aspects of the study adopted all of these components.

1. Invitation to Attend

The children who were selected to participate in the programme were all children from year 2 classes from the schools who were involved in the study. All of the children in the classes were invited to participate. An invitation was then sent out to the parents of those children, from the class teacher, inviting them to attend. Research has identified that teacher invitations are more successful in encouraging more parents to engage in home/school activities as opposed to a more generic school invitation (Colgate et al. 2017). Hoover and Dempsey comment further on this, stating: "Invitations serve as a motivator for involvement because they suggest to the parent that participation in the child's learning is welcome, valuable and expected by the school" Hoover and Dempsey (2005, p.110). This illustrates that the act of a teacher writing an invitation to a parent is itself a form of engagement and a motivator for parents to attend.

2. Assess

The programme began with an assessment of the child's writing to understand their current level of writing ability and to gauge the next steps of development for each child. This involved the child independently writing a piece of writing with no support or prompting from an adult. The children completed this independent writing task in their own schools with their class teachers. As such this would be seen by the children as a very normal and natural part of their school day and would not have caused any additional worry or anxiety. This was then assessed using The Oxford Writing Criterion Scale (2015) to give it a level. This assessment procedure was also followed by a group of children who had not participated in the programme. They are referred to as a comparison group.

Writing Scales

To ensure that the assessment of the writing samples was reliable and rigorous, an accurate and standardised tool needed to be used which was able to uniformly note and recognise

even small levels of progress in children’s writing. This was highlighted by Gorard and See (2013) as a recommendation to ensure the quality of research in this area. As previously noted, in the pilot study, the Literacy Outcomes for Children’s learning was used as a tool to assess the writing but this was too broad a measure to show the incremental small improvements that children make when they are at the earlier stages of their writing.

Therefore, the Oxford Writing Criterion Scale, 2015 (OWCS) devised by Ros Wilson was used as the assessment tool for the quantitative part of the study. This is a ‘curriculum neutral’ assessment tool suitable for any school to adopt (OWCS, 2015). The OWCS can be used both as a periodic summative teacher assessment tool and as a tool to inform next steps for success, both in the short and long term (Oxford Press, 2015). It is a very detailed assessment tool focused solely on writing skills. It breaks down children’s writing development into small steps so that it is easy to identify the point children have reached and the steps they need to take next in order to progress. The OWCS is split into a range of standards, 1, 2, 3, etc., with each standard setting out several criteria against which children are assessed. The criteria are assessing the following aspects of writing:

- Features of type/genre;
- Handwriting;
- Spelling;
- Grammar (including connectives and punctuation);
- Ambitious vocabulary, and
- Length, detail and description leading into writing voice.

An example of the criteria for **Standard 1** is shown in the following table. The other standards (R, 2 and 3) used are in the appendices (Appendix 1, 2 and 3).

No	Criteria	✓ • X
1	Can write own first name with appropriate upper and lower case letters (may not be accurate).	
2	Can form most letters correctly, although size and shape may be irregular.	
3	Writes simple regular words, some spelt correctly.	
4	Always leaves spaces between words.	
5	Begins to make phonic attempts at words.	

No	Criteria	✓ • ✕
6	Can spell CVC words (consonant, vowel, consonant, e.g. sit/bag/cat) usually correctly.	
7	Writes captions, labels and attempts other forms of writing (lists, stories, retell etc.)	
8	Can show some control over letter size, shape and orientation in writing.	
9	Can say what writing says and means.	
10	Can produce own ideas for writing.	
11	Can show some control over word order producing logical statements.	
12	Can spell most common words correctly (high-frequency words and the words on the year 1 list).	
13	Can make recognisable attempts at spelling words not known (almost all decodable without the child's help).	
14	Can write simple texts such as lists, stories, reports, recounts (a paragraph or more).	
15	Begins to show an awareness of how full stops are used in writing (maybe in the wrong places or only one, final full stop).	
16	Can usually give letters a clear and regular size, shape and orientation (ascenders and descenders/use of upper and lower case are usually accurate).	
17	Can use any connective, (may only ever be 'and') to join 2 simple sentences, thoughts, ideas, etc.	
18	Can use appropriate vocabulary, (should be coherent and sensible) in more than three statements.	
19	Can use logical phonic strategies when trying to spell unknown words in more than three statements.	
20	Can usually use a capital letter and full stop, question mark or exclamation mark to punctuate sentences.	
21	Can produce a paragraph or more of developed ideas independently that can be read without the help from the child (maybe more like spoken than written language / must not be a retell).	
<p>E=Emergent S=Secure A=Advanced AP=Assessment Point</p> <p>Assessment: 1-E = 7-12 1-S = 13-17 1-A = 18-21 1-AP = 19-21</p>		

Table 2: Example Criteria (Standard One)

To assess each piece of writing, the assessor(the class teacher) worked down each standard’s expectation, ticking criteria if it was secure, putting a dot if there was a little evidence but it was not yet secure and putting a cross (x) if the piece of writing did not demonstrate that skills. The ticks were then counted and the assessment box used to match the count to the overall assessment level e.g. 14 ticks would mean that a child was awarded a 1-S assessment level.

These are the steps that were followed to assess the writing samples from the children who were involved in the Impact programme, as well as the children who were not, on their two pieces of independent writing. The difference between the judgement on the first piece of writing and the judgement on the second was then calculated. This became the child’s progress score and represented the quantitative data collected, as shown in the following table.

Child	Writing example 1 (baseline)	Writing example 2 (post Impact)	Change
Child A	1-E	1-A	2 levels of progress

Table 3: Example of Progress Measures

The assessment of the children’s writing needed to be accurate, non-biased and consistent. I understood that I approached this research having already acknowledged the importance of parental engagement. It was fundamental that I was not biased in my analysis or views on the writing samples and that I remained impartial when analysing the data. To ensure the results were accurate, I adopted a phased approach, with the first set of assessments on the writing being undertaken by the class teacher which I then further verified. Random samples of writing examples were also moderated by a literacy specialist. All of the adults involved in the assessment of the writing samples were trained teachers who were all familiar with teaching young children and therefore skilled at interpreting individual expectations.

3. Teach

Parents and family members who had been invited to participate in the programme attended a workshop at the school which lasted approximately one hour. During the workshop, parents and family members were introduced to the rationale of parental engagement and some of the research which underpins this e.g. namely Desforjes and

Abouchaar (2003) and Goodall and Vorhaus (2011). This crucially allowed parents to understand the importance that their input can have and set the context for the programme. It lets parents know that they matter and that they can make a difference. Following this more general introduction, the specifics of the programme were introduced. The *Impact in Writing* programme provides parents with materials to help support their children at home with writing tasks and sets six different writing tasks to be completed over six weeks. The support materials are explained to the parents. These include sound mats (cards with the alphabet letters on them but that also have the corresponding sound picture cues to support emergent writers); punctuation pyramids (punctuation symbols that are presented hierarchically); blank recount frames (who, when, what, why, how) which can be used to help structure recount writing; dry whiteboards which can be used to “have a go” at sounding out words independently; high-frequency words which are those words that are most commonly used by emerging writers; and a pen and book in which to complete the writing tasks. All these materials are presented to parents in a plastic wallet for the parent and child to take home. Therefore, by providing materials the programme is not only furnishing the “home learning environment” (Sylva et al. 2004), it is also encouraging parents to focus on specific learning activities in the home (Sylva et al. 2004; Goodall, 2013).

After the supporting materials were introduced to the parents, their children were brought into the session. The children sat with their parents and the workshop leader (the class teacher) then led a recount writing lesson with the children with the parents observing. The teacher then modelled the key teaching points which were needed to support the children to be able to write a good recount. After supporting the structure of the writing by modelling the use of the writing frame, as the children began to write the teacher reminded them about the need for capital letters and full stops, using the punctuation pyramid, support them by suggesting the use of the high-frequency word chart, use the sound mat for sounding out words and giving advice on how to move their writing forward. This feedback is referred to as assessment for learning and provides children with the next steps for their learning. During the session, along with teaching the children how to complete a recount, the teacher was also guiding the parents in how to support their children in these activities. The quality of the support and training that is provided to parents at this point is key, as commented by McElvany and Steensel (2009), as the aim is to support the parents to

incorporate stimulating literacy practices within their home routine (Purcell-Gates, 2000). The interaction that children have with their parents and family members is important. Sociocultural theory asserts that children improve complex competencies, such as writing, by interacting with more skilled adults (Goodall, 2018a). This allows the adults, in this case parents, to “scaffold” children’s learning; that is, support them to first attain a skill with their help which then over time they are able to master independently (Vygotsky, 1978).

Along with the quality of the support given to parents, it is also crucial that the person leading the workshop is able to build good relationships with parents and work with them. Moran and Ghate (2005) completed a summary of studies looking at the effectiveness of parental support more generally rather than just from a parental involvement viewpoint. They concluded that in general the more successful programmes had trained professionals delivering them; however, the ability to develop relationships was also key.

This step of the programme is about ensuring that parents leave the session with an accurate understanding of what the children are being asked to do at home and how they are able to help them with their learning during these activities to ensure they begin to develop their writing skills. Parental engagement is closely linked to parents’ own knowledge and skills. Therefore, if parents perceive their own skills to be appropriate then they become more positive about engaging in an activity with their child (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). In addition, parental engagement can often hinder children’s development if it provides advice which is contrary to that being given in school. If teachers support parents through a workshop like Impact, they are less likely to become victims of counterproductive teaching methods (Blasi and Beck, 2002). It also allows schools to extend their capacity to provide daily substantive guidance in response to individual children’s writing (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001).

4. Home Activities and Feedback

At the end of the workshop, the parents and children left with all the materials they need for the children to undertake the home learning tasks over the next six weeks. Each week a different writing task was set. The parents then supported the children at home to undertake the tasks, using the support materials provided and giving prompts and feedback. The writing was returned to school every week and was marked by the teacher. The teacher

was then able to support the parent and the child by giving them feed-forward comments, i.e. those comments which provide the children and parents with the next steps for their development. It has been suggested that teachers can shape parental engagement when they regularly communicate with parents and that this communication can positively impact children's performance particularly when teachers provide feedback, as they do in Impact, on how their children can improve (Kraft and Rogers, 2015). This regular feedback continued over the six weeks of the programme, with the child completing one piece of writing per week.

5. Re-Assessment

At the end of the six-week programme, all the children then completed another independent piece of writing which was assessed using the writing scales. This was then used to compare to the original baseline writing.

This model of programme duplicates elements as identified by Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005, p.120) as suggested strategies to enhance parents' capacities for effective involvement based on their research on why parents become involved in their children's education and how this impacts children's attainment. The strategies included ensuring that parents were aware of the important role that they play in their child's education by communicating this clearly to them. This is achieved during the initial workshop phase. They also recommended giving parents specific information about what they can do to be involved, as well as information about the general effects of involvement on student learning and how their involvement influences learning, providing specific information about the curriculum and National Curriculum learning goals. Again, this is clearly detailed when parents attend the school for the workshop session when the teacher explains how the activities being completed relate to the curriculum and therefore relate to what their child is learning about. Finally, they identify that it is important for parents to receive feedback on the effects of their involvement. This happens during the regular feed-forward comments that the class teacher provided to the children and parents over the six weeks.

The model of the programme and the format and structure of the activities is the same each week. This allows parents to build up their skills as they understand each stage and what to

do next. As the skills being developed are hierarchical, the children have the opportunity to build on their skills week after week.

Participants

The participants involved in this study were drawn from three schools. Data were also generated from three non-participating schools to provide some contextual analysis on expected level of progress. The three participating schools were chosen from a convenience sample of schools participating in the *Impact in Writing* training programme. The non-participating schools were also drawn from a convenience sample, through professional networks. Attempts were made to broadly match the schools in terms of geographical demographics, size, pupil attendance and effectiveness, as measured by Welsh Government's (2017b) national categorisation. However, it was not intended that these non-participating schools were to represent a control group. Thus, this analysis of progress followed a quasi-experimental pre-/post-test design (the limitations of this approach are discussed below on p.122).

Contextual information about each school implementing the programme is detailed in Table 4 below. Contextual information regarding the three schools who were non-participating can be found in the appendices (Appendix 4).

School A:

- Infant school with 185 pupils on roll whose ages range from 3 to 7
- Green category
- Attendance figure: 95.2%
- 22% of pupils eligible for free school meals

School B:

- Primary school with 368 pupils on roll whose ages range from 3-11
- Green support category
- Attendance figure: 95.1%
- 25% of pupils eligible for free school meal

School C:

- Primary school with 331 pupils on roll whose ages range from 3-11
- Green category

- Attendance figure: 93.4%
- 30% of pupils eligible for free school meals

Table 4: Contextual Data for Schools Implementing the Programme

The three schools included in implementing the programme were a convenience sample; that is, available by virtue of its accessibility (Bryman, 2012). These schools volunteered after attending a training day based at my school where I shared that I was looking for schools to become involved in some research which focused on family engagement. All three were subsequently included in the research as they represented different local authorities, provided different and contrasting contexts and had differing prior knowledge of parental engagement.

The following numbers of participants (children) were involved and provided writing samples from the three schools.

School Ref	School Type	Number of Pupils	Before & After Writing Samples
A	Impact	33	33
B	Impact	33	33
C	Impact	24	24

Table 5: Numbers of Pupils from each Participating (Impact) School

To provide some contextual data on expected writing improvement, writing samples were also collected from three schools which formed a non-equivalent group in this study. The participants (children) involved and the writing samples these schools provided are detailed below.

School Ref	School Type	Number of Pupils	Before & After Writing Samples
D	Non-Impact	27	20
E	Non-Impact	8	8
F	Non-Impact	12	12

Table 6: Numbers of Pupils from each Non-Participating (Non-Impact) School

Phase 2: Qualitative Methods

The qualitative method used in this study consisted of six different focus groups, three focus groups involving parents and family members who had participated in the *Impact in Writing* programme and three focus groups which involved staff members from School A, B and C who had participated in implementing the programme. Within the family members there was a mixture of grandparents, parents and older siblings; and within the staff members there was a mixture of senior leaders, teachers who had been directly involved in delivering the programme and family engagement officers. The following table illustrates the number of participants in each of the focus groups across the three schools, school A, B and C who implemented the *Impact in Writing* programme. Schools D, E and F did not participate in the qualitative data in the study.

Participants

School A	School B	School C
Focus group: Five family members	Focus group: Three family members	Focus group: Three family members
Focus group: Three staff members	Focus group: Three staff members	Focus group: Two staff members

Table 7: Participants in each School

Focus Groups

Bryman (2012) describes a focus group as “an interview with several people on a specific topic or issue” (p.504). Focus groups were selected as a means of gathering data for several reasons. Firstly, I wanted to ensure that the qualitative method used allowed the topic of parental engagement to be discussed and explored in detail, thus hopefully providing data which would explain the sub-questions from the research. In addition, using focus groups allowed the collection of opinions encountered as a group, rather than on an individual basis. This is important as, listening to others in a group, can often prompt participants to think of something to add that they may have not done so if they were being interviewed on their own. I felt this was particularly important with the parents’ focus group as I felt that it may mitigate some of the positionality issues arising from my role as dual researcher and headteacher.

For both focus groups, a pre-prepared set of questions were asked (see Appendix 5 and 6), however, I ensured that there was ample opportunity for the group to expand upon and raise the issues that they felt were important. As I was undertaking three focus groups with the parents and three with the school staff, having some set questions allowed me to ensure a broad comparability across these different groups.

Parents and Family Members Focus Groups

I held a focus group in each of the three schools that had implemented the *Impact in Writing* programme. I felt that the focus group approach was particularly successful with the parents as it proved to be less intimidating for those involved as they were able to be interviewed as a group (Bryman, 2012). I was very conscious that schools can be daunting places for parents and that some parents may feel less confident in a school setting and unable feel to participate fully. The focus group allowed parents and family members to share their views and explore in-depth some of the issues raised, but as it was a group context those less confident participants were also able to share their views, often after another participant had made a comment. I was aware that I was unknown to the group, but they were aware I was a headteacher. The group began with me introducing myself by my first name and giving an overview of the research, getting consent from all the participants and stressing that all views shared would be anonymised in the final study. I also stressed that I would not be sharing their views directly with the staff of the school. I hoped that this would put the participants at ease, allowing them to take a full and active part in the process.

I did not challenge any of the responses given, other than for further clarification, which allowed group discussions to take place and therefore allowed participants to build a collective response together. This dialogue between participants was more evident in the focus groups conducted in Schools A and B than the group in School C. Both Schools A and B had previously offered opportunities for parents to come into the school for various events and so it could be that these parents then felt more at ease and therefore more willing to discuss things more opening in the school setting. In addition, School A had a larger focus group with five participants therefore generating more discussion. In School C, one of the participants was a grandparent as opposed to a parent and this could have affected how

relevant she felt her responses were in comparison to the other participants in that group. All of the focus group sessions were recorded at the time and subsequently transcribed. On reviewing the transcripts, in schools A and B both groups had a similar input from all participants; however, in the focus group in School C, although all the participants inputted, one parent seemed to dominate and answered more extensively than the others. I tried to mitigate this by asking direct questions, by name, to the other participants e.g. "What are your views on this Mary?" and by doing this I did ensure all participants responded.

I conducted all the focus groups in the school setting where the parents' children attended and ensured that it was at a time that was convenient, coinciding with finishing at the end of the school day so that the school pick up was not disrupted.

Staff Members' Focus Groups

The purpose of the staff focus group was to gather information on the teachers' attitudes to the programme and to gather an insight into how parental engagement strategies could be improved from a teacher's perspective. Again, these were held in each of the three schools that participated in implementing the Impact programme and included at least the class teacher who had delivered the programme and a senior leader (in all three schools this was the deputy headteacher). In two of the three schools, the focus group included the family engagement officer from the school, so I ensured that these groups were held at the school where the staff worked so as not to cause inconvenience. I was also keen to stress at the beginning of the focus groups that I was there to gather their views about the programme and was not making a judgement about anything that they said. The school staff engaged in discussion readily and there were many instances where a member of staff would feed off a previous point and further elaborate on it. This was enhanced by the fact that each staff member involved had a different role within the school; either a senior leader, class teacher or family engagement officer (in the groups conducted in both Schools A and B) and therefore their interpretations of issues came from a slightly different viewpoint. I felt that this allowed for a far richer understanding of the issues and ensured a very realistic account of the viewpoints of the schools involved. Again, in School C, there was less discussion amongst the group. This could have been because there were only two staff members and also because of the power play within that group. The class teacher was involved in the

focus group along with the deputy headteacher and therefore may have felt unable to raise any points that contradicted the view of the more senior staff member. Again, I asked the class teacher direct questions to ensure greater equity of voice.

Analysis of the Qualitative Data

The qualitative data were analysed by adopting a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Using a thematic analysis approach allows the researcher to identify, analyse and report on patterns within data in order to address the research questions. A theme can be described as a category which has been identified by analysis through the data, that builds on codes identified in transcripts and which provides a theoretical understanding of the data (Bryman, 2012). It is not aligned with a particular epistemological approach, but is a flexible approach that can be adapted for use and therefore sits comfortably for use within pragmatic research. The thematic analysis framework undertaken in this study followed six phases; familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; establishing themes; reviewing and defining the themes, and finally writing up the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The first step of the process involved me transcribing the focus groups verbatim and then immersing myself in the data; rereading the transcripts until I became very familiar with them. During this part of the process, as I read and re-read the texts, I made notes and comments directly onto the transcripts and highlighted different sections of the data. I did not use a computer package to undertake this part of the process, preferring to handle the data personally, working with highlighters and post it notes to help annotate and make sense of it. I began to generate some initial codes noting aspects of the data which seemed relevant and interesting. From these codes, I then developed an initial set of emerging themes which were informed by my knowledge of existing theories as detailed in the literature review. I went through the process of applying themes and amending them several times, each time re-reading the original data to ensure that the process was thorough. As such, this was an iterative process, allowing me to engage deeply with the data. The themes were then defined prior to using them to support the writing up of my analysis. An example of the final thematic map can be seen in Appendix 7.

Ethical Considerations

I was mindful during my research of the need to maintain the highest professional and ethical standards and to ensure that I maintained the integrity and reputation of educational research (BERA, 2018). This was particularly important, given my professional role as a headteacher. I ensured that I adhered to the British Educational Research Associations Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018), paying particular reference to my responsibility to the participants, in particular to the children who were involved, my dual positionality as headteacher and researcher and the need for confidentiality.

I always ensured that I operated showing responsibility to participants and treating all participants fairly and sensitively. I ensured that consent was gained from all participants at the start of the study including the parents of all the children involved and the parents and school staff involved in the focus groups (BERA, 2018, pg. 9). Detailed information was shared to all the participants allowing those participating to understand why their participation was being sought, what they would be needed to do and how the information gathered would be used and retained (Appendix 8) in line with BERA's guidelines. At the start of the research, I ensured that those schools who volunteered to be a part of the research were aware that I would be conducting focus group interviews. Most of the staff involved had been on the initial training and therefore had already met me, limiting any anxiety. These school-based staff were then used as gatekeepers to access parents and family members who had been involved in the writing programme. The school staff approached the parents at their own schools, sharing the information letter and asking them to participate in the focus groups. They were able to answer any questions the parents had and make clear the aims of the sessions. They also explained clearly that the parents were not obliged to take part, that they had the right to withdraw at any time and that their data would be confidential and that they would not be identifiable from the data in any way.

Whilst consent from the children themselves was not sought, consent was gained from the parents for the children who participated both by attending the programme and by providing writing samples in line with guidance from BERA (2018, p. 24) and the United

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990). All of the writing data were generated as part of the school day; however, it was explained to parents that this writing would be used for research purposes.

As a headteacher, my dual positionality was a key factor in ethical considerations during the research (Point 19, BERA, 2018) and I was keen to ensure that my reflective research did not impinge upon others. To support this, I was very explicit about my role as a researcher and made this distinction from my role as headteacher by telling participants that their participation was voluntary and that this could be withdrawn at any time without affecting any professional relationship with me or my school moving forward. In addition, I explained that there would be no wider benefits through participating e.g. career benefits. I also consciously rejected any assumptions that I had on the schools prior to the research which arose from my professional viewpoint and experience. I ensured that the analysis of data was accurate, non-judgemental and open to scrutiny.

All data collected were confidential and anonymised. All participants were made aware of this before participation. All electronic data were stored on a secure computer network and at no time have any portable storage devices been used. Any paper-based data e.g., writing samples have been stored securely in a locked cabinet at home. The storage and use of all data adhere to the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) (2018).

Finally, this research has not been sponsored or commissioned by a third party and there has been no potential commercial gain for participating in this research. Throughout the research, I have ensured that the conclusions that I have drawn are evidence-based and are not simply supporting previous held beliefs or views based on my educational understanding.

During the next chapter I will share my findings from the research, not only looking at whether the *Impact in Writing* programme improved children's writing skills, but also analysing the qualitative data to unpick the wider implications for parental engagement.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

The data gathered from both the quantitative and qualitative methods have been analysed in order to answer the following research questions:

- Is there a link between the *Impact in Writing* programme and improved attainment in writing?
- What strategies are used in the programme to promote parental engagement?
- What are parents' attitudes to the programme and how could parental engagement be improved from a parental perspective?
- What are teachers' attitudes to the programme and how could parental engagement strategies be improved from a teacher's perspective?
- What lessons can be taken from this programme for wider parental engagement in children's learning?

The following themes have emerged from the data and will be discussed during the findings chapter: parents as teachers, which will draw heavily on the quantitative data; relationships between home and school, drawing on both the quantitative and qualitative data; developing parental agency and aspirations and moving from involvement to engagement.

- I. **Parents as Teachers.** Against the backdrop of a rapidly changing education system, this theme will present parents' understanding of pedagogic strategies prior to the programme and highlight whether this changed as a result of participating in the programme. It will detail the quantitative data to highlight whether there is a link between the *Impact in Writing* programme and an increased attainment in children's writing.
- II. **Relationships.** This theme will focus on both parents' and teachers' attitudes and the importance of effective home/school relationships. As part of this theme, the data highlights ways in which schools can support their parents, ensure effective communication and build trust. It explores the role of the family engagement officer highlighting the importance of this role in supporting the development of

meaningful relationships between parents and the school which underpin effective engagement.

- III. **Parents' Agency and Aspirations.** This theme will explore the interaction that parents had with the schools prior to engaging in the *Impact in Writing* programme, the use of their social and cultural capital and their agency in their children's learning. It also focuses on parents' aspirations for their children prior to engaging in the programme, challenging the deficit model.
- IV. **Involvement to Engagement.** This theme will look at the evidence from the data which highlights where the schools were positioned in relation to involvement and engagement both before and after the programme; to identify whether parents involved in the project moved at any point from involvement with the school to engagement with their children's learning and identify the strategies which were used in the programme which supported this.

Parents as Teachers

The first phase of the research focused on whether, by engaging in the *Impact in Writing* programme, children's attainment in writing could be raised. The parents involved in the focused groups expressed a desire to help their children and many of the parents spoke specifically about their responsibility for supporting their children with their learning. However, despite this desire to help, the data identified barriers which prevented the parents from engaging more deeply with their children's learning. One of these barriers was the changes in the curriculum and the pedagogical approaches that schools take.

Because everything changes. Teaching them the right way for now rather than how we were taught at school. Otherwise they get confused – you will tell them this way but in school they are doing it another way so at least you can both do it the same way (Parent 2, School B).

Yes, it's knowing what they are taught in school so that you can all give the same information so that you are not confusing them (Parent 3, School A).

You need to know what is being taught in school and I found that that was a barrier for myself. I know how to write something but it's what he's been taught and following that through. Times have moved on, haven't they? (Parent 4, School A).

As the data indicate, parents in both school A and B, identified their lack of understanding about how things are taught in school. The data further highlight parents' concern about this and specifically the idea that things have changed since they were at school, which has left them feeling disempowered and fearful about trying to help their children in case they get it wrong. The data show that parents were concerned that they might confuse their children or make the situation even worse by showing them the wrong pedagogical methods, those that they were in taught in school as opposed to the approaches used now. One parent explained:

I was showing Sarah how to read and she said, no, we are not doing that (Parent 1, School B).

This parent then went on to say how she wanted to be on the same wavelength as her daughter. Further data identified that other parents spoken to wanted to overcome this barrier of not understanding how things are taught also:

I like to come in because it helps you to understand what to do to help them because it's different (Parent 3, School B).

As the parent in School A states, she feels that she lacks an understanding of how she can help but realises that she can access the school for support and that this something that she feels comfortable doing. The lack of knowledge around the teaching of literacy skills and writing in particular was emphasised in the data.

When it was more formal writing, I didn't really know how to support her to develop. I wasn't kind of sure where to go with it (Parent 4, School A).

I had a copy of the alphabet and she explained how they were teaching the different letters to them (Parent 5, School A).

These parents both identify particular concerns around their lack of understanding of how phonics and writing is taught and explain how this lack of understanding means that they feel unable to support their children as a result. The teaching of literacy has undergone many changes within the last twenty years and this has created a gap in knowledge for parents, especially those removed from school because of a perceived lack of social and cultural capital.

However, previous research has shown that parental interventions can result in improving children's literacy skills (Senechal and Young, 2008). However, for these interventions to be successful the parents involved need to be confident in their own ability (Sime and Sheridan, 2014). For the parents involved in the programme to develop their confidence and understanding in key pedagogical issues around writing, so that they knew how to help effectively, they all attended a workshop led by the class teacher. During this workshop, the teacher modelled the approaches that the parents could take when working with their children at home. The children were brought into the workshop so that strategies could be modelled and practised by the parents so that they had a clear understanding of what constitutes effective intervention and support when developing writing. This approach was identified in the data as being an effective way to support parents to develop their skills and knowledge.

We had a presentation on what the impact course was all about, how to do it, which was useful (Parent 5, School A).

We came in and they discussed it all at first and told us what it was for and then we had the paper to practice and so the children came in afterwards and we had the paper, everything to go with it and to show us and we done it there and then went through it afterwards with the children and with the teachers so you did know a lot about it and what you were going to do and what they expected (Parent 2, School B).

The data indicate that the format of the workshop, which was attended by the children, gave the parents an opportunity to practice what they had to do and they subsequently left having a clear understanding of what was expected of them. This supports wider research on the effectiveness of family learning, where parents and children are engaged jointly in learning activities (Hingle, 2010). Another aspect of the structure of the programme which was highlighted in the data as being effective was the resources that were provided to the parents and the children.

You had all the tools yeah. The resource pack was really helpful because that pack was our bible for those six weeks if I'm honest (Parent 2, School A).

The special pencil came out and he knew it was his homework. It made everything easier as you didn't have to go and look for a pencil and a rubber. Its simple things (Parent 2, School A).

The resources you can use at any time, so if they have got other homework you have got that you can pull back out and say, look, remember when we were doing this to implement those strategies then to support the type of homework that they are doing (Parent 4, School A).

These parents identified the importance of being provided with these resources, both because it removed any financial barriers that may have prevented completing the tasks but also as a means of structuring and supporting their delivery of the programme. One parent also identified that this support would be beneficial after the programme had ended and would be used as an ongoing means of support. This endorses the work of Deforges and Abouchaar (2003), who identified that if parents lack suitable resources to be able to support their children with their learning this can act as a barrier to their engagement. Furthermore, it also reinforces the work of Sylva et al. (2004) who identified the importance of furnishing the home learning environment to ensure that there are a range of resources available for parents to use to support the delivery of appropriate activities.

Both schools A and B took a proactive approach in providing additional materials to parents after the programme had initially started. They explained how they made a further information sheet, detailing exactly how to support with the home learning activities and then placed that in the front of the Impact books. The class teacher describes how;

It was really helpful and it cleared up some of the confusion (Teacher, School A).

Again, this indicates how schools A and B both were proactive in wanting to develop the parents throughout the programme and also that they acknowledged some of the challenges that the parents were facing.

The following section focuses on the quantitative data gathered to show whether, through the support provided at home by the parents, the children's writing skills were improved.

Is there a link between the *Impact in Writing* Programme and Improved Attainment in Writing?

Three schools were involved in the quantitative data collection, who implemented the *Impact in Writing* programme (schools A, B and C). Three schools were used as a non-equivalent sample to provide illustrative comparisons (schools D, E and F). The following

table shows the three schools who were involved in delivering the programme, giving a breakdown of the numbers of participants involved in each school and noting the amount of free school meals pupils.

School Ref	School Type	Number of Pupils	Baseline and Final Writing Samples	FSM Pupils
A	Impact	33	33	5
B	Impact	33	33	12
C	Impact	24	24	6

Table 8: Summary of Schools and Pupils Implementing the Impact Programme

All the children involved from all three schools were in the same school year, Year 2. All the children completed two independent pieces of writing, a baseline and final sample, which were both assessed and levelled using standardised writing scales. One piece of writing was completed the week before the *Impact in Writing* programme began and the second piece of writing was completed at the end of the programme.

A graph showing the baseline levels of the pupils in schools A, B and C is shown below.

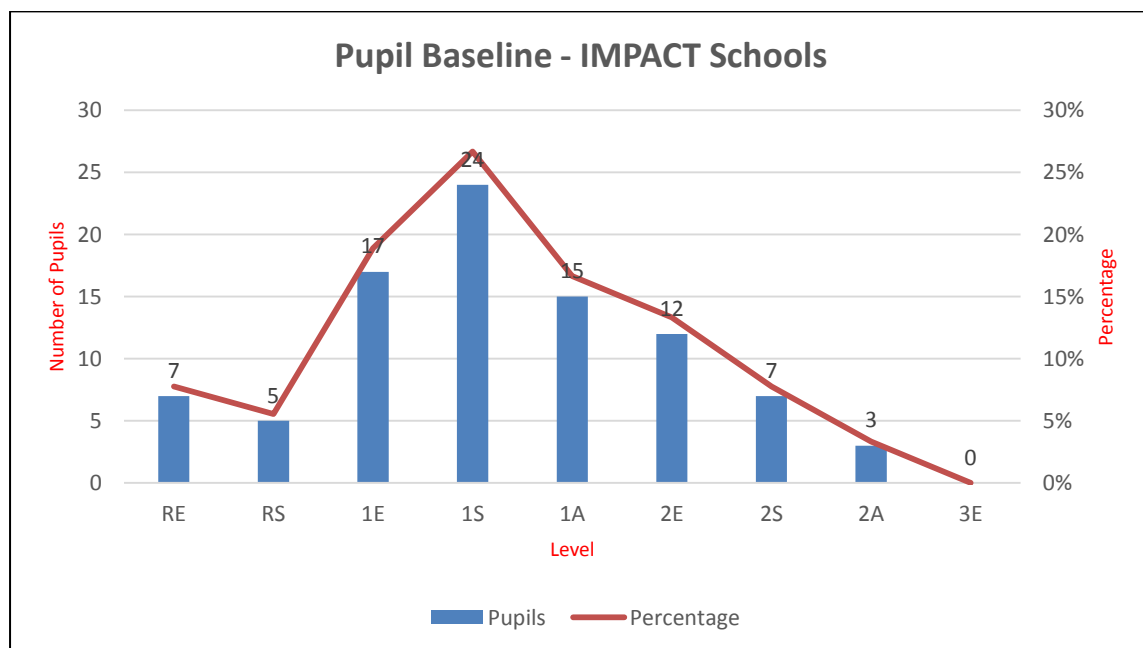


Figure 1: Summary of the Baseline Data for Impact Schools

The data show that prior to starting the *Impact in Writing* programme, the children had a broad range of starting points ranging from RE, where children are at the very earliest stages of writing, to 2A, where children are able to write fluently and at length including a

range of punctuation. The majority of children started the programme at 1S. This means that they are beginning to develop their writing skills as they can spell some common words correctly and that they use their phonetic knowledge to make attempts at unknown words. They are also beginning to write in sentences, showing an awareness of how full stops are used.

A final piece of writing was completed by all the children after they had participated in the *Impact in Writing* programme. The graph below shows a summary of the final levels of the writing achieved by the children.

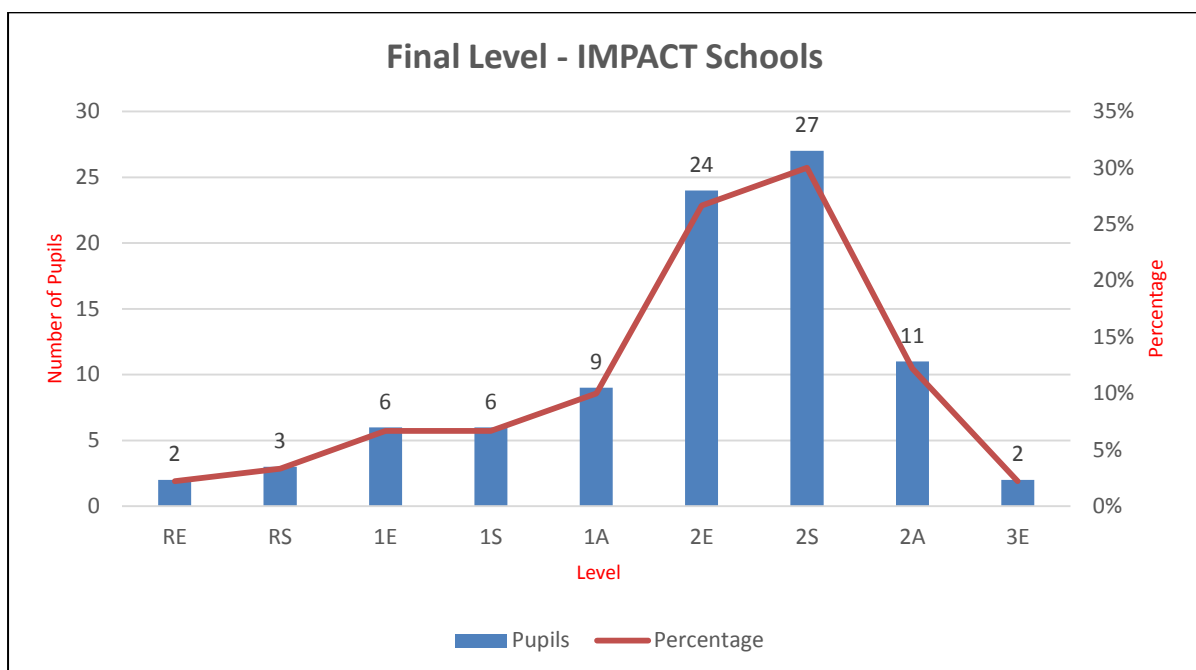


Figure 2: Summary of the Final Writing Data for Impact Schools

The levels of the baseline and final samples of writing were then compared and noted to see whether there had been any change in the assessed level over the duration of the programme. Table 9 below illustrates the results calculated for the children who had participated in the *Impact in Writing* programme between their baseline and final piece of independent writing.

Progress	School A	School B	School C	TOTAL	Percentage
None	1	2	7	10	11%
1 Level	10	16	4	30	33%
2 Levels	11	12	12	35	39%

Progress	School A	School B	School C	TOTAL	Percentage
3 Levels	10	2	1	13	14%
4 Levels	1	1	0	2	2%
TOTAL	33	33	24	90	100%

Table 9: The Progress made by the Children in each of the three Schools

The data show that ten children made no progress in their writing, that is, their assessment level remained the same despite having attended the *Impact in Writing* programme.

However, eighty children all made progress in their writing throughout the *Impact in Writing* programme and this progress ranged from increasing by 1 level of progress, to two pupils who increased by four levels of progress. Most children, thirty-five, made two levels of progress.

The following bar chart illustrates the summary of progress for all children involved in the *Impact in Writing* programme.

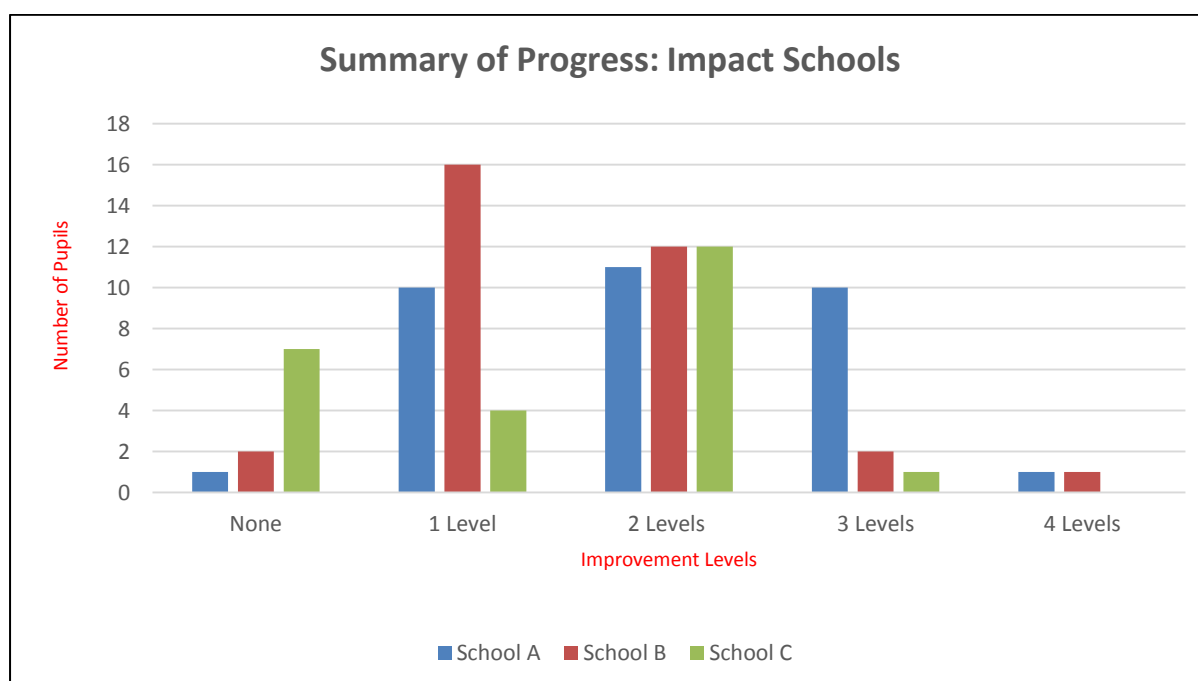


Figure 3: The Progress made by the Children in each of the three Schools

To provide some contextual data on expected levels of progress for the analysis of the *Impact in Writing* programme, data were gathered from three schools (schools D, E and F) who were not implementing this programme, referred to earlier as the non-participating schools. The children in the non-participating schools completed both a baseline assessment

and a final writing sample, in line with the participating schools. Detailed analysis showing data from the non-participating schools including samples collated from each school, baseline data, final writing data and progress levels, including a breakdown of progress for each school, can be found in Appendix 9.

To illustrate the potential impact of the involvement in the *Impact in Writing* programme, it is interesting to make a comparison between the data from the schools involved (schools A, B and C) and the three non-participating schools (schools D, E and F). The graph below shows a comparison between the baseline assessments for the Impact v Non-Impact schools.

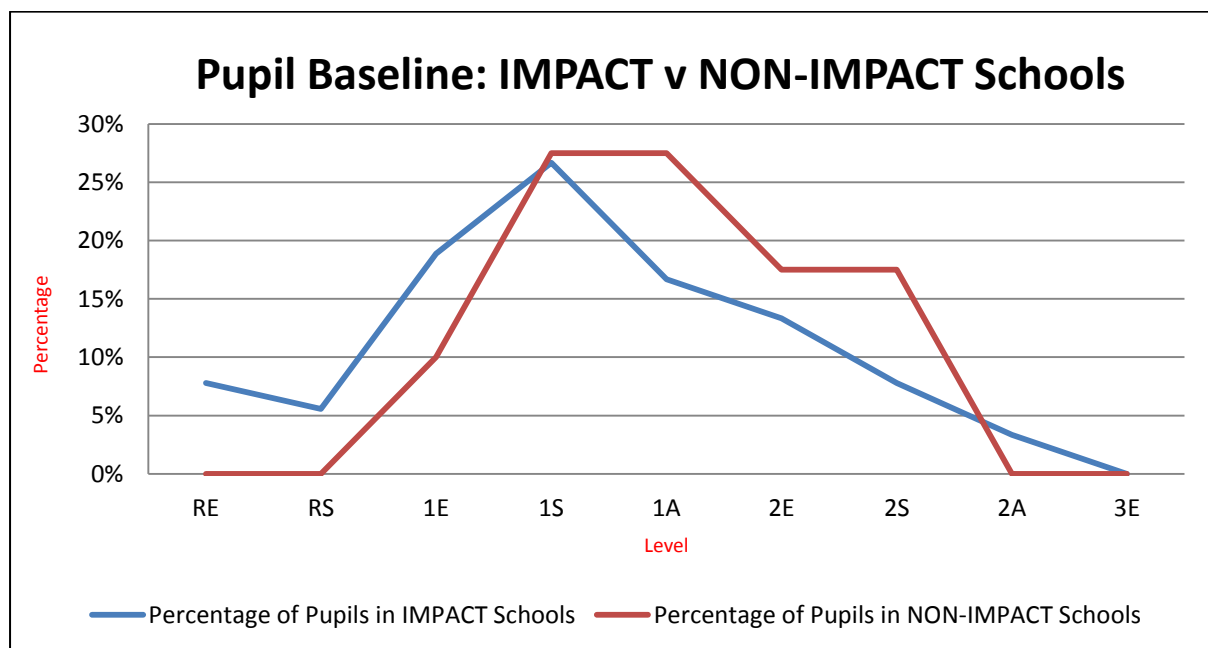


Figure 4: Summary of Pupil Baseline between Impact and Non-Impact Schools

The graph shows that the attainment of the cohort of pupils in the non-impact schools was higher than the attainment of the cohort in the impact schools, before implementation of the programme. As a non-equivalent sample there could be a range of variables that could explain this, though the variable socio-economic demographics of the schools is a likely cause (see Appendix 4). The graph below shows the attainment of the children in their final piece of writing, after the children in schools A, B and C had implemented the programme.

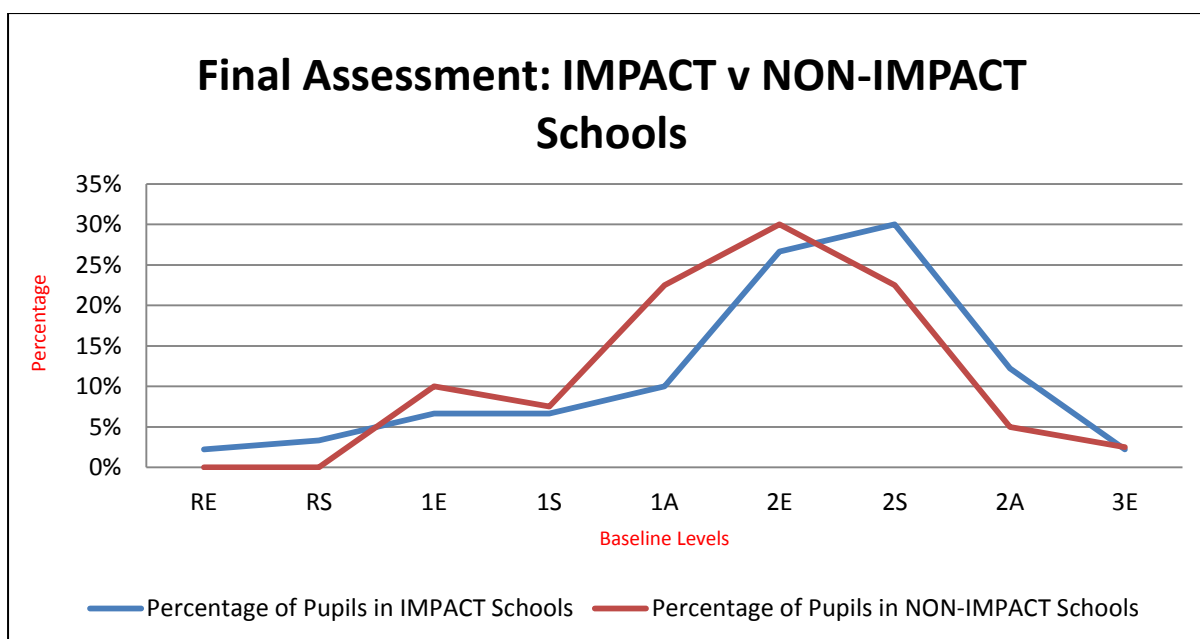


Figure 5: Summary of Final Writing Assessment between Impact and Non-Impact Schools

The graph shows that attainment (in writing) of the cohort of pupils in the Impact schools at the final writing stage was above that of the cohort in the non-impact schools. That is, the attainment in writing of the cohort within the participating schools overtook that of the cohort within the non-participating schools. The shift in attainment is explained by the data in the levels of progress that each child made. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Tables 10 and 11 below show a direct comparison between the levels of progress made by children who completed the programme (Impact schools) and the levels of progress made by the children who did not undertake the programme (Non-Impact schools).

Number of Pupils in IMPACT Schools	Percentage of Pupils in IMPACT Schools	Progress Level
10	11%	None
30	33%	1 Level
35	39%	2 Levels
13	14%	3 Levels
2	2%	4 Levels

Table 10: Progress Levels at Impact Schools

Number of Pupils in NON-IMPACT Schools	Percentage of Pupils in NON-IMPACT Schools	Progress Level
18	45%	None
18	45%	1 Level
3	8%	2 Levels
1	3%	3 Levels
0	0%	4 Levels

Table 11: Progress Levels at Non-Impact Schools

When the results of the levels of progress made by the children who were involved in the *Impact in Writing* project are compared to the levels of progress made by the children who did not participate in the programme, the results show that:

- 11% of children made no progress in Impact schools compared with 45% of children making no progress in non-impact schools. This suggests a far greater proportion of children did not make progress over the duration of the programme.
- 89% of children made at least one level of progress or more in Impact schools compared with only 55% of children in non-impact schools. This shows that a significantly higher proportion of children made more progress in the Impact schools.

The graph below shows the comparison of progress between Impact and Non-Impact schools.

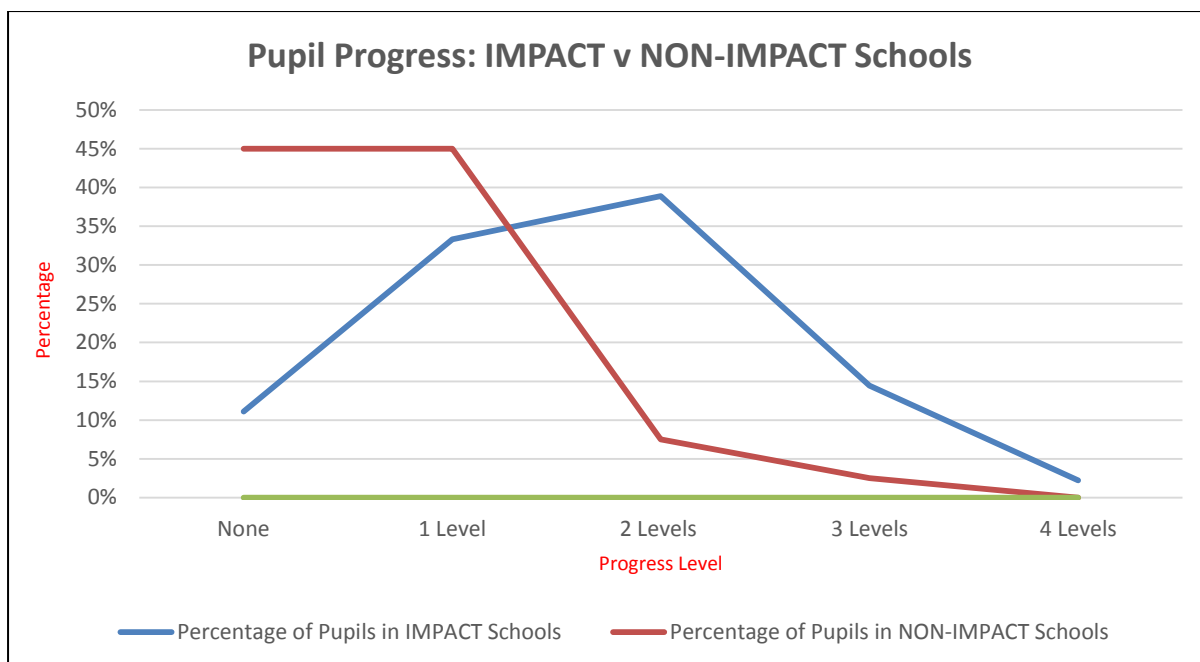


Figure 6: Comparison of Progress between Impact and Non-Impact Schools

While these results suggest a correlation between involvement in the programme and improvement in writing we cannot make any robust claims in relation to causality given that there is no direct equivalence between the two groups and a range of confounding variables could explain this. In addition, by virtue of the fact that one group were exposed to the intervention and the other were not, one would expect some impact. However, these results do suggest that participation in the programme resulted in higher levels of progress when compared to those children in the non-participating schools.

To illustrate how this progress looks in terms of the children’s actual writing, I have included some examples below. For each child, I have included their baseline piece of writing, which they completed prior to completing the programme, followed by their second piece of writing they completed after the programme.

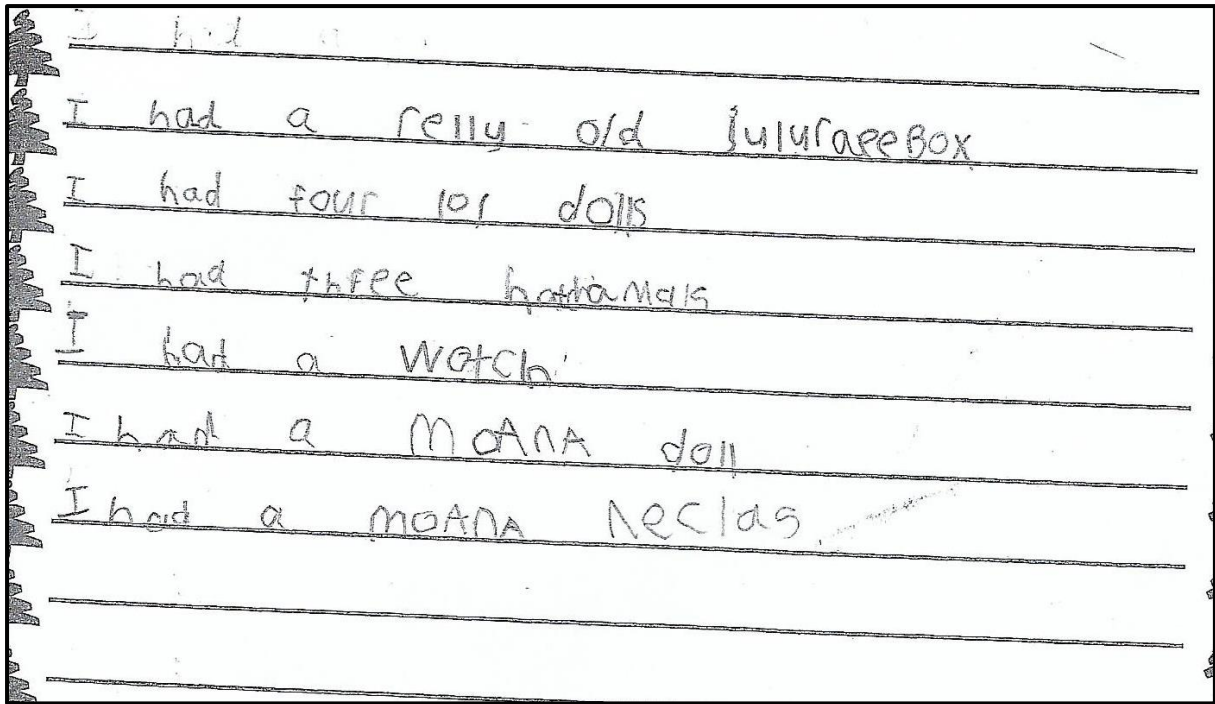
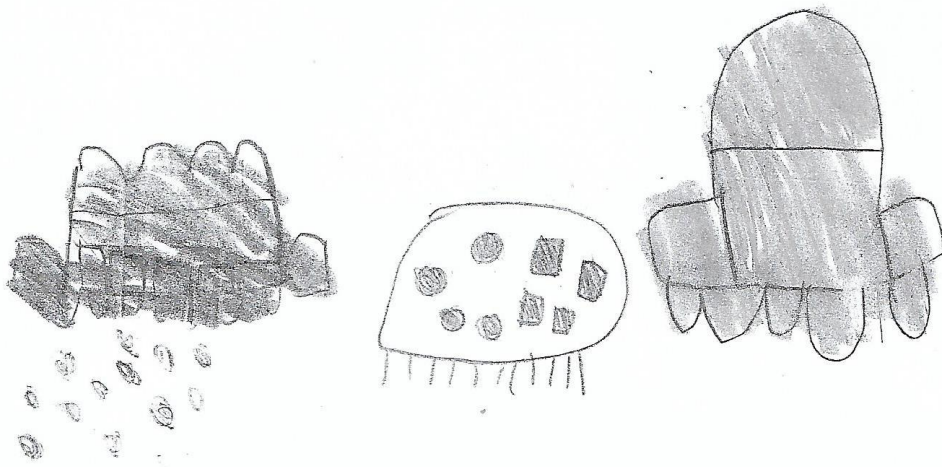


Figure 7: Child A, School A: Before Participating in the Programme

In this piece of unaided writing, this child is able to spell a simple cvc^4 word correctly and can show some control over their letter size and shape. They are beginning to show an awareness of how full stops are used (there is one at the very end of the writing) and they are leaving spaces between words.

⁴ A **CVC word** is a single syllable three-letter **word** that follows the pattern of consonant, vowel, consonant



I was in mine and my gransha's room
sleeping. My gransha was all ready and
I got up really excited. I said grans
can I open my m and m dispenser
pieces? no said gransha because Mam and
dad want to see you open them.
OK. I said, Mamma's daddy's grans and m
Big Brother Alex got up, now we can
said gransha, Pinella! I said, Mamma! I
said a m and m dispenser! cool said
mamma we had so much fun I felt
excited. ✓

Figure 8: Child A, School A: After the *Impact in Writing Programme*

The second piece of independent writing by Child A shows a marked improvement. They have produced a much longer paragraph of more developed ideas and are also using a range of punctuation including a question mark and an exclamation mark. They are able to use a connective to join two simple sentences and are beginning to include more detail to interest the reader.

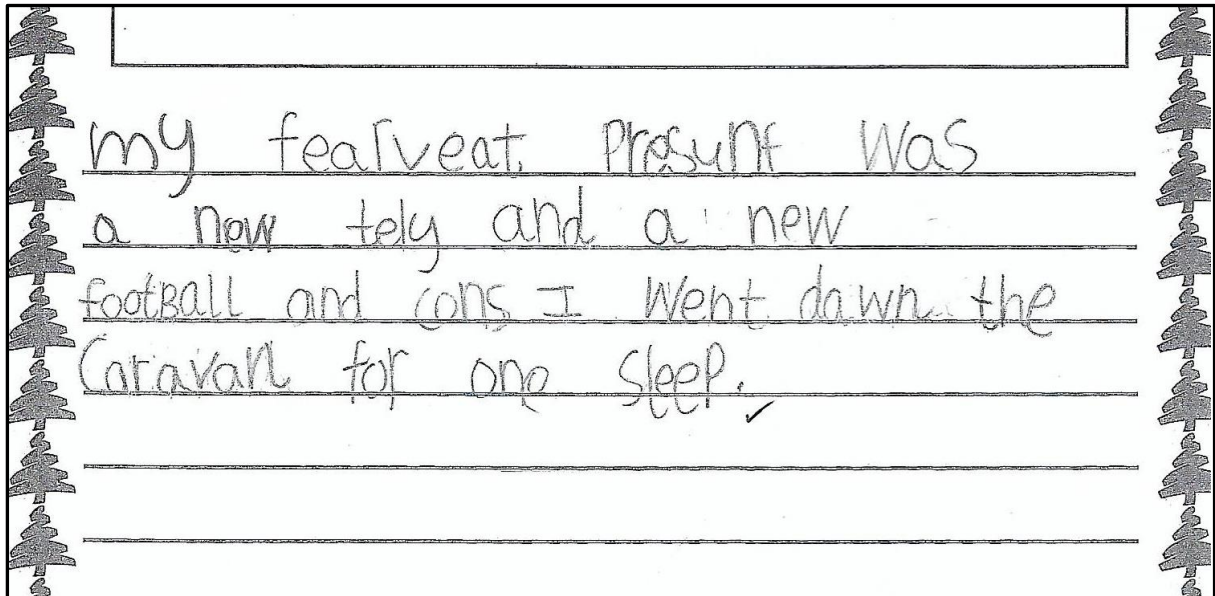


Figure 9: Child B, School A: Before Participating in the Programme

This child is able to write simple regular words with some of them spelt correctly, can form most letters correctly is showing awareness of how full stops are used.

On January the 23 it was my birthday. When I woke up out of bed. I went down the stairs and opened all my presents. My favorite present was my drone and it has a camera on it. It can change like it can change red and green at the same time. It's got a camera on the controller and it can do 1 mile by a minute. My drone was off my mummy and my

daddy. It was more than 100 Pawns. It was 109 Pawns then we went to my leaguon party with all of my friends and all of Xavier's friends. I pick TJ, Theo, Cody, Even, and Jesse, and I was the red team and Xavier was green team. My brother went and he pick a friend. one friend he was 9 years old he was one of sub

Figure 10: Child B, School A: After the *Impact in Writing Programme*

In this piece of writing Child B is able to command meaning well using a series of sentences to communicate their ideas. The piece shows the basic punctuation is correct and more ambitious types of punctuation have been attempted, although these are not always correct. They are using phonetically plausible strategies to attempt to spell unknown words.

Both these examples show a significant improvement in the children’s writing after being involved in the *Impact in Writing* programme and help to illustrate the quantitative data.

The Performance of FSM Pupils Involved in the Programme

There is extensive research to suggest that social disadvantage and lower educational attainment are closely related (Feiler, 2005). This is described as the attainment gap within educational discourse. At both a UK national level and within Wales, the issue that this attainment gap presents and how this can be countered has become a main focus, both for policy and practice. The current research on the effectiveness of parental engagement interventions, such as *Impact in Writing*, and their ability to impact pupil outcomes specifically for disadvantaged pupils is limited. Therefore, the next analysis will focus on the performance of the FSM pupils who participated in the programme, with a view to adding further evidence to this key debate.

In the three schools that implemented the Impact programme, 23 pupils were FSM and 67 pupils were nFSM. The following table shows the levels of progress achieved by the FSM children.

Progress Levels	Number of Pupils	Average
None	3	13%
1	10	44%
2	7	30%
3	3	13%
4	0	0%
TOTAL	23	100%

Table 12: Progress Level Summary for FSM Children

13% of FSM children made no progress but 87% of children made one or more levels of progress. 43% of children made two or more levels of progress.

The following table shows the levels of progress achieved by the nFSM children.

Progress Levels	Number of Pupils	Average
None	7	10%
1	20	30%
2	27	41%
3	10	15%
4	3	4%
TOTAL	67	100%

Table 13: Progress Level Summary for nFSM Children

These figures show that 10% of nFSM children made no progress with 90% of children making one or more levels of progress. 60% of children made 2 or more levels of progress.

The progress of the FSM children made was broadly in line with that of the nFSM children. Whilst there is a slight attainment gap (3%, one level or more), this is significantly lower than the attainment gap in Wales at the end of Key Stage 2, which is 16% (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2018).

There has been significant focus in Wales and more widely, on suitable strategies and interventions which could be delivered by schools in order to narrow the attainment gap. Whilst direct comparison cannot be made in this study the non-participating schools provide some comparative data. The following graph showing the baseline data of the FSM children in the schools who were due to access the *Impact in Writing* programme compared with the nFSM children who were not going to access the programme, that is, those in the non-participating schools.

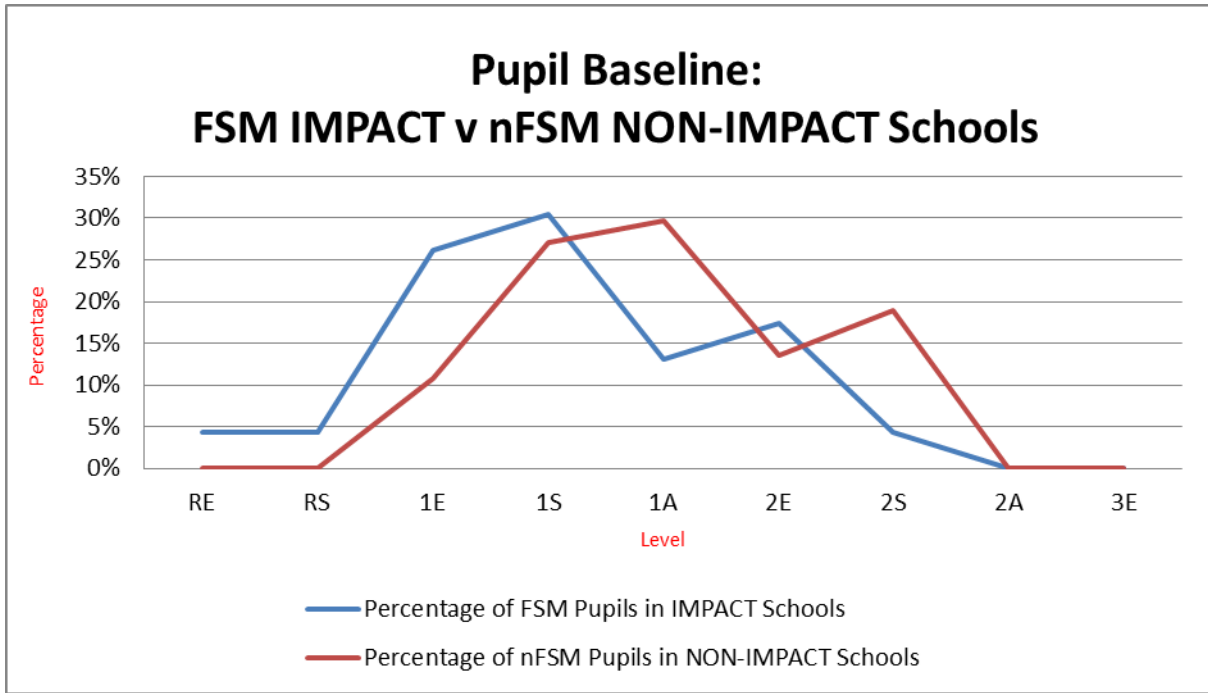


Figure 11: Baseline of FSM Pupils in Impact Schools v nFSM Pupils in Non-Impact Schools

The graph shows that prior to starting the programme, the nFSM pupils in the non-participating schools had a higher baseline than the FSM pupils in the participating schools and shows a clear gap in attainment between the two groups.

The following graph shows the results of the final writing assessment after the FSM children in the participating schools had accessed the programme and compares them with the nFSM children in the non-participating schools.

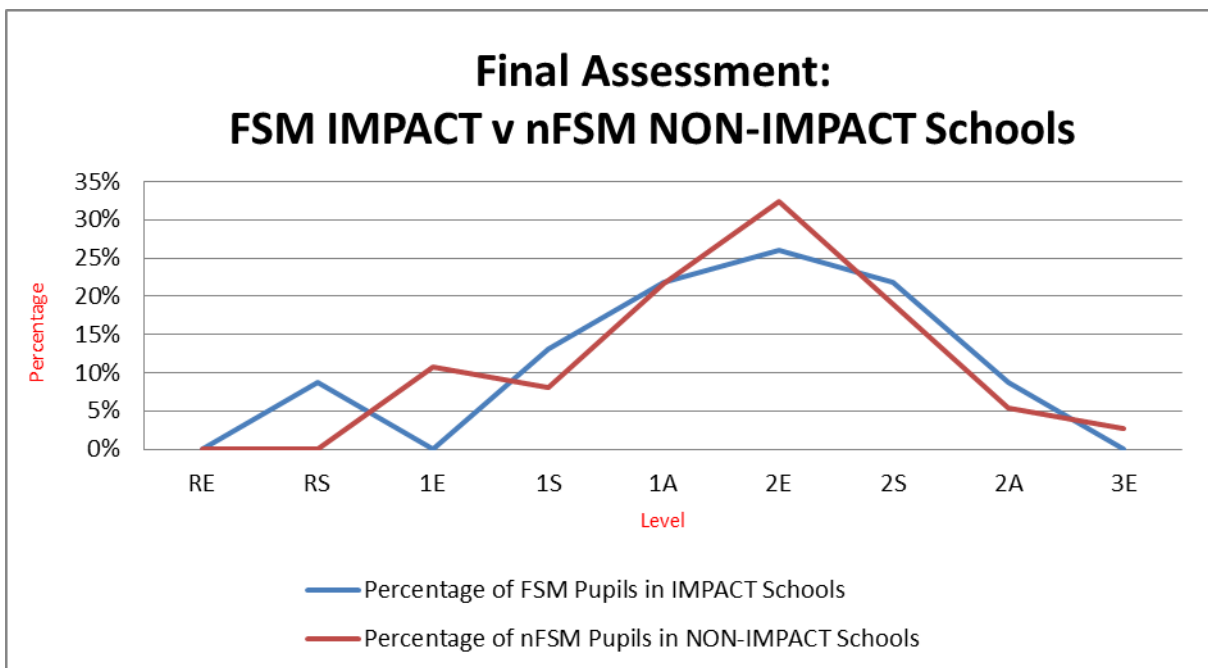


Figure 12: Final Assessment of FSM Pupils in Impact Schools v nFSM Pupils in Non-Impact Schools

This graph shows that, following participation, the gap between the two groups reduces. It is important to note that this is a very limited sample and therefore no definitive wider claims can be made in relation to impact or causality (Gorard and See, 2013); however, the data suggest that by participating in the *Impact in Writing* programme, the progress in attainment of the children involved was higher on average than the progress of attainment of the children who were not involved in the programme. This accelerated progress resulted in a shift of attainment for the children in schools A, B and C overtaking the attainment of those children in schools D, E and F. This data support wider research that states that when parents engage and support their children's learning in the home it is most likely to make a positive difference to the children's learning outcomes (Harris and Goodall, 2008). It also suggests that it can make a difference to children's learning when schools provide clear and concise information to parents about ways that they can help their children at home (Epstein, 2010). The qualitative data show that the parents spoken to felt more confident in their ability to help their children at home as a result of participating in the programme, regardless of their initial skills and understanding of specific literacy pedagogical approaches. This was highlighted in the comments by the parents:

I have a much greater understanding. Things I was unsure about, I know now (Parent 1, School B).

It was a good programme; otherwise, I wouldn't have had a clue (Parent 2, School B).

One parent was able to explain in detail how she felt that participating in the programme had impacted on her and her child. She talked about her inability to understand the way that phonics is taught in school and how she had previously not understood how to help her child with her spellings, often writing out the whole word for her to copy rather than allowing her child to have a go and use her developing knowledge of sounds. After the programme, she talked about how she is now able to help her child.

We do that all the time now. I say well, what can you hear? What letters can you hear? Tell me what you can hear first? (Parent 5, School A).

I felt really confident. Before, I didn't do writing at home but when we took the project on, I ensured that I was the one doing it...it was our time together (Family member 1, School C).

This comment indicates that through participation in the programme, the attitude and willingness of this grandparent in helping their grandchild with their writing at home changed. She went from not helping at all, to feeling confident and able to help which is a positive change. The data also suggest that parents have the ability to make a difference in their children's learning regardless of their prior knowledge, socio-economic class or their feelings about their own time in school. These parents stated:

I don't like homework, I never did in school (Parent 1, School B).

When I am writing something, I don't put punctuation in, nothing at all (Parent 2, School B).

Although parent 1 stated that she didn't like doing homework when she was in school, this did not prevent her from being able to support her child. Additionally, parent 2 talked about her own lack of literacy skills, however, despite not being a confident writer herself, she was able to support and make a difference to her child. This supports the research that shows that specific activities that parents can engage in within a well-resourced home learning environment can override other more negative factors (Sylva et al. 2004).

In this section, I have presented the findings from all schools involved in delivering the programme. However, in order draw lessons from this programme which could inform and support wider parental engagement in children's learning, it is important to look at the individual approaches that each school adopted towards the programme and look for school variations in results, both from the qualitative and quantitative data. Therefore, the next section will begin with this and will then explore the theme of home-school relationships.

Home/School Relationships

A key aspect of the research was not only to gather data on whether the *Impact in Writing* programme could have a positive effect on children's writing skills, but also to understand more about the attitudes of both parents and teachers to parental engagement and to see if lessons can be taken from the programme which would better inform schools and settings in their understanding of parental engagement. To do this, it is interesting to look at the

ways that each school adapted the programme and the individual results that they had. The following data analyses the individual results achieved in schools A, B and C.

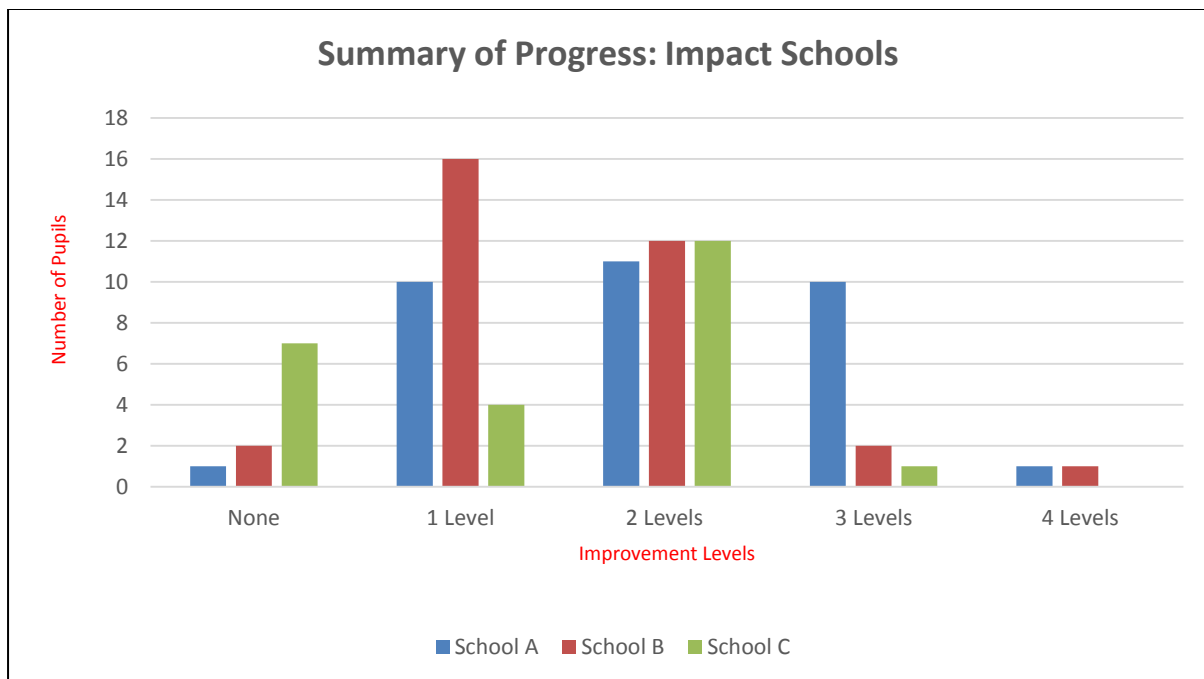


Figure 13: Progress Level Summary for all Impact Schools

The table below shows the progress levels for School A only.

Progress	Pupils	Percentage
None	1	3%
1 Level	10	30%
2 Levels	11	33%
3 Levels	10	30%
4 Levels	1	3%
TOTAL	33	100%

Table 14: Summary of Progress for School A (all pupils)

These results show that 3% of pupils made no progress but 97% of pupils made at least one level of progress. 66% of pupils made two or more levels of progress.

Likewise, the table below shows the summary of results from all the children who participated in the programme in School B.

Progress	Pupils	Percentage
None	2	6%

Progress	Pupils	Percentage
1 Level	16	48%
2 Levels	12	36%
3 Levels	2	6%
4 Levels	1	3%
TOTAL	33	100%

Table 15: Progress Level Results at School B (all pupils)

These results show that 6% of pupils made no progress but 94% of pupils made at least one level of progress. 45% of pupils made two or more levels of progress.

The table below shows the summary of results from all the children who participated in the programme in School C.

Progress	Pupils	Percentage
None	7	29%
1 Level	4	17%
2 Levels	12	50%
3 Levels	1	4%
4 Levels	0	0%
TOTAL	24	100%

Table 16: Progress Level Results at School C (all pupils)

These results show that 29% of pupils made no progress but 71% of pupils made at least one level of progress. 54% of pupils made two or more levels of progress.

In School C, a far greater number of pupils made no progress, a 26% increase on School A and a 23% increase on School B. As a result, the number of pupils who made at least one level of progress or more was also considerably less than both Schools A and B.

Analysis of the qualitative data highlights the way in which each school delivered the programme and the home/school relationship which each school developed, which may help to account for the variation in results from each school. The parents involved in the focus groups in schools A and B all talked very positively about their relationship with the school prior to the programme commencing. They spoke about being invited into the schools for various social events and of having the opportunity to ask any questions and get

help. They talked specifically of the school staff and the time that they felt those staff gave to the parents, allowing them to feel more involved.

The teachers do try to engage the parents as much as they can to get them involved (Parent 3, School A).

They (the school) do make a lot of time to work with the parents and to listen to any concerns (Parent 2, School A).

If you have a problem, they sort it, they are all approachable (Parent 2, School A).

If you have a problem, they say, come and see us (Parent 1, School B).

In School C, one parent commented that she felt the school was helpful but that parents had to be proactive to access that help.

If you are proactive, the school is very helpful (Parent 2, School C).

However, as previously mentioned, not all parents have the appropriate social and cultural capital required to be able to be proactive in their dealings with schools and therefore some parents in School C may have been prevented from accessing help and support as a result.

In addition, staff in both schools A and B talked positively about their constructive relationships with parents as a starting point and valued the relationships they had created. This highlights the commitment both schools show to working with parents as partners and their desire to build trusting relationships. Furthermore, both schools had a family engagement officer (FEO) in post, whose role it was to co-ordinate all the opportunities for creating partnerships between home and school. School A acknowledged that their FEO did 'most of' the work supporting parents whilst the FEO in School B detailed the various aspects of her role and how this role bridges the home/school divide as it brings together both the parents and the teaching staff.

I have been appointed to work closely with the parents but I also work closely with the teachers (FEO, School B).

I have a really close relationship with the parents because I work in the classroom one day a week. Everyone knows me and everyone feels like they can approach me, I am usually their port of call; I am their friendly face (FEO, School B).

By describing her role as a 'friendly face', the FEO in school B acknowledged that for many parents, school can be a daunting place and that parents may feel anxious about coming in a school environment. One aspect she identified as being important to breaking these barriers was through establishing herself and her role as being different to that of a teacher. The relationship that she was then able to create allowed her to understand fully the values of the parents and therefore to be able to work closely with them in partnership (Goodall, 2018a). She also detailed how she bridges the issues of social and cultural capital and mitigates what could be considered as deficit understandings by presenting herself as someone who is like the parents. By doing this she can show that she understands the parents and is able to engage in a shared discourse with them (Broomhead, 2014).

Parents look at me differently than teachers and I have that type of relationship with them. I always say to them, look I am a mum, I am not perfect myself and I tell them little mistakes I made with my daughter and they laugh then, and I'll tell them bits about my family so everyone feels more relaxed and there's no wall, no barrier (FEO, School B).

The data identify that the allocation of a member of staff, who is recognisable and known to parents, helps to support the building of positive relationships and ensured that there were effective lines of communication. Previous research has identified that when schools identify a staff member to lead parental engagement their parental engagement is more effective (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011).

Another variation in the way in which each school adopted the programme was in the ongoing support that parents received as they worked through the programme with their child. The parents from the focus groups in both schools A and B described the support that they had received throughout the programme in a variety of ways. They identify a variety of strategies that these schools used to offer help and support as the programme got underway including opportunities for face to face meetings, contact using digital platforms e.g. Class Dojo and having phone calls off school staff.

The teachers would message us on the class dojo thing and it was nice as it kept the class link (Parent 3, School A).

It was quite easy to just message a teacher if you had a problem, I did message her once or twice to do with the spelling. I would message her teacher back and forth (Parent 5, School A).

(The support) with the teacher or with the other teacher (The FEO), she was always there. She was great (Parent 3, School B).

However, this was in contrast to the contact and on-going support that the parents received in School C. Family members in School C talked of not accessing any support but they identified that they would have liked to have some support just to ensure them that they were giving the right kinds of help to their children.

It would have been nice to have had some sort of follow up. Although I felt confident, just to confirm that I was doing it right so... that your child is getting the best support they possibly can (Family member 1, School C).

There was no support. Unless you asked for it you don't get it. We had the first meeting then this, nothing in between (Family member 2, School C).

This family member went onto comment that they felt that the lack of ongoing support impacted their ability to build effective relationships with the school staff;

I mean we had the first meeting and then this, so only two things can't build a relationship (Family member 2, School C).

It might have been nice to say after the second one, there would have been a letter home saying, oh thanks very much, you are all doing well, just to try and get people to engage (Parent 1, School C).

The data also identified differences in the ways that the teaching staff described their strategies for supporting the parents and the children throughout the programme. The FEO in school B talks about maintaining daily links with the parents to check that they knew exactly what they needed to do and to give them encouragement and the teacher in School B described giving one-to-one support to an unconfident parent.

I made myself go out onto the yard every morning just to check that parents didn't have any problems; that everyone was happy and that they understood everything. I was just there for them if they need any help and support and not just the parents but the children as well (FEO, School B).

There was one parent who was a bit, she didn't feel confident at all in coming in so she came one night after school and I just went through it with her and her son (Teacher, School A).

Staff in School C described that their parents could ask questions at the end of the day if they needed to but that they did not put any other measures in place. Again, this indicates that the approach that School C took required their parents to be proactive and approach them if they needed any support.

An important aspect of the *Impact in Writing* programme is the need for the class teachers to give the children feedback on their home tasks so that they can identify the next steps in their learning. The comments, referred to throughout the programme as feed-forward comments, enable the children to understand what they should do next in order to move their learning forwards. These feed-forward comments are also important for parents so that they understand the next stages of their children's learning. Again, the data identified that the feed-forward comments were approached slightly differently in school C to schools A and B. In schools A and B, the feed-forward comments were written in the child's home task book. This allowed both the child and the parents to have a clear understanding of what to focus on next.

Figure 14 below is an example of one of the feed-forward comments shared with the children.

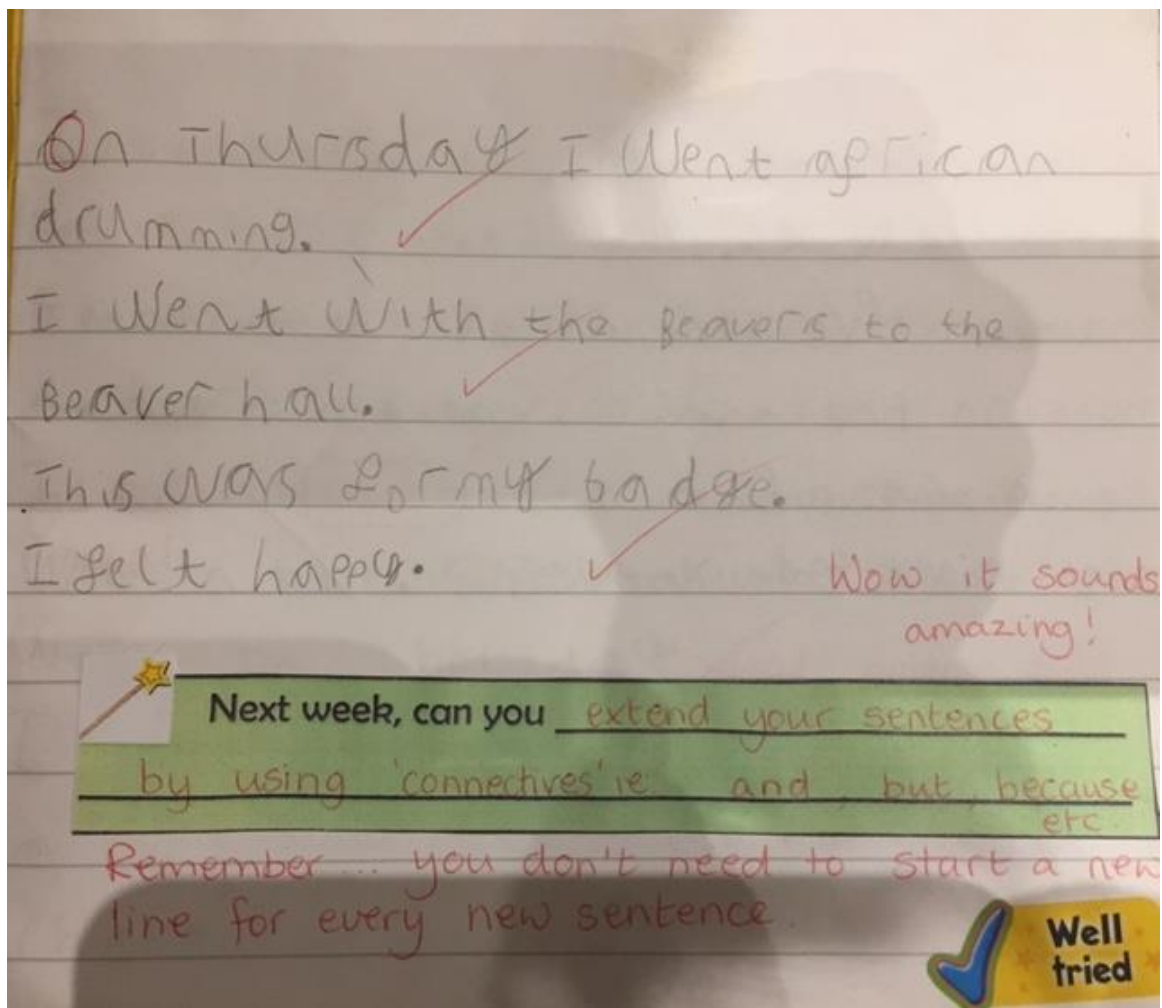


Figure 14: Child C, Feed-forward Comments

This child can formulate simple sentences and understands how capital letters and full stops are used in writing. The teacher has identified that the appropriate next step for his child would be to use connectives to be able to join two simple sentences together and therefore has issued this as the feed-forward for the child to focus on for the next week. In addition, the teacher has given clear examples of a range of suitable connectives which enables the parent also to have a clear understanding of the ways that the writing can be developed for their child. These feed-forward comments were highlighted by the parents as being helpful:

You are picking up stuff all the way along every week. I felt my skills were developing as well as my child (Parent 1, School B).

There would always be a little encouragement on how to improve it (the writing) the following week. It gave them a different goal (Parent 1, School B).

The data indicate that not only did the parents see the feed-forward comments as encouragement, they also saw them as a means of developing their own skills and understanding, which then subsequently allowed them to further develop their confidence and support their children more effectively. This was also acknowledged by the staff in school A:

I was amazed at how most parents acted upon the ways forward. When I look back through my impact books and you see that they have acted on what you have asked them to do. That's where you get the progress then (Teacher, School A).

This teacher in school A clearly identifies that, if the parents do support their children in an appropriate way, it results in the children making progress in their writing. However, school C adopted a slightly different approach as illustrated by the data:

A lot of mine when it came to the feed forwards ended up being oral, because there wasn't time to do it (Teacher, School C).

In school C, the feed-forward comments were given to the children verbally, and not written down with the children's writing. The data indicate that this led to some confusion by the parents and family members involved:

She (the class teacher) asked me to come here and it was only then that I knew he had improved because up until then I had no feedback (Family member 1, School C).

You want to help your child but you don't actually know whether you have got somewhere or not (Parent 1, School C).

As the family member in school C indicates, by not having any on-going feedback, she was left not only not being aware of her child's progress but also not having a clear understanding of the next steps for his learning and whether her support was having a positive impact on him or not.

These differences in approaches may have accounted for some of the variations in the progress rates of the children. Interestingly, school C identified the different progress rates of their children involved, but placed this within the context of children's prior attainment in writing, stating that if children had a higher standard of attainment on starting the programme, they achieved higher levels of progress throughout the programme. This was attributed directly to the involvement of the parents and the support that they gave.

The deputy headteacher in School C stated that the children, who progressed, did so because their parents supported them. Likewise, she observed that the children who were lower ability, or struggling as she described it as, did not progress because they did not have the support of their parents.

The more able children improved. There is no doubt about that. Their parents, they joined in, they bought in and they did it and they did it well and they gave the time to it and those children who were good became very good. Those children who were struggling continue to struggle because their parents gave up (Deputy headteacher, School C).

The comments from the deputy headteacher in School C give no sense of reflection as to why the engagement of some parents failed. She seems to lay the blame for the children who “continued to struggle” directly with the parents and as such reflects a deficit discourse that has been identified in previous research (Goodall, 2019, Crozier, 1999a). This deficit discourse was not reflected in the data from schools A or B.

In conclusion, although the *Impact in Writing* programme can be used to support the improvement of children’s writing, to maximise the effect that participating in the programme can have, it is important that schools build up relationships with parents and provide them with on-going support and also understand and value their roles and their starting points. The data suggest that when parents are given advice and support on pedagogic changes and are shown the best ways to help their children at home, they can have a positive impact on their child’s learning and that opportunities for this to happen are welcomed and well-received by parents. The data also illustrate that teachers welcome the support of parents and, when they are proactively engaged in a meaningful relationship with them, they can support them most appropriately. The next section will draw exclusively on the qualitative data to explore the theme of parental agency.

Parents’ Agency

There is an argument which promotes the idea that all parents want the best for their children, have high aspirations for their educational attainment and want to be involved in their children’s school life (Reay, 2010). However, it has also been argued that for some parents, despite saying that they want to be involved, this does not result in them playing a

full and active role in their child's education. One reason which has been suggested for this is the perceived lack of cultural and social capital which individual parents have and their ability to draw on this capital in order to have a positive impact on their child's education. This section will identify the strength of parents' agency, that is, their ability to act in a positive way to influence their children's education, before being involved in the programme. Then, by drawing on the data, I comment on whether there is evidence to suggest that parents' agency developed as a result of participation in the programme.

The data counter many of the narratives around lack of aspiration amongst parents (Cook et al. 2014) as all the parents interviewed showed a positive desire to support their children and an acknowledgement that their involvement is both necessary and has a positive impact.

I have always been inspired to help Rhys (Family member 1, School C).

I help as much as I can really (Parent 1, School A).

I want to be quite involved in her education. I've always tried to sort of be there and help her (Parent 2, School A).

These family members showed that they all felt a desire to be involved in supporting their children / grandchildren. Parent 1, School A, acknowledges that she helps as "much as she can" suggesting that there may be barriers which are preventing her from helping further. However, there is a consistency in the data which identifies that the parents and family members all wanted to help their children. Along with showing a willingness to help, the parents also showed an understanding on why their help was important and the impact that it has on their children.

Your involvement at home does benefit your child's progress in school (Parent 1, School A).

The more you give, the more you get back as well (Parent 1, School A).

To invest your time to work alongside your child to support their learning it does have, you know, huge benefits for them (Parent 3, School A).

Teachers can only do so much, they have only got 6 hours a day, and they have got 30 odd children. They can't work miracles so as parents you have got to give your child time for them to succeed further (Parent 1, School A).

The data indicate that these parents recognised the importance of the home environment and their key role in children's education and learning. It challenges the belief that parents are increasingly seeing the school as having total responsibility for the education of their children. However, although the parents and family members had identified their responsibility in their children's education, the data identify that their engagement in their children's learning prior to participating in the programme had been minimal.

The involvement I have had in the school is coming in for the concerts and things, I haven't done anything else otherwise (Parent 5, School A).

It's the main things like parents' evenings, we are invited each year to come and learn about what the children will be focusing on for that year group (Parent 1, School A).

It was homework really and reading (Parent 2, School A).

The examples these parents and family members identified when they were illustrating their prior relationship to their children's learning all focused very much on accessing school-based "involvement activities", rather than a greater and deeper engagement in their children's learning. Parents' evenings, concerts and homework as mentioned in the data, relate to activities that have been organised by the school and largely related to more general and limited forms of parental involvement. There is a lack of discourse in the data about any, deeper, forms of engagement specifically with their children's learning.

The data identify an indication of the relationships between parents and teachers prior to the programme and an indication of the different and distinct roles which the parents saw for themselves and for the school-based staff.

At the end of the day it's your child's education, so you kind of, it goes both ways, you as parent and them as a teacher (Parent 2, School A).

Teachers can only do so much, as parents you have to give your child time for them to succeed further (Parent 4, School A).

I mean, they spend a lot of time in school, but you have got to carry on with it outside of school as well. Yeah, I think it's as much my responsibility as it is the school's responsibility (Parent 5, School A).

The data show that parents identified the distinct roles between parents and teachers; however, they also acknowledged the challenges faced by teachers and the supportive role they could play in working alongside the school staff. The parent in School A details a partnership approach to her child's education by explaining that she feels there is an equal responsibility between her as parent and the school.

The data from the school staff highlight their approach to working with parents and indicated that they were trying to engage with parents.

We see parents all the time with different events and meetings. We have done a reading workshop through the school and also a numeracy one (FEO, School B).

We have had information evenings, things like Read, Write, Inc but they haven't always been successful and there is a lot of organising just for a few parents to attend (Deputy headteacher, School A).

Both School A and School B had also organised more specific events for the parents to access which had focused on some elements of the children's learning. However, these more formal events, focusing on curriculum issues were identified by School A as not always being successful as the staff identified that not many parents had previously attended these meetings. The data identify that one reason why parents were less likely to attend school for more formal requests for their participation was because of a perceived lack of social and cultural capital (Lareau, 1987) so although the desire for involvement is present, this is minimal and is centred around school-led activities. One school summarised their approach to parents as an "open door" policy.

We have the consultation meetings but the parents know that we do have an open-door policy (Deputy headteacher, School C).

We feel as a staff we communicate really well with parents. We think we come across as quite approachable (Deputy headteacher, School A).

However, although school staff talked about an open-door policy, one where parents were able to approach them at any time if they felt that they had a problem or an issue, in reality,

if parents lack the cultural and social capital required for this, they are prevented from accessing the information and support that they may need. It could be argued that an open-door policy places the onus on parents to engage and act with the school and when those parents without capital are unable to engage, this is often represented as a deficit or that those parents are disinterested with of lack of ambition or aspiration for their children.

Following participation in the programme, the data suggest that there was a development in parents' confidence in engaging with the school and their ability to participate in with their children's learning increased. It suggests that they felt more empowered about their ability to intervene positively on behalf of their child and there they were more confident with their relationship with the school.

I haven't had much involvement up until now but now that I have participated I feel like I have got a better rapport in the short time that I am integrating with staff (Family member 2, School C).

I went in there with a little bit of trepidation but I came out from there thinking oh yes, I can do this (Family member 1, School C).

It was nice to know her teacher a bit better. I feel a bit more comfortable now coming into school to do things with her as well (Parent 5, School A).

Following the programme..... I wouldn't hesitate in coming to ask if I wanted to know something. You shouldn't be afraid of being able to come in and ask because at the end of the day it's your child's education (Parent 3, School B).

This improvement was also acknowledged by the school staff. A teacher in School A explained that after participating in the programme the parents seemed more proactive with their interactions with the school and took greater ownership in instigating communication so that they could ask the relevant questions to be able to help their children at home.

They don't feel afraid to ask anything, they are quite open (Teacher, School A).

This teacher also reflected that having been a part of the programme, her own expectations about parental involvement had changed. She had realised that before the programme she had been asking the parents to do things and participate in a way which may have been

difficult for them to do. She acknowledges that prior to the programme, the parental involvement strategies she adopted were constructed from her own perspective; she was setting tasks that she as a professional felt were achievable for parents to do (Crozier, 1999b). However, she was not thinking about the strategies from the parent's point of view and whether they were achievable for them.

It was the resources, I think that really hit me. We have expected parents to do homework and we don't give them anything. It really hit home with me because I've expected my parents to do some incredible things in the past and they might not have had the things at home to do that (Teacher, School A).

Desforges and Abouchar (2003) identified in past research that, whilst there may be a broadly held desire amongst parents for a greater level of involvement in their child's schooling, there are clearly material barriers, both time and money, which may prevent some parents from doing so. It also highlights the fact that schools tend to adopt the same parental involvement strategies, irrespective of their parents' individual need, socio-economic status or class (Crozier, 1999a) and therefore by doing so, prevents many parents from accessing these strategies fully.

For both School A and B, increasing parental agency and ensuring that they were promoting greater parental engagement in children's learning at home was an identifiable aim for participating in the project. Both schools A and B identified this programme as a way of further enhancing their wider understanding of engagement and saw this as an opportunity to improve their children's writing through fostering and improving relationships with their parents.

We wanted to raise standards in writing, develop more relationships with the parents but also help the parents help their children at home (Deputy headteacher, School A).

We wanted to see progress in the pupils' work. We wanted to see more engagement through the parents and just parents being more involved with children in the house and taking the time to listen to them, to talk through things and to help them with their work (Deputy headteacher, School B).

We see being a part of this project as an opportunity to hand it over to the parents, reemphasize their role in their children's learning and get them to take a bit of

responsibility where they can make a difference themselves and not just in the school (Deputy headteacher, School B).

In schools A and B, their hopes for the project went beyond simply having an impact on children's attainment. The data illustrates that both schools wanted to further develop their relationships with parents as an outcome of being involved but specifically wanted to improve the potential of the parents to be able to support their children at home. This is an indication that these schools recognised the importance of the home learning environment (Sylva et al. 2004) and wanted to ensure that they supported parents to be able to engage in parental involvement activities in the home rather than parental involvement in school (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

However, this was different to School C who had a very limited engagement approach, reflected in their institutional structures e.g., they did not have a FEO. The data indicates that the model that they adopted was *laisse faire*.

If they (the parents) have any issues they come into us (Teacher, School C).

From this we can see that the school adopted the approach of waiting for the parents to make contact with them if they felt that they had a question or an issue, rather than being proactive in reaching out to parents to offer help or support. This approach was extended to the programme, which was not framed in family engagement but purely as an exercise in improving writing.

The standard of writing at year 2 wasn't good. It was way behind our expectations of year 2 children, and we wanted something that would help. We were hoping that this project would work with the majority of children in developing and improving their writing (Deputy headteacher, School C).

The data suggest that School C did not seem to acknowledge the wider social and cultural factors which impact on children's learning and saw the improvement in writing as separate to the development of parents' agency.

The data illustrate that participation in the programme did result in an increase in ownership, confidence and a willingness to engage more purposefully with the school and directly with children's learning. The agency of the parents who participated in the programme in both Schools A and B increased, as identified by the parents themselves and

the school staff involved. This is an indicator that those parents, through participation in the programme, had developed their social capital. Lee and Bowen (2006) have identified opportunities which could be promoted by schools in order to increase parents' social capital. These include sharing information with parents and having ways to communicate with them, enabling parents to have access to suitable resources which can be used to support their children's learning, thus mitigating the socio-economic barriers which can prevent engagement as described by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) and by helping parents to develop their own skills so that they have greater confidence in being able to support their children with their learning. The final theme will explore whether, as a result of participating in the programme, we can state that the parents moved along the continuum from parental involvement to parental engagement, (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014).

Involvement to Engagement

From a parental perspective, all the parents commented that they found participating in the programme useful with many showing a change of attitude and understanding about the effect that their support at home can have on the development of their child.

Learning as well, just giving them a little bit of time, the benefits you can reap from a one to one that makes a difference, its amazing (Parent 3, School A).

It proves that if you invest your time to work alongside your child to support their learning it does have huge benefits for them (Parent 2, School A).

He went from a couple of sentences to a whole page, that was really nice to see the improvement and it was really nice to be a part of that, helping him to improve (Parent 1, School B).

The parents also spoke about their desire to continue to help their children moving forward. This is an important development as it classifies a move along the continuum, from the parents simply being involved in their children's learning because the school have suggested them to be, towards wanting to do so themselves; and therefore have a greater understanding of themselves as parents and what they can do for their children.

You have got the tools now to go forward and the confidence in using those tools again (Parent 1, School A).

It makes you want to be involved when you see them doing well and getting better and better and you know that it's making a difference (Parent 2, School B).

Another indication of the movement along the continuum from involvement to engagement is the re-interpretation of the traditional roles of school staff and parents. After the programme, there was a greater understanding from school staff that the children's learning was not the sole responsibility of the school, that parents had a crucial role to play as well. It was also understood that for parents to become more involved there needed to be a more equitable distribution of agency. This transfer of agency emerged in the data as initially being a concern by some school staff and something that they felt uncertain about.

I was quite worried initially about how the children would behave with their parents there but that wasn't an issue in the end so that's made me think I'd be happy to do it again now (Teacher, School A).

School B felt that running the programme had not only enabled them to broaden out their reach to parents, but that it also had a positive effect on how parents viewed coming into school and attending workshops.

You tend to get the same ones who come to workshops whereas all of them have come and they have said that they are going to come to more workshops, other workshops, not just Impact so I found that fantastic (FEO, School A).

I think parents are now empowered to have a go. I think parents who maybe weren't so sure as to how they could help their children, it gave them that bit of confidence to say, we can do this together at home now (Teacher, School A).

This comment illustrates how beneficial the relationship between home and school can be (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). If relationships are fostered that are built on mutual respect and both the parents and the school have a shared understanding of the context in which each other is working in, then a shared dialogue can emerge (NCSL, 2010). This can enable parents to gain the appropriate skills to be able to support their children at home. If the school adopts a proactive approach with parents, that relationship flourishes with the majority of parents ensuring they help their children, despite the many other pressures that they may have. If the school recognises and acknowledges the efforts of parents and children, a sense of pride for both can emerge

(Watt, 2016). Parents feel empowered, full of confidence and are able to take responsibility for their children's education.

The analysis of the qualitative data indicates that some parents and schools moved along the continuum. The parents who participated in the focus groups talked about their involvement prior to the programme, but this was focused on school-led and organised events. However, by participating in the programme they became involved in the schooling of their child and regularly exchanged information with the school about this, as evidenced from the data around communication. The parents were also supporting their children with their learning tasks at home. They acknowledged the value in these tasks and seemed committed to carrying on this support after the programme had ended. This speaks of a shared responsibility between the parents and the school and a more equal sharing of agency. This progression along the continuum is not without its challenges and some of these challenges were identified by the parents in the data. The parents in both schools A and B talked about the time constraints there were placed upon them as busy parents.

We have struggled with it because we have got three kids and a busy household so it can be hard (Parent 3, School A).

It has been hard with the time really, it can start to stress you out (Parent 1, School B).

I guess the only time it's difficult is when I work 12-hour shifts so when I am not there (Parent 5, School A).

These comments support research undertaken by Hornby (2011), who suggests that family factors such as lack of time and childcare issues can have a negative impact on parents' ability to become involved. However, although these concerns were raised, the overwhelming opinions of the parents at the end of the programme was that they had enjoyed participating in it, they had seen improvements in their children's writing and they were all keen to be involved in more programmes like this in the future.

Conclusion

To summarise, the analysis of the data showed that:

- The parents involved in the focus groups expressed willingness and desire to support their children prior to the programme but not all parents had the confidence to engage with the school and with their children's learning fully.
- Recent pedagogical changes, along with time restraints proved to be barriers to engagement as identified by the parents.
- When parents were supported by the school staff and given guidance on how they could help their children at home, they were able to follow through and give the appropriate support.
- Accessing the programme and receiving support for learning at home correlated with increased writing skills.
- Positive relationships between home and school are key. The most effective parental engagement happens when teachers and school staff actively encourage this and when schools are welcoming to parents.

During the next chapter, I will discuss these themes more broadly, relating them to current research and make my recommendations.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter will relate the findings from the data and place them within the current literature and research on family engagement. As part of this analysis, I will reference the findings against acknowledged models of parental involvement and engagement, highlighting where the findings support or challenge alternative theories. I will also discuss the limitations of the data and suggest areas for further research and enquiry.

The data show that most of the children who participated in the programme improved their attainment in writing as a result. The data evidences the shift in cohort attainment prior to, and following, participation in the programme and suggests a correlation between accessing the programme and increasing parental engagement and an improvement in writing skills. This adds to the well-established research that has identified a link between parental involvement and increased attainment (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Sylva et al. 2004; Harris and Goodall, 2008; Jeynes, 2012). It also adds to the research which looks specifically at the use of parental engagement interventions in literacy and further highlights how specific literacy interventions can positively impact the attainment in basic literacy skills such as reading and writing, as previously cited by Senechal and Young (2008) and Camacho and Alves (2017). Specifically, the findings also correlate to an area of research that has previously been acknowledged to be more limited. The EEF (2018) stated that robust evidence of the impact of programmes which have tried to increase involvement to improve children's learning is currently minimal. This study makes a contribution to this area and will begin the discussion in this chapter.

Impact in Writing and Raising Attainment

One of the objectives of the Impact programme is to use parental engagement as a strategy to increase children's attainment in writing. Prior to starting the programme all the children involved completed a baseline assessment, an independent piece of writing, which was then assessed, using a standardised measure. On average, the baseline assessments of the children who were going to be involved in the programme were lower than those children who were not going to be part of the programme. After completing the programme, those

children involved, on average, had a higher writing attainment average than the children who had not participated in the programme. These results suggest that, through engaging with the parents and supporting them to be able to have a specific and targeted impact on children's learning, a positive impact is achievable. The children who participated in the *Impact in Writing* programme showed much greater levels of progress than those children who did not and, as a result, the attainment gap that was present between the two cohorts at the baseline assessment diminished. These findings support wider research which has found an association between parental engagement and increased attainment (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; See and Gorard, 2015; Goodall and Montgomery, 2014) and specifically, that literacy parental engagement interventions in particular, are able to have a significant impact (Senechal and Young, 2008; Higgins and Katispataki, 2015).

The parents within the focus group highlighted the benefit of the support they received from the school and detailed how this had enabled them to then support their children at home. This provides further evidence that parents and teachers working together in partnership have a greater influence than either working alone in isolation (Jeynes, 2012, p.733). Hingle (2010) identified that getting children to involve parents in learning-related activity, as happened during the second part of the workshop, is a highly effective method of promoting parental engagement. Furthermore, when both the child and parents are working together, there is the opportunity for the teacher to offer one to one support to parents and children and for differentiated feedback to be given (Van Steensel, 2011). It also allows any interventions to be tailored to meet individual parents' and children's needs (Kane et al. 2007).

***Impact in Writing* as an Intervention Programme**

As discussed in the data findings chapter, the quantitative data showed that children who accessed the *Impact in Writing* programme made more progress in their writing than those children who did not access the programme. However, the specific analysis of the progress of FSM pupils who participated in the programme was also noted, as this presented an opportunity to further add to the debate on parental engagement and its effectiveness as a strategy for narrowing the attainment gap.

The use of eFSM status as a proxy indicator of relative social deprivation has been very important in drawing attention to systematic differences in educational achievement due to children's socio-economic circumstances. It is widely recognised that eFSM children are on average, less likely to achieve expected levels at the end of their primary years (Taylor, 2017). Within some deficit-orientated accounts (Gordon, 2011) there has been a tendency to malign parents as being disinterested or lacking aspiration for their children. Indeed, this accusation has also been applied to some home engagement activities resulting in Goodall (2019) questioning whether such initiatives were helping perpetuate the social disadvantage they sought to mitigate. The findings of this research challenge this view. 23 FSM pupils participated in the *Impact in Writing* programme and the majority of those children did make progress. There was a slight attainment gap between the FSM and nFSM pupils, 3% for 1 or more level of progress, but this is significantly lower than the attainment gap at an All Wales level at the end of Key Stage 2 which is 16%. These findings indicate that parents of FSM children did engage in the same way as other parents and supports the views of Dermott and Pomati (2016) and Reay (2010). However, the data did highlight that some parents' agency was curtailed by a lack of their capital; some parents stated that they did not understand the ways their children were learning in school and therefore felt less able to support them at home. Some also acknowledged that they were more confident to approach the school after the programme. Therefore, if schools could attempt to support the development of parents' capital, by sharing information, helping to develop their skills and enabling them to access resources (Lee and Bowen, 2006) this would increase their agency and enable them able to fully engage and support with their children's learning.

A broad range of studies have looked at the ways in which schools could use interventions in order to reduce the attainment gap (Jeynes, 2015; See and Gorard, 2015; Barbour et al. 2018; EEF, 2018). In all these studies, increasing parental engagement is identified as a possible strategy for reducing the attainment gap however high-quality evidence showing this has been limited (Gorard and See, 2013). In this study, the findings support the belief that parents with lower incomes are just as likely to engage in positive parent/child activities as those more affluent parents and that when these parents do support their children they result in the same benefits in terms of children's attainment (Lee and Bowen, 2006). This reinforces findings from the Millennium Cohort Study (Hartas, 2010) which

showed that the quality of the support that children from lower socio-economic groups received from their parents was different, not the amount of support that they received. Therefore, a focused intervention, which provides parents with high levels of support and which uses structured materials may improve the quality of the support given and may support the increase of the attainment. If schools applied what is known about parental engagement and supported their parents to work with their children at home through specific, focused and targeted programmes then it would suggest that this could be an effective way of narrowing the attainment gap. This is a view that has also been promoted at a national level. Estyn (2018) recommended that schools should support parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds to become involved through helping them to develop their skills and to increase their confidence so that they were best placed to help their children. They also recommend that local authorities should be providing support for schools for them to develop their parental engagement strategies. Welsh Government has also promoted this message stating: “Research indicates that effective family and community engagement can have a positive impact on outcomes for all but especially for learners from more deprived backgrounds” (Welsh Government, 2013c, p.6).

As detailed in the findings, the overwhelming attitude from the parents and family members involved in the focus group was one of wanting to be involved in their child’s school life and as seeing their child’s education as being their responsibility, alongside that of the school. The data highlighted that the parents wanted to support their children and they acknowledged that the education of their child was a process that they played a big part of as argued by Hartas (2010). These attitudes are in line with wider trends in parental engagement in children’s education where parents feel involved in their child’s school life and see their child’s education as increasingly their responsibility (Peters et al. 2007).

Although the data indicate that parents had a desire to become involved in their child’s education and showed a commitment to this, it also highlighted that initially, the parents had lower levels of engagement in their children’s learning at home. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) present a model of progression for engagement as a continuum, from parental involvement, which begin with activities such as information giving to parents, to parental engagement where parents are fully engaged with the learning of their child at home. The progression they describe highlights a shift in emphasis away from the

relationship that the parents may have with the school and focuses on the relationship that the parents have with their children's learning. From the comments made by both the school staff and the parents, prior to engaging in the programme, the activities that the parents had undertaken indicated that the parents were at the earlier stage in the continuum as their examples focused on more general information sharing. At this point on the continuum, the school staff lead and dominate the relationship with parents and although they may be involved in activities, these are instigated and controlled by the school.

By the end of the programme, the parents spoke of their increased understanding of how to help their children at home with their writing and spoke of regular and focused sessions at home where they were engaging and supporting with their children's writing tasks. This indicates that the parents had moved along the continuum, from parental involvement with the school to parental involvement with schooling and towards parental engagement with their children's learning as detailed by Goodall and Montgomery (2014).

Through participating in the programme, there had been an exchange of information about the children's learning and the processes which surround this, highlighting that the agency was more equally shared between the parents and the school. This information had begun through initiation by the school, however, as the programme progressed, some parents identified that they had also shared information back with the school on specific aspects of their child's writing. There was also a shift and a reinterpretation of the school and the parents' roles after participating in the programme. By supporting and enabling the parents to help their children at home, school staff were required to acknowledge that the education of a child is a joint endeavour and that a child needs wider support in order to achieve fully; it highlights the shared responsibility of the parents and the school. Parents were also providing learning opportunities for their children and were displaying a positive attitude to learning in the home. Therefore, using Goodall and Montgomery (2014) as a framework for analysis on the parent's actions, it suggests a move along the continuum from parental involvement towards parental engagement.

Jeynes (2018) presents the view that parental involvement with the school is a vital component of parental engagement and identifies parental participation in two ways:

school-based, which related the earlier stages of Goodall and Montgomery's continuum; and home-based, which reflect the view of engagement in learning in the home environment. He states that both of these components are important when developing effective parental engagement strategies. The themes that emerged from the data show alignment with Jaynes' view as they identified both an importance of parental involvement in school-based activities which then led to a greater engagement in home-based learning. These themes were: parental agency; developing positive and purposeful relationships between home and school ensuring effective communication, and parents as teachers. These themes mirror the need for both parental involvement in school and parental engagement in learning in the home and as such, support Jaynes' research. Whilst the *Impact in Writing* programme could lead to greater engagement in children's learning, in order to maximise this engagement, schools need to have supported and developed effective parental involvement, based on building social capital amongst parents, having a greater sharing of agency and building and maintaining effective relationships. These actions lay the foundations for greater engagement in learning to occur.

The following sections will provide greater analysis on each of these themes.

Parental Agency

As discussed, all of the parents showed a desire and willingness to be involved in their children's education but despite this, before participating in the programme, the parents identified an involvement in school-based activities as opposed to deeper engagement in children's learning in the home-learning environment. However, through the programme, there is evidence that the parents in schools A and B developed greater confidence in their ability to engage with school staff and to have greater ownership over their relationship. This allowed them to ask questions and seek out the information that they needed to be able to help their children at home, which indicates a greater ownership in agency between the parents and the school staff. The *Impact in Writing* programme which the parents and children participated in is very structured and has a clear academic focus. It requires sharing information with the parents, which is specifically centred around how their children develop particular writing skills, and the types of activities that they can complete at home which will help to support this. Wider research has identified that parental engagement

programmes without such a clear academic focus have sometimes struggled to improve pupil attainment (EEF, 2018). The data highlighted that both from the initial workshop and the on-going support given by school staff, parents developed their own literacy education skills. The workshop and the feed-forward comments ensured that all parents felt able to offer their children the help that they need, despite their prior skills for example, some parents acknowledged that they had a lack of punctuation skills themselves initially, but that had not impacted or prevented them from helping their child during the writing tasks. The programme also enabled parents and children to access appropriate resources; the most valuable being human resources, through the direct and regular communication with school staff who were on hand to help and support. The data highlighted the importance of this support and guidance. An important aspect for the parents in being able to deliver the programme effectively was determined by the positive impact that the teachers support had on their own ability to support their children at home. This reinforces Jaynes' (2012) claims that teacher guidance can support parents get the most out of their children at home. The data showed that parents felt that they were able to support their children effectively after having the initial workshop training; it was the input from the teachers and school staff that allowed them to feel a greater sense of empowerment and confidence to be able to deliver those key messages at home. However, the programme also provided the physical resources, those which were required to be able to complete the programme e.g. pencils, word mats, alphabet cards, sentence openers etc. which helped to overcome any of the material poverty that has long been established as impacting upon families' ability to support and provide educational opportunities (Lee and Bowen, 2006).

After the programme, the parents spoke of a greater confidence in accessing school staff and asking questions. This was endorsed by the staff too who said that parents seemed to be more confident in their engagement with the school and showed a far greater ability to support their children at home. This change in attitude and action suggest a shift in agency from school staff to the parents and shows that, participating in the programme, resulted in the development of some of social and cultural capital needed by parents to be able to intervene in a purposeful way on their child's behalf (Crozier, 1997).

Therefore, this research endorses the view of Lee and Bowen (2006) who state that the social capital of parents could be developed if schools shared information with them, helped

to develop their skills and supported them with resources. However, for both school-based involvement and home-based engagement to occur, the school cannot simply develop their strategies in isolation from the parents. A fundamental theme within the research centred on the importance of positive relationships between school staff and parents and of the need for effective communication to support these and it is this theme which I will explore in the next section.

Home/School Relationships

Relationships between school staff and parents are a vital way of developing involvement in the school and engagement in children's learning and this research reinforces this (Harris and Goodall, 2008).

The data show that the foundation for the success of the *Impact in Writing* programme was the creation of effective parental / school relationships. Both the staff and the parents in schools A and B highlighted positively what they saw as their productive and supportive relationships. Parents noted these relationships and were grateful for them. Harris and Goodall (2008) state that for schools to be able to work closely with parents and to be able to build up a relationship built on trust, they have to know their parents well and understand their individual contexts. This can be difficult in schools when teachers are busy and may lack the time to be able to invest in securing those relationships. Schools A and B did manage to build a positive relationship with their parents and a key component in achieving this was the role of their Family Engagement Officers, who lead and co-ordinated the family engagement throughout the schools. In School B, there was an expectation and a desire to build relationships with parents as soon as the children entered school, and this continued throughout the time the child remained at the school. The FEO spoke of seeing herself as one of the parents and was able to bridge the gap between the parents and their home life contexts and the school staff and the school context. In addition, the data highlighted that she was able to work flexibly, knew the parents well and was able to support them when they needed it. Wider research has stated that schools should take the time to learn from families and understand the community from which they come in order to create positive parental engagement (Fenton et al. 2017). The findings of this study reinforce this view.

The positive impact of the role of the FEO also supports wider research about the need for schools to develop key staff who become a point of call for parents (OECD, 2012). Schools A and B had both developed this role independently and without wider support. The role of an FEO is not officially recognised and there is no formal training which can be accessed. These roles have generally evolved out of a desire by schools to place greater emphasis on their parental involvement strategies and an understanding of the wider support required by parents. Both schools had seen this need and had prioritised this area of their practice, thus strongly indicating that this was an area of provision that was greatly valued. This role had undoubtedly helped to secure a positive relationship with the parents prior to engaging with the programme but it also enabled the school to provide the parents with greater support and feedback during the programme, as highlighted by the data.

This need for positive relationships with school staff to facilitate parents' access to knowledge about their children, as well as providing a mechanism to empower parents to support their children, has been highlighted more widely. Sime and Sheridan (2014) highlighted that positive relationships with school staff, along with the need to treat parents with respect and have a genuine belief in their ability to support their children's learning, was a key factor in ensuring successful parental engagement. In addition, research undertaken by the Parental Engagement Fund (Barbour et al. 2018) further identified the need for positive relations between parents and school staff. It stated that if there is a pre-existing relationship between staff and parents, then the parents are much more likely to feel comfortable getting involved with the school to help their children. The findings from this research confirms this as both schools A and B had parental involvement strategies in place which had served to build up effective parental partnerships prior to the programme commencing.

In school C, the parents and family members involved in the focus groups spoke of having little involvement with the school or engagement with their children's learning before undertaking the programme. School C spoke of having an "open-door policy" but the emphasis was put upon the parents to come in and ask for help if they needed it rather than the school being proactive and reaching out to parents. However, for parents to be proactive and able to approach the school in this way they need to have the skills and confidence to do so; some parents may need to be encouraged and supported with this by

the school. School C had not developed any parental involvement strategies prior to adopting the programme and therefore it could be argued that these parents were far less supported in developing their social and cultural capital. This reinforces the work of Lee and Bowen (2006) who argue that schools have the ability to foster social capital in parents by offering them a range of parental engagement strategies. Also, the staff did not acknowledge a desire to improve their parental engagement through adapting the programme, rather focusing on developing the writing skills of the children. The staff were far less willing to have a renegotiation of roles and greater equality in the agency. From this point of view, it could be argued that in School C, there was not an equal sharing of an agenda, this was dominated by the school and therefore it was not a genuine collaboration and partnership (Cairney, 2000). This was also highlighted in the data through the teacher's perceptions about parents when reflecting on the outcomes for the children involved. She explained that she felt the reason some children did not make progress was because the parents of those children gave up. This discourse, which perpetuates a deficit model, suggests that there was a lack of understanding around the complex relationship between home and school (Cairney, 2000). Wyness (2020) identified that teachers can adopt a deficit discourse and that some schools lack engagement with parents who they feel do not fit with the idea of a "responsible" parent. The data from school C supports this view.

When schools are less proactive, and parents do not feel that their involvement is valued or recognised, they are far less likely to get involved with their child's education as a result (Hornby, 2011). Wider research has identified that schools have a duty to ensure that their vision, pedagogy, policy and practice extends further than the immediate school environment (Goodall, 2018a; Hornby, 2011). Schools have to be proactive in reaching out to parents and family members, delivering strategies to build effective relations and then recognising the impact that parents can have on children's attainment when they are encouraged, supported and guided through the process. The data identified that parental engagement was most successful when there were positive relationships between the parents and the school and when the schools were proactive in developing those relationships and collaborations. These findings support the views of Hornby, (2011) and provide opportunities for schools to adopt when wanting to overcome any barriers to parental engagement.

Effective Communication between Home and School

Effective communication is another vital component for effective partnerships to be created and maintained and is one of the basic principles which need to be in place for schools to be able to build a true home/school partnership (Turnbull et al. 2011). The findings show that effective communication was highlighted as being important by both the staff and parents involved in the programme. The parents in both school A and school B spoke of their commitment during the programme and highlighted the importance of the communication they received from the school in order to support and maintain this.

Throughout the programme, the school staff and the parents in schools A and B worked closely together. The teachers communicated with the parents regularly to give them feedback and encouragement. This communication took several forms and included:

- Written praise and indication of the next steps to take in learning in the children's *Impact in Writing* book;
- Informal discussions with parents before and after school. These were conducted by the class teachers and the FEO;
- Formal meetings between teachers and parents to clarify points of help with any individual need, and
- The use of online communication through Dojo, the online messaging system.

Jeynes (2018) highlighted the importance of multiple avenues of communication being open to parents and referenced the need for schools to use IT to support this. The necessity for effective communication and dialogue between home and school has also been acknowledged by Blasi and Beck, who stated that joint working sent a clear message to children of dual support and mutual respect between home and school (Blasi and Beck, 2002). In the research, this was echoed by the parents who acknowledged the range of opportunities to communicate with the school and the value that they placed on being able to access the on-going support of the teacher and school staff. The use of an online messaging service helped to lessen the barriers to involvement that can be caused by work commitments, lack of childcare or lack of resources. This has been highlighted as a particular issue for parents living in poverty and can account for these parents having restricted access to the educational social capital in school and as a result negatively impact their ability to

provide educational involvement at home (Lee and Bowen, 2006). Goodall, (2016) also highlighted the importance of using technology, and commented that online communication allowed parents and schools to communicate quickly and effectively, at times which suited them both, allowing parents the greatest opportunity to be involved in their children's learning. The findings of this study further reinforce that view.

Parents as Teachers

Desforges and Abouchar (2003) acknowledged that there was a broadly held desire amongst parents for more involvement in their child's schooling but that there were also barriers which operated to prevent parents from becoming as involved as they would like. One of the barriers that emerged from the qualitative data were around parents' ability to engage in home tasks in a purposeful way prior to the programme due to their lack of knowledge around specific curricular content and pedagogy. The parents spoke about their perceptions of the curriculum, how this had changed from when they were at school and how they felt that they did not know what was being taught to their children or how it was being taught. They expressed a fear of supporting their children in case they got it wrong and that rather than helping, this would be detrimental to their children. In research conducted by Harris and Goodall (2008), almost a third of parents said that they felt their own lack of skills were the greatest barrier to being more involved in their children's education. Therefore, it is crucial that schools can have an impact on parents' own level of confidence and their knowledge of the curriculum in ways that will benefit their children's learning. However, despite this requirement, Estyn (2018) report that only half of primary school parents believe that their school was effective in helping them to support their child's learning.

The education system both at a UK national level and in Wales has undergone a great amount of reform. The introduction of new curricular and pedagogic change has meant that many parents feel in the dark about their children's education and do not know how to support their child at home with their learning and this was highlighted in the data. The Languages, Literacy and Communication Curriculum, in particular, has undergone many changes and many terms introduced which may not be known or understood by parents e.g. synthetic phonics, digraphs, connectives and segmenting (Literacy and Numeracy

Framework, 2013b). Teaching early literacy skills, even when you have had formal training can be difficult and so it is not surprising that the data indicates that the parents felt unprepared and apprehensive about helping. This reinforces the research by Reay (2010) which stated that working-class mothers, in particular, felt they were unable to help teach their children at home as they felt that they lacked the appropriate competencies and knowledge and that this compounded their lack of confidence. The concepts around developing early writing skills are challenging and could be difficult for some parents to understand. However, the data indicate that when parents are supported by the school and helped to develop the appropriate knowledge and skills that they need in order to help their children, this apprehension ceases. This supports previous research which has identified that, for parental engagement with children's learning to be effectively supported, parents need to receive clear, specific and targeted information from schools (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011; Colgate et al. 2017) and that any information given should be tailored to meet individual parental needs (Kane et al. 2007). The structure of the *Impact in Writing* programme, holding a live workshop where parents watched the teacher and the children interact and then modelled the strategies they had seen, allowed school staff to deliver the appropriate pedagogic advice for parents to be able to support their children in the most effective way. It also required parents to then engage in a series of appropriate home-based tasks, as detailed by Jeynes (2018). The parents talked very positively about coming into school for this meeting and, in particular, being able to work alongside their child with the benefit of the class teacher also being there. They acknowledged that this allowed them to ask questions, ensure that they were being consistent with the school strategies but also get to know the school and the teacher better. Following the participation in the programme, parents were able to identify strategies that they used to support their child's writing development which were closely aligned to the school's approach.

Some previous research has questioned the impact that parents could have on their children's learning. Wilder's (2014) research suggested that there was no positive relationship between homework assistance and pupil academic achievement and the explanation given for this was that parents are not trained to teach or that they may not be familiar with appropriate teaching methods. However, this research challenges that view. The data show that, when the parents understood how to help their children effectively and

the pedagogical approaches which were aligned to the school, they were able to support their children in a positive way. This supports the recent work of Goodall (2020) who has stated that there is a value in supporting parents so that they know how to help with homework.

One important aspect of supporting the parents to develop their understanding of the curriculum and ensuring that they understand how best to support their children at home centres around the resources that were supplied to the parents. It was noted in the data that the parents not only used these resources to support completing the tasks during the programme but that these also helped to structure the learning time within the home. The data indicates that the resources benefitted the parents and children as:

- They gave guidance and scaffolds on pedagogical approaches to both the parents and the children to support them complete the home activities.
- They enabled the parents and children to complete the tasks; they helped to mitigate some of the financial barriers that may have been in place which could have prevented parents accessing the material resources that they required.
- They provide an opportunity for the support to remain in place after the programme had finished; thus, providing the resources allowed schools to maximise the opportunity to change the parent's long-term behaviour towards supporting learning in the home.

The home learning environment and its impact on the development of children's skills has been widely studied in recent decades. The importance of the home learning environment was first raised by Sylva et al. (2004) whose longitudinal study highlighted how crucial this was for children's intellectual and social development. It was argued that when resources are provided as part of the support given by schools, this can have a direct impact on the types and quality of activities being completed in the home. As a result, this can then overcome some financial barriers that families may be facing, for example being unable to provide age-appropriate and relevant developmental resources (DfE, 2018). This has particular relevance and importance for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Department for Education (DfE, 2018) has stated that a good home learning environment can not only moderate the effect of disadvantage and offers partial protection against the

effects of disadvantage, even into the teenage years but also moderate the impact of socioeconomic background on cognitive skills and socio-emotional difficulties (DFE, 2018, p.7).

Training for Staff

The data highlighted that building and maintaining positive relationships with parents is crucial; however, it cannot be assumed that school staff are comfortable and confident with building and maintaining relationships with parents (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). Despite research which recommends that teachers and school staff should be provided with the opportunity to engage in professional development programmes specifically orientated to parental engagement (OECD, 2012), none of the teachers who participated in the programme had received any explicit training. As there is no requirement for parental engagement to be covered in teacher education programmes, staff enter the profession without any understanding of the importance of this or having had the opportunity to develop any of the skills necessary to be able to fulfil that role effectively. Even in schools A and B, where there was a clear interest in and strategy for parental involvement, this had evolved out of need, on an ad hoc basis, rather than being developed using clear guidance underpinned by research. The data highlighted some teachers' misconceptions and beliefs about the role of parents and in particular, about them helping with their children's learning. If teachers had received training on parental engagement, this could have mitigated those misconceptions. The data showed that concerns were raised by teachers about how the children would react to their parents coming in for the workshop and about seeing their child and comparing their ability to the other children in the session. This concern did not prevent the schools from proceeding with the programme, however, it may deter others. It is understandable to see why some schools and school staff may be reluctant to engage with parents or to offer strategies if they do not have a detailed understanding of why it is beneficial or if they feel like they do not have the skills to interact with parents in a purposeful way. Fenton et al. (2017, p.222) suggest that trainee teachers should be afforded opportunities to interact with parents and that they should work alongside mentor teachers who are able to support these trainees adopt a culturally responsive lens when engaging with parents. However, it is not just teachers who require training as although both schools A and B had an FEO post, neither of the staff who fulfilled

that role had undergone any recognised or formal training as there is no recognised qualification for an FEO. Engaging in the programme allowed the staff to reflect on their current practice and to understand how parental engagement contributed to their wider professional work. It therefore supports the view of Epstein (2018) and others who have reiterated the importance of wider training on parental engagement.

Limitations of the Data

It is important to note that, as with all studies in professional practice, this research was a relatively small-scale study, involving three schools, 90 children and 11 parents / family members. Three additional non-participating schools were used to provide some contextual data and act as an interesting comparison; however, as mentioned previously, they were not intended to represent a control group and whilst the data are encouraging, it is important to note that like for like comparisons cannot be made between those children who were involved in the Impact programme and those who were not. The analysis of progress followed a quasi-experimental pre-/post-test design and this approach was adopted as a control group could not be established. However, this approach has many limitations, most especially its inability to identify and eliminate any confounding variables. As a result, any data presented in this study simply highlights correlations and suggests possible causation. As such, we do not know how participation / non-participation would have impacted upon children in each of the schools, reinforcing Goodall's (2015) observation that it is very difficult to isolate exact causes. Furthermore, the sample size between the participating and non-participating groups, was different and whilst attempts were made to broadly match the contexts of all the school involved, there were clear disparities. There were 23 FSM children involved in the Impact programme which allowed for data comparison within the Impact group, however, there were only 3 children who were in receipt of free school meals in the non-participating schools and therefore analysis of this data and direct baseline and cohort comparisons would not have provided reliable results. It could also be argued that as the programme focused on home tasks in writing, those who participated in the programme had greater access to writing activities than those who did not. Thus, one would expect greater improvement. It could also be argued that a similar intervention may have produced the same or better results. However, this research was designed to consider the processes as much as the effectiveness of this intervention; a

full randomised control trial may, in the future, provide more robust data on its effectiveness as an intervention. The mixed method approach did allow triangulation of both qualitative and quantitative data with interesting results; however, there was a clear absence of males in the qualitative data, although a few male family members did attend the initial training.

It would be beneficial to now undertake a larger-scale study and include more schools, to see whether the results of this study are replicated. It would also be beneficial to undertake a separate study with FSM pupils to see whether developing parental engagement through the *Impact in Writing* programme could be an effective intervention for narrowing the attainment gap.

After careful consideration of the findings of this study and how these findings relate to broader research, the next chapter will detail the recommendations resulting from this study.

Chapter Six: Recommendations

Introduction

The research that I have undertaken has been very much grounded in educational practice. The action research design began with me reflecting on the current practice in parental engagement, both in my own school and schools more widely, which provided me with a series of questions which I wanted the research to address. These were:

- Can the *Impact in Writing* programme be used to develop parental engagement within schools, and can it improve children's attainment in writing?
- What can we learn about wider parental engagement through the process and how can this be used to further develop parental engagement?

Recommendations

As part of the action research cycle, following the analysis of the data and the discussion and reflections of that data, there are five recommendations that I will present. Whilst I anticipated that any recommendations could target middle-tier organisations in order to help their role in supporting schools with their parental engagement at a more strategic level, it was also important that the findings were accessible and comprehensible to schools. It was always my intention that any findings from the research would be used to inform my own practice and to support schools to improve their parental engagement, offering practical strategies wherever possible. Therefore, my recommendations start at school level.

- 1. The use of the Impact in Writing programme should be considered as an effective literacy intervention and as a tool for supporting the development of parental engagement.***

The quantitative data highlighted that nearly all the children who completed the *Impact in Writing* programme made progress with their writing skills, with many children making quite significant improvements, as evidenced with the examples shown in the findings chapter. In addition, the school staff in this study recognised that parents' engagement in their children's learning increased by participating in the programme. They became more

confident and knowledgeable about how to help their children and this then seemed to have a positive impact on their wider involvement with the school. The parents involved in the programme detailed that by participating in the programme they felt they had a better relationship with the school and that they felt more confidence in helping their child with their writing. Therefore, schools should be encouraged to adopt this programme, or other context-appropriate parental engagement literacy interventions to support the needs of their children and as a means of increasing parental engagement. It is important to note that the use of this programme should only be considered if it is appropriate to the needs of individual parents, identified through co-operation and consultation as detailed in the next recommendation.

2. Schools should be proactive in developing positive relationships with parents and family members.

Developing purposeful relationships between school staff and parents is vital if parents are going to move from involvement with the school to meaningful engagement in their children's learning. It is important that the school understands the context of the parents and respects and acknowledges their values and ideals. The better schools know their parents, the more they can work with them in a meaningful way to co-construct programmes and strategies that will best support them. The research showed that when invited in, nearly all parents joined the programme highlighting that most parents want to support their children. The feedback from the schools who had already begun to establish their parental engagement strategies showed that parents recognised and welcomed this. As part of that recognition, the role of the Family Engagement Officer was noted. Parents spoke positively about receiving support from the FEO and of welcoming the ongoing communication from the school. Developing relationships with parents has to become a part of the school culture and as such cannot be seen as a quick win. This research suggests that a named staff member, who has a dedicated role in supporting parents, is crucial to develop those long-term relationships needed to foster deep engagement. Of course, for a cultural change to happen, all staff need to buy into developing parental engagement but the role of the FEO can help to strategically lead and develop this work throughout the school. In order for the role of the FEO to be most effective, formal development opportunities need to be available. Therefore, a further recommendation to support schools

to develop positive relationships with parents is that the role of the FEO should be a recognised role, with a clear job description, training and development opportunities.

3. *Schools should provide regular advice, guidance and resources about the curriculum and how we teach for parents to be best placed to help their children at home.*

For parents to best support their children outside of the school, they must know what it is their children are learning and how best they can support that learning. A consistent theme emerging from the data centred on the recent changes in the curriculum. This resulted in the parents feeling out of touch with the learning that goes on in schools and as a result, they felt unsure about how best to help their children with their learning. The vast majority of parents want to help their children and want to support them with their learning, but the research has identified that for many, feeling like they don't know what to do becomes an instant barrier. Therefore, schools should offer parents regular opportunities to attend information sessions or to access resources which help to support them understand what their children are learning and how they can support that learning at home. This support could be a workshop, an online tutorial, a checklist, discussion groups etc. Schools should liaise with the parents to understand what guidance they need and work with them to identify how best to offer that support. It has been identified that parents support learning in the home when they understand the value of the home learning environment and the impact that they can have on learning (Barbour et al. 2018). Wales is currently going through an unprecedented amount of educational reform. Parents are at great risk of feeling even more detached from understanding what and how their children learn than ever before. Therefore, there is an even greater need to ensure all schools are working with their parents to give support and guidance which enables them to make a positive difference to their child's learning.

4. *Training on parental engagement should be included as part of the ITE programmes and high-quality professional learning opportunities should be made available to school-based staff.*

Studies conducted in several European countries including England confirm that it is important for teachers to understand and conduct effective practices of family and

community engagement and yet most new teachers feel unprepared to work well with the families in schools where they are placed (Epstein, 2018, p.399).

It is imperative that staff in schools are aware of the importance of parental engagement, understand this engagement as part of their professional role and are confident in the strategies that they can use to develop this engagement. This must begin at Initial Teacher Education (ITE) level so that we are developing a future workforce within our schools who understand this priority and will develop it once they begin their teaching career. Likewise, we must ensure that current school staff can access high-quality professional learning opportunities which focus on sharing the rational and research about parental engagement and then support staff to develop strategies which could be implemented within their contexts. This is particularly relevant to school leaders whose engagement is vital if schools are to develop their practice. The culture of the school must have parental engagement embedded within it for processes to work the most effectively and for it to have its most transformative power (Goodall, 2018a).

5. A national approach to parental engagement should be considered, building on the foundations already established, but further promoting consistency across all sectors of education.

As detailed in my literature review, Welsh Government have paid reference to parental engagement for many years. Estyn have also made recommendations over several years regarding the approach that they think schools and local authorities should adopt in relation to parental engagement. However, this is still an area which is underdeveloped as recognised by Estyn (2018). The findings of this study indicated a correlation between accessing the programme and an improvement in attainment and increased parental engagement in learning in the home. However, as previously identified, high quality evidence for the effectiveness of parental engagement interventions and their impact on children's attainment is limited. Additional research commissioned by Welsh Government would provide further empirical evidence in order to support a national approach. This would allow for consistency of approach amongst middle-tier organisations, the regional consortia and the local authorities who would then be able to provide support and guidance to schools and settings within their local context. A support package for parental

engagement has been trialled in Wiltshire and evaluated by Goodall (2018a). The findings show that if schools are able to access resources to support their planning for parental engagement, in addition to high quality professional development opportunities and are able to share their practice with other practitioners, then they are able to have a positive impact on the learning and support given in the home learning environment (Goodall, 2018a).

Summary

These recommendations should not be viewed or implemented in isolation of one another, but rather be seen as each influencing and working alongside the others.

It is crucial that a cohesive approach to parental engagement, which is acknowledged and valued at all levels of our education system is devised, which then allows for the appropriate support and guidance to be given to schools. With realignment of funding, this should ensure that all schools can develop effective parental engagement strategies which will benefit all aspects of children's development and make a lasting impact on their broader educational attainment.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This study focused on the *Impact in Writing* parental engagement programme and had two main foci. Firstly, the study aimed to gather data on whether participating in the Impact in Writing programme resulted in an improvement in children's writing skills. Additionally, the study also aimed to better understand the processes of wider parental engagement in children's learning from both the experiences of the parents and the school-based staff involved. As an action research project, the aim was always that this research would in some way be able to inform professional practice and as such, the methods adopted ensured that this research was grounded in real-life practice within schools. The aim was to provide research which would support the development of parental engagement within schools and settings. It has been recognised that school leaders in particular have to acknowledge and understand parental engagement and that their role should no longer be confined to what happens within the school grounds (Goodall, 2018a). This study endeavoured to provide evidence and information which would support this aim.

Parental engagement is a topic which is currently of particular relevance within education in Wales. The on-going coronavirus pandemic and the recent lockdown which resulted in schools being closed, served to illustrate the importance of schools having effective relationships with their families and highlighted the need for systems to be in place to communicate, support and gather information from parents in all circumstances. There is much research available which reinforces the view that it is beneficial for children when schools and families have close and purposeful relationships (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). Previous research has showed that parenting programmes aimed at supporting parenting skills, which include supporting parents to help with learning at home, can have positive effects (Senechal and Young, 2008). However, the research on parental engagement is not unproblematic. Whilst it is widely accepted that positive relationships with parents are beneficial, there have been differences in the understanding of terms used to describe different aspects of the practice. Parental involvement and parental engagement can mean different things to different people and have often been used interchangeably. In addition, there is a danger that parenting practices are viewed through a narrow lens, tending to focus on white, middle class values,

which can result in a deficit view of parents being formed. The practice of parental engagement is complex and diverse with the lack of high quality, robust research has also been identified as problematic (Gorard and See, 2013; See & Gorard, 2015). The complexities of undertaking research in this area has been highlighted by many experts in the field. Whilst it has been noted that some parental engagement programmes can have positive effects on attainment, it has also been identified that many programmes lack a consistent evidence base leading to much debate. Furthermore, there has been very little understanding as to which programmes are most effective and why (Jeynes, 2012). This view is one which has been endorsed by the Education Endowment Fund, who have stated that there is little robust evidence of the impact of programmes that have tried to increase engagement. Goodall (2015) has acknowledged that it is very difficult to isolate the effects of any single parental engagement intervention from another. In addition, Estyn have acknowledged that even where schools are offering opportunities for parents to become involved, this area of practice is mixed, and few schools evaluate the impact of their parental engagement work appropriately.

I hoped that this study would respond in some way to the gaps in research currently identified and provide an opportunity to highlight further possible areas of research which would directly impact not only my own professional practice, but also parental engagement practice more widely. This study aimed to provide greater clarity around parental engagement and its ability to have a positive impact on children's learning and also to provide a valuable insight into some of the processes that could be adopted by schools in order to develop this area of their practice.

As research into individual parental engagement programmes is limited, I decided that my research would focus on one parental engagement programme, *Impact in Writing*. I ensured that this study had a clear skills-based focus, using an outcome measure which was standardised, independent of the programme and which had real-world meaning (Gorard and See, 2013).

The findings of this study suggest that the *Impact in Writing* programme is an effective intervention and can lead to increased attainment in writing skills. The findings also suggest that the programme can be used by schools as a way to initiate parental engagement and

highlight some of the wider implications for this around staffing and training. However, the limitations of the study are such that this research can only indicate some correlation whilst acknowledging the complexities within this area as cited earlier. In addition, this study was a small-scale study based on professional practice and whilst the focus groups did collect interesting data from the parents involved, as these were collated through focused groups, only a minority of parents fed into these. Furthermore, other than the gender make-up of the parents involved, limited data were collected about their wider socio-economic circumstances. However, these issues withstanding, the research has added to the available research on the impact of parental engagement on children's learning and specifically on the impact that parental engagement can have on children's literacy skills, namely writing. This is an area where research has been underdeveloped and where it has previously been stated that little was known about (Camacho and Alves, 2016).

This study has also highlighted the need for further research into parental engagement. Whilst there is evidence of an increase in the writing attainment of the children who participated in the programme, there could be many reasons for this increase. Further research adopting a randomised comparison of a treatment and control group could provide greater insight to the reason for this improvement (Gorard and See, 2013). Larger studies drawing on the views of greater numbers of parents, would also be beneficial. Furthermore, if such a study yielded data to support this approach then it would be timely to conduct more research into parental engagement as a means of narrowing the attainment gap; this remains a national priority and a grave concern for all connected with education.

This study was an action-based research study into professional practice. It was borne out of, not only a professional interest in parental engagement, but also a belief that parental engagement strategies were underdeveloped and undervalued in schools. This was not necessarily down to the schools themselves, but more reflective of a wider lack of awareness and understanding within the system as a whole. It can be argued that the *Impact in Writing* programme could present a school-centric view of parental engagement. However, by engaging in the programme, schools were able to build up relationships with their parents, to start the journey of developing a true partnership based on trust and respect that is needed for support to be given, which is attuned to the values and needs of the individual parents. It presents a practical starting point for developing parental

engagement which I believe is needed. It allows schools to begin to understand and reflect upon the subtle aspects of parental engagement which are implicitly crucial for securing effective relationships.

As an action research project, I will conclude by identifying how I have reflected on the outcomes of this study and the implications for my practice. This process has undoubtedly had an impact, not only from a professional point of view but also for me as an individual (Noffke, 2017). I have become more knowledgeable about aspects of parental engagement whilst appreciating that there is so much more to consider, research and understand. On a personal level, the findings of the study reaffirm my understanding of the positive benefits of engaging with parents and creating purposeful home / school relationships. However, the wider reading I have undertaken for this study has also allowed me to reflect on the deficit view of parenting and understand how some parental engagement strategies could be viewed within this framework. Therefore, following this research, as a school we will undertake a review on the opportunities that the parents currently have to share their views with us and will look at ways to further develop this aspect of our provision. We will still continue to offer opportunities for parents to work alongside school staff but will ensure that our programmes are responding to the parents' needs and are not just driven and led by us as a school. We have already begun this work with the family forum, our parent body who meet and discuss all aspects of the school's provision on a regular basis. This forum has been particularly useful during the enforced COVID lockdown, where both the FEO and I were able to speak directly to parents and gather their views on their needs and experiences during the school closure. I will also continue to challenge my own thinking on appropriate parenting; looking to set a balance between offering support to parents so that they can help their children at home if they so wish, whilst also taking into account the individual values, cultures and needs of all parents.

In addition, I intend to use this study, along with wider studies cited in this thesis to further develop my influence on the wider system, within my cluster of schools, the Local Authority, Regional Consortia and Welsh Government. As an associate headteacher in the National Academy for Educational Leadership (NAEL), I hope to use my role to bring about wider system change and to have a positive influence on the practice of parental engagement at a national level, whilst still driving the development of parental engagement within my own

setting, ensuring that my children and families have the best support and opportunities for development. Parental engagement will remain at the very heart of my professional work and will continue to inspire and motivate me for many years to come.

Appendix 1

Writing Scales: R

No	Criteria	✓ • X
1	Will tolerate hand manipulation.	
2	Will work with another to allow mark making using body parts or an implement.	
3	Will attempt to mark make independently.	
4	Can recognise mark making materials.	
5	Can use and enjoys mark making materials.	
6	Can show some control in mark making.	
7	Can produce some recognisable letters.	
8	Can write initial letter of own name.	
9	Will attempt to write things, including own name using random letters.	
10	Can differentiate between different letters and symbols.	
11	Shows some awareness of sequencing of letters.	
12	Will write own name with wrong letter formations or mixed lower / upper case.	
13	Can copy over / under a model.	
14	Can imitate adults' writing and understands the purpose of writing.	
15	Is aware of different purposes of writing.	
16	Can ascribe meaning to own mark making (reads what has been written).	
17	Knows print has meaning and that, in English, is read from left to right and top to bottom.	
18	Can hold and use a pencil effectively.	
19	Can write single letters or groups of letters which represent meaning.	
20	Is beginning to write coherent statements applying emerging phonic knowledge, although may have some errors in letter shapes and spelling.	
21	Can say what they want to write, speaking in clearly defined statements or sentences.	
22	Can spell common, single syllable words correctly in writing, including many of the words in the R high frequency list and the EY Outcomes.	
23	Can write 3 or more simple statements that can be read without the child's help and that make senses, although letter shapes and	

No	Criteria	✓ • ✗
	spelling may not be fully accurate.	
<p>E=Emergent S=Secure A=Advanced AP=Assessment Point</p> <p>Assessment: R-E = 0-17 R-S = 18-23 R-AP = 18+</p>		

Table 17: Writing Scales: R

Appendix 2

Writing Scales: Standard 2

No	Criteria	✓ • X
1	Can communicate ideas and meaning confidently in a series of sentences (may not be accurate, but mainly glows as it has lost the list like form of some early writing, at least a paragraph in length).	
2	Can control use of ascenders / descenders and upper / lower case letters in handwriting.	
3	Can write in three or more text forms or genres with reasonable accuracy.	
4	Can provide enough detail to interest the reader, (e.g. is beginning to provide additional information or description, beyond a simple list).	
5	Can vary the structure of sentences to interest the reader (manipulated sentences e.g. questions, direct speech or opening with a subordinate clause).	
6	Can use interesting and ambitious words sometimes.	
7	Can usually sustain narrative and non-narrative forms (can write at length, stay on task – close to a side of A4 at least).	
8	Can match organisation to purpose (e.g. showing awareness of structure of a letter, openings and endings, importance of reader, organisational devices, beginnings of paragraphing).	
9	Can usually maintain use of basic sentence punctuation (full stops followed by capital letters) in a piece close to a side of A4 in length. (May be on a shorter piece or not accurate for 2E).	
10	Can spell most common words correctly and most of the high frequency words in R, Yr. 1 and Yr. 2.	
11	Can use phonetically plausible strategies to spell or attempt to spell unknown polysyllabic words.	
12	Can use connectives other than and to join 2 sentences, thoughts, ideas etc.	
13	Can use a range of punctuation, mainly correctly, including at least 3 of the following: full stop and capital letter; exclamation mark; question mark; comma; apostrophe for simple contraction and for singular possession.	
14	Can make writing lively and interesting (e.g. provides additional detail, consciously uses humour, varies sentence length or uses punctuation to create effect).	

No	Criteria	✓ • ✗
15	Can link ideas and events, using strategies to create flow (e.g. last time, also, after, then)	
16	Can use adjectives and descriptive phrases for detail and emphasis.	
17	Structures basic sentences correctly, including capital letters and full stops in a longer piece (one error acceptable).	
18	Can use accurate and consistent handwriting (in print at minimum, can show consistent use of upper / lower case, ascenders / descenders, size and form).	
19	Begins to show evidence of joining handwriting.	
20	Uses past and present tenses correctly.	
<p>E=Emergent S=Secure A=Advanced AP=Assessment Point</p> <p>Assessment: 2-E = 6-9 2-S = 10-15 2-A = 16-20 2-AP = 17-20</p>		

Table 18: Writing Scales: Standard 2

Appendix 3

Writing Scales: Standard 3

No	Criteria	✓ • X
1	Can produce work which is organised, imaginative and clear (e.g. simple opening and ending).	
2	Can usually join their handwriting.	
3	Can use a range of chosen forms appropriately and consistently.	
4	Can adapt chosen form to the audience, e.g. provide information about characters or setting, make a series of points).	
5	Can use interesting and ambitious words sometimes, (should be words not usually used by a child of that age, and not a technical word used in a taught context only e.g. volcano).	
6	Can develop and extend ideas logically in sequenced sentences, (may still be overly detailed or brief).	
7	Can extend sentences using a wider range of connectives to clarify relationships between points and ideas, (e.g. when, because, if, after, while, also, as well).	
8	Can usually use correct grammatical structures in sentences, (nouns and verbs generally).	
9	Can use pronouns appropriately to avoid the awkward repetition of nouns.	
10	Can use most punctuation accurately, including at least 3 of the following; full stop and capital letter, question mark, exclamation mark, comma, apostrophe.	
11	Can structure and organise work clearly, (e.g. beginning, middle, end; letter structure; dialogue structure).	
12	Is beginning to use paragraphs.	
13	Can adapt form and style for purpose, (e.g. clear difference between formal and informal letters; abbreviated sentences in notes and diaries).	
14	Can write neatly, legibly and accurately, mainly in a joined style.	
15	Can use adjectives and adverbs for description.	
16	Can spell phonetically regular, or familiar common polysyllabic words accurately.	
17	Can develop characters and describe settings, feelings and / or emotions etc.	
18	Can link and relate events, including past, present and future, sensibly, (afterwards, before, also, after a while, eventually).	

No	Criteria	✓ • ✗
19	Can attempt to give opinion, interest or humour through detail.	
20	Can use generalising words for style, (e.g. sometimes; never; always; often; mainly) and / or modal verbs / the conditional tense.	
21	Is beginning to develop a sense of pace (lively and interesting).	
<p>E=Emergent S=Secure A=Advanced AP=Assessment Point</p> <p>Assessment: 3-E = 6-9 3-S = 10-17 3-A = 18-21 3-AP = 19-21</p>		

Table 19: Writing Scales: Standard 3

Appendix 4

Contextual information about the non-participating schools

<p>School D:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Primary school with 151 pupils on roll whose ages range from 3-11• Green support category• Attendance figure: 95.3%• 7% of pupils eligible for free school meals
<p>School E:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Primary school with 419 pupils on roll whose ages range from 3-11• Yellow support category• Attendance figure: 95.6%• 5% of pupils eligible for free school meals
<p>School F:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Primary school with 585 pupils on roll whose ages range from 3-11• Green support category• Attendance figure: 95.1%• 15% of pupils eligible for free school meals

Table 20: Contextual Data for Non-Implementation Schools

Schools which were used to provide a contextual comparison on expected levels of progress

I ensured that there was a similar geographical dynamic and that the schools were in the same local authority support category. I also tried to ensure that attendance figures broadly aligned. It proved difficult to broadly match FSM numbers and therefore, to ensure that the schools implementing Impact were not seen to be at an advantage, the schools in the comparison group all had lower free schools meals averages.

Appendix 5

Semi structured interviews with parents who participated in the programme

Prior to Impact:

- Before the Impact programme what was your prior involvement with the school and specifically around your child's learning?
- What sort of help have you given to your child at home previously?
- Before the programme how confident were you helping your children with their writing?

During the Programme:

- Can you talk about your experiences at the initial meeting? Did you find it useful?
- What support did you receive from the school during the programme?
- What comments can you make about the programme itself e.g. the length of the programme?

After the Programme:

- Do you feel that participation in the programme was beneficial? If so, in what way?
- Has the relationship with the school changed in any way because of your participation in the programme? If so, in what way?
- Do you feel that participation in the programme has meant that you now have a better understanding about the ways in which you can help your child with their learning?
- Would you make any changes to the programme?
- Do you have any other comments you would like to make?

Appendix 6

Semi structured interviews with teachers / staff delivering the programme

Prior to Impact:

- How much prior involvement had you had with parents in your role? What involvement have you specifically had with parents regarding their children's learning and how they can help?
- What interested you in running the programme? Why did you adopt it as a school and what were you hoping it would achieve?
- How effective did you find the training for the programme? Did it enable you to successfully implement the programme? Did you encounter any difficulties / barriers when you ran the programme?

During the Programme:

- How many parents and children attended the programme? Of those, how many children completed the programme?
- What involvement did you have with the parents and children throughout the programme?

After the Programme:

- What do you see as the benefits / drawbacks to the programme? Have you noticed a difference in any of the children who participated in the programme?
- Do you feel that participating in the programme has changed your relationship with any of the parents? If so, in what way?
- Do you feel that there is anything that can be done to improve the programme from a school's perspective? Are there any changes that you would recommend?

Appendix 7

Thematic Analysis Map

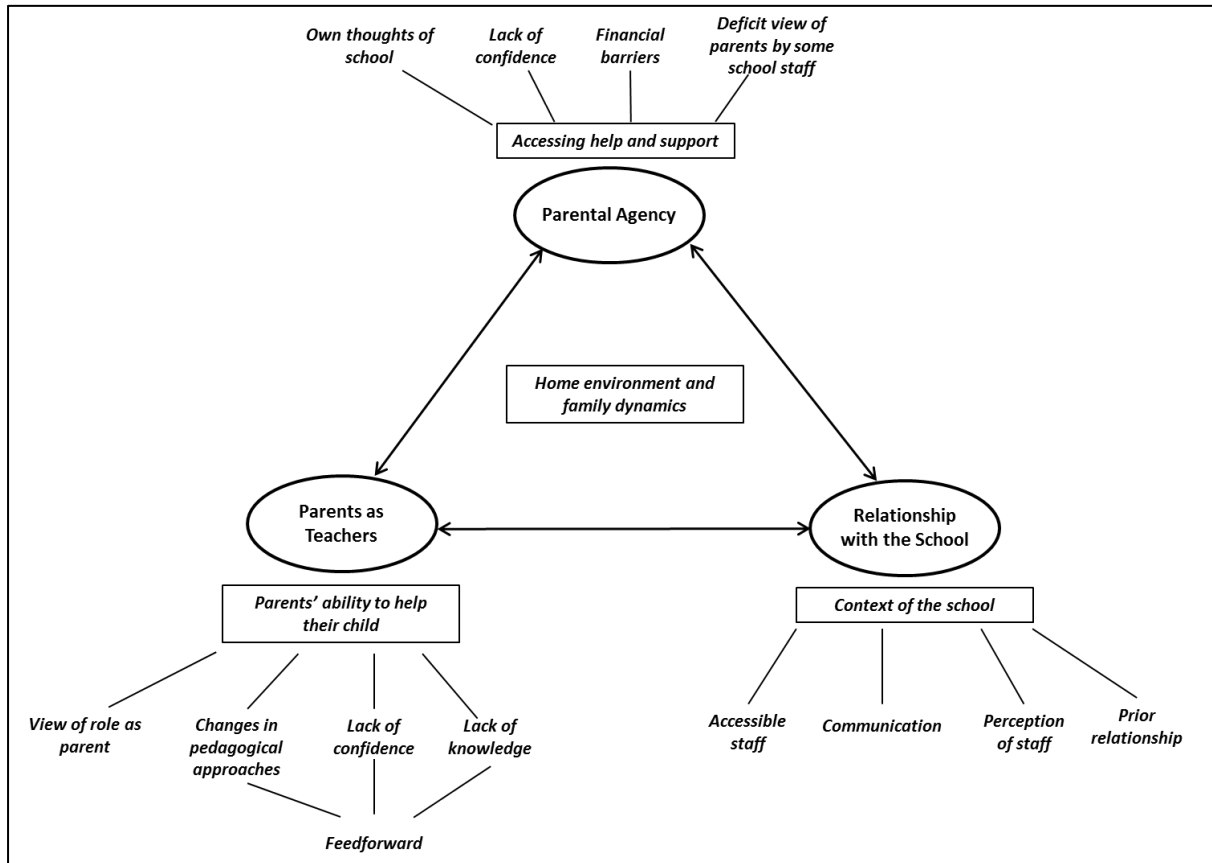


Figure 15: Thematic Analysis Map

Appendix 8

Permission for participant involvement in research (writing samples)

Parental Permission for Participation in Research

Title: Can the Impact in learning parental engagement strategy improve children's writing skills? What lessons can be taken from this strategy for the future development of wider parental engagement in children's learning?

Introduction

The purpose of this form is to provide you (as the parent of a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to let your child participate in this research study. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to give your permission for your child to take part. If you decide that your child can be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your permission.

Background to the study:

It is widely acknowledged that parents and carers can have a positive impact on children's learning. This research will specifically look at whether using the Impact in learning **parental engagement strategy can improve children's writing** and get a better understanding of parents and carers attitudes towards parental engagement.

What information will be required?

For the research we will be specifically using examples of your child's writing. These will be anonymised.

What are the risks involved in this study?

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

Through the research we hope to have a better understanding of ways in which we can support children to develop their writing by using a parental engagement programme.

Voluntary nature of the study:

Your decision whether or not to participate in this research will not affect your current or future relations with the school or the Local Authority. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. You can withdraw the research at any time, ask for the information to be destroyed and the data removed from the project until it is no longer practical to do so e.g. when the final report has been written and submitted.

Confidentiality:

All data collected in this research will be anonymised and any records of this study will be kept confidential. If the report is published, there will be no information that will make it possible to identify a child, class teacher, parent, support worker or school.

Whom to contact with questions about the study?

Prior, during or after your participation you can contact the researcher, **Suzanne Sarjeant** at **01656 815730** or send an email to Sarjeants@cardiff.ac.uk for any questions.

Signature

You are making a decision about allowing your child to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to allow them to participate in the study. If you later decide that you wish to withdraw your permission for your child to participate in the study you may discontinue his or her participation at any time.

Printed Name of Child

Signature of Parent(s) or Legal Guardian

Date

Appendix 9

Findings from non-participating schools

Included below are the findings from the non-participating schools used as a non-equivalent sample in order to provide illustrative comparison. Table 24 below shows these schools, giving a breakdown of the numbers of participants involved in each school and noting the amount of free school meals pupils. As with the Impact schools, all of the children involved from these three schools were in the same school year, Year 2. All of the children completed their writing samples with the same timeframe as the children in the participating schools. However, whilst all of the children completed an initial baseline writing sample, not all of the children completed a final writing sample. This means that the total writing samples used for comparison data were forty.

School Ref	School Type	Number of Pupils	Before and After Writing Samples	FSM Pupils
D	Non-Impact	27	20	2
E	Non-Impact	8	8	1
F	Non-Impact	12	12	0

Table 21: Summary of Schools and Pupils who did not Implement the Impact Programme

The graph below shows the baseline levels of the pupils in schools D, E and F.

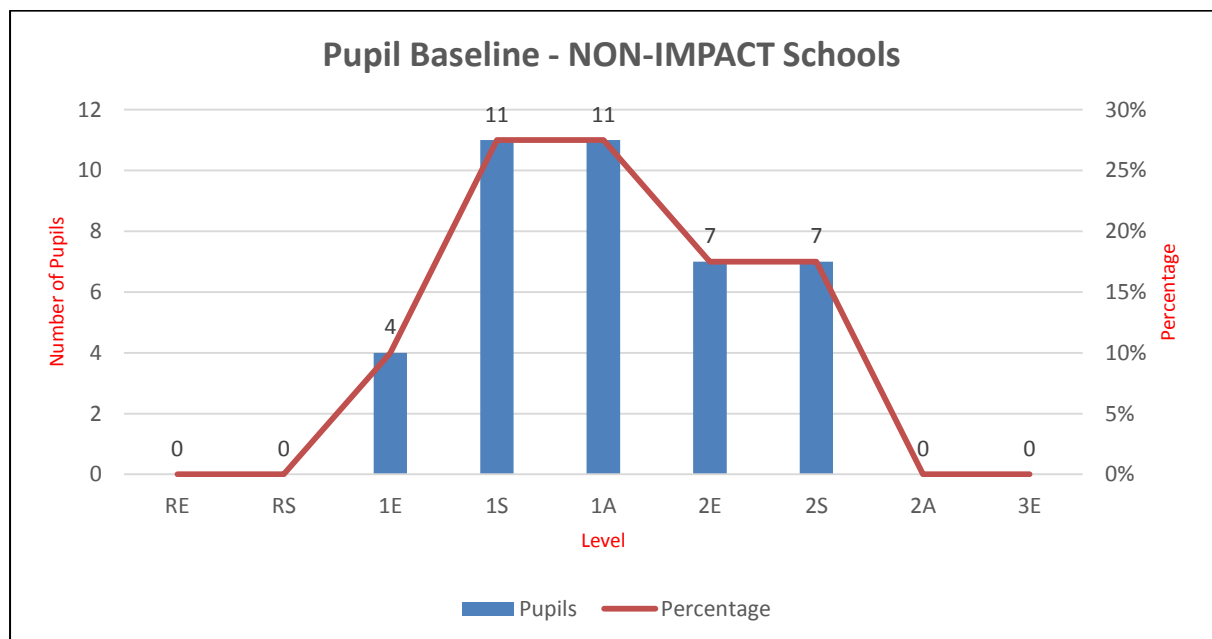


Figure 16: Summary of the Baseline Data for Non-Impact Schools

The data show that at the baseline assessment stage, the pupils in schools D, E and F generally had a higher baseline than those who were in schools A, B and C. This means that their writing, on average, was a higher standard to begin with. In schools D, E and F, no children were assessed to be at RE or RS levels. An equal number of children started at both 1S and 1A.

The graph below shows a summary of the final levels of the writing achieved by the children.

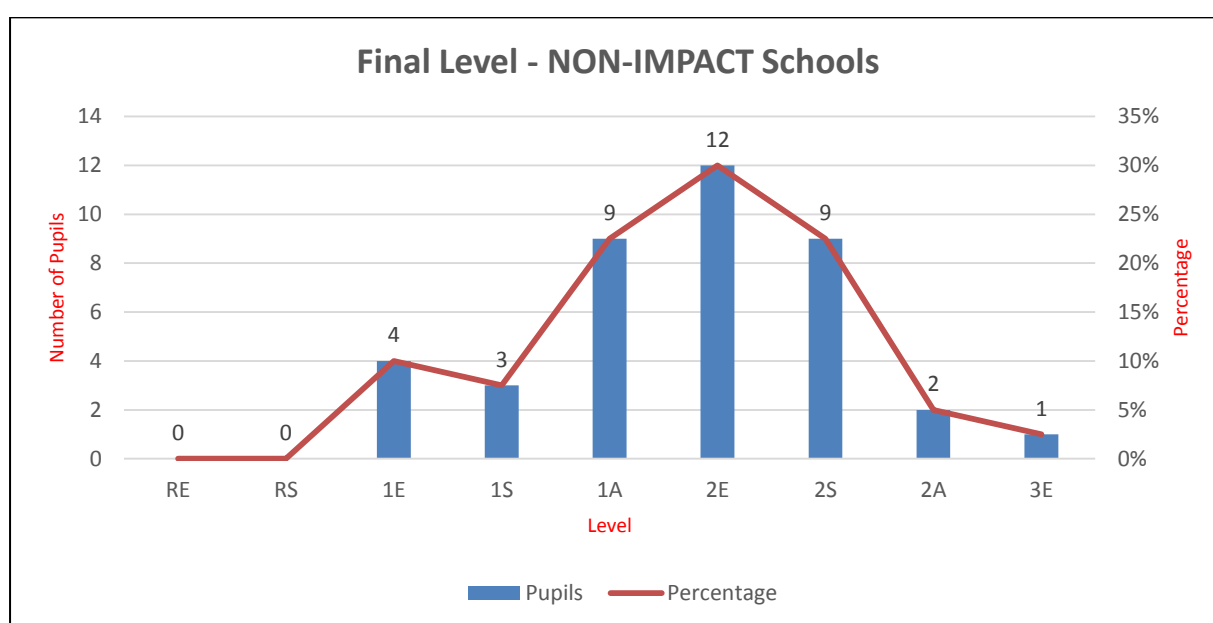


Figure 17: Summary of the Final Writing Data for Non-Impact Schools

The following table illustrates the progress calculated for the children from schools D, E and F who did not participate in the *Impact in Writing* programme, from their baseline to their final piece of independent writing.

Progress	School D	School E	School F	TOTAL	Percentage
None	4	7	7	18	45%
1 Level	12	1	5	18	45%
2 Levels	3	0	0	3	8%
3 Levels	1	0	0	1	3%
4 Levels	0	0	0	0	0%
TOTAL	20	8	12	40	100%

Table 22: Progress Level Results at Non-Impact Schools

In schools D, E and F who form the comparison group, eighteen children made no progress, with eighteen also making 1 level of progress. Very few children made either 2 or 3 levels of progress and no children made 4 levels of progress.

The following bar chart illustrates the levels of improvement for children in each of the Non-Impact schools.

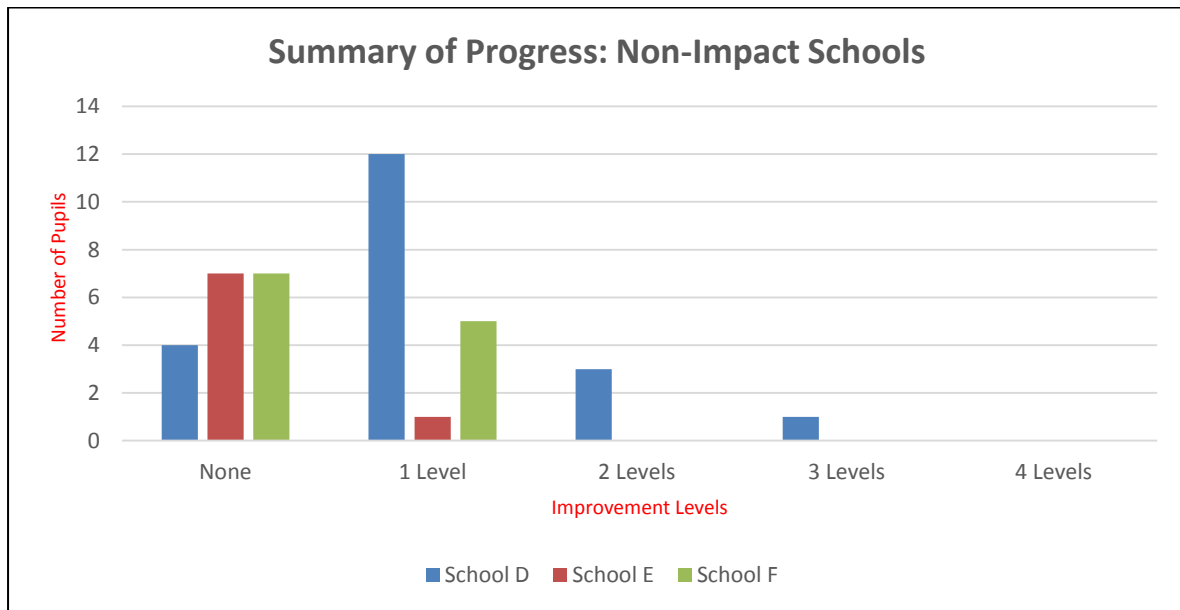


Figure 18: Summary of Progress Level Results at Non-Impact Schools

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