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# Understanding parental involvement with schools and parental engagement with learning across schools in areas of socioeconomic deprivation in Wales

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## ABSTRACT



Parents' involvement and engagement with their child's school and learning are important in children's educational outcomes and their overall life successes, and both parental involvement and engagement are seen to be socioeconomically distributed. This paper aims to explore to what extent and how parents from areas of socioeconomic deprivation are involved in their children's school and engaged in their children's learning. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with children, parents, and school staff from four schools in areas of socioeconomic deprivation across Wales. These interviews primarily explored parental involvement with schools and parental engagement with learning. Findings revealed that parents were involved in a range of parental involvement activities and events. However, there were differences in the levels of parental engagement reported by families and schools, with schools reporting limited parental engagement with learning. Variations stemmed from differences in how parents and schools conceptualised "learning". Barriers to parental involvement and engagement showed schools' limited understanding and consideration of the poverty faced by families, and deficit approaches towards parents were evidenced. To understand parental engagement with learning further, there is a need for a broader conceptualisation of learning and its value, to encompass non-academic and less formal development opportunities. Further research to explore and assess the impact of parental engagement with learning, both formal and informal, on children's academic and non-academic outcomes is recommended. In addition, the research recommends schools attempt to further understand the complexities of families and their wider environment to tailor involvement and engagement approaches.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

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## Background/ main text introduction

The socioeconomic status (SES) of a child is one of, if not the most, significant predictor of their educational success (Garcia & Weiss, 2017; Tahir, 2022). In the UK, children from lower SES backgrounds tend to have on average significantly lower educational attainment than their peers from higher SES backgrounds. These disparities in achievement emerge early in life and continue to grow throughout a child's education and adolescence (Blundell et al., 2021; Garcia & Weiss, 2017). These educational inequalities can be attributed to broad structural forces such as poverty, welfare reforms and the environments in which families live, work and play (Pearce et al., 2016). However, also of importance to children's educational successes, and a significant contributor to the intergenerational reproduction of socioeconomic differences in attainment, is a child's home environment, including the support and stimulation a child receives within the home (Johnson et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2019). Learning within the home and community continue throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood (Goodall, 2018a), with formal school learning only accounting for a small proportion of a child's overall learning and development. Parental involvement in a child's school and active engagement in a child's learning are crucial for a child's academic success (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017; Şengönül, 2022; Tárraga García et al., 2018). According to the Education Endowment Foundation (2021), parental engagement in learning can boost a child's progress by an average of four months over the course of a year.

Decades of research and policy have highlighted that parental involvement with schools, parental engagement with learning and positive parent-school relationships are key levers for improving child educational outcomes (Durand & Secakusuma, 2019; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2013; Ishimaru et al., 2016). Whether this involvement is home-based or school-based, parental involvement with schools and parental engagement with learning have been linked with higher academic attainment, lower school drop-out rates, higher rates of participation in further education and social mobility (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2013; Jeynes, 2018; Smees & Sammons, 2018). Successive UK governments have emphasised the importance of parental involvement and engagement with the publication of documentation, which supports parents with their parental practices (Goodall, 2019). For example, the 2018 Westminster Conservative Government published the policy document, "Improving the Home Learning Environment", which outlined evidence supporting a behaviour change model to improve the home learning environment (HM Government, 2018). In addition, a 2010 UK government review on parental engagement highlighted how the Department for Education placed importance on improving children's outcomes through increasing parents' engagement with their child's learning (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2010).

Political rhetoric focusing on increasing or improving the quality of parents' involvement and engagement promotes ideas that parents need to be reeducated to adopt alternative values, ideas and parenting practices (Gillies, 2005; Goodall, 2019). As parental involvement with schools and engagement with learning have been shown to be socio-economically differentiated, this often means that these policies are aimed at parents from lower SES backgrounds (Roksa & Potter, 2011). Discourses around poverty and families often suggest that poverty is a result of personal choice, beliefs and attitudes (Gewirtz, 2001; Goodall, 2019), and this concept of "choice" extends into ideas around why parents from lower SES backgrounds may not engage in their child's learning. Structural forces that impede parents from lower SES backgrounds are often not considered

and instead parents are viewed as having a limited interest in their children's learning, or experiencing a personal deficit which inhibits their ability to engage (Doyle & Keane, 2019). This "deficit approach" sees blame for parents' or families' limited involvement with their child's school and learning, and children's poor educational outcomes placed firmly on individual parents and families (Goodall, 2019). In addition, the growth of neo-liberalist ideals throughout society and the marketisation of the education system have contributed towards a greater expectation for parents to engage with their children's learning (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016). Neo-liberalism views individuals as responsible for their own life outcomes and sees that outcomes are a consequence of the ways in which individuals live their lives, reinforcing deficit approaches.

Nonetheless, much contemporary academic research has dismissed the deficit model, highlighting the crucial importance of larger societal factors on children's educational outcomes (Doyle & Keane, 2019; Spencer et al., 2018). Arguably, there have been increased efforts to adopt asset-based approaches, whereby the power differentials between some families and schools as well as the impact of structural factors on families' lives are considered in relation to parental engagement and child outcomes (Ishimaru et al., 2016). A theoretical framework, which can support understandings of how structural factors influence and interact with families and schools is Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory and framework. The theory and framework conceptualises children and families within a wider set of influences, which all interconnect to influence health and educational outcomes. Within Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological framework there are five layers to the environment which all interact to affect children's development; the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem. The different levels of the framework offer opportunities as well as constraints, with these opportunities and constraints interacting simultaneously to produce outcomes (Zimmerman et al., 2015). Rather than viewing involvement and engagement as solely a consequence of parental choice and agency, the framework can support understandings of how parents' involvement and engagement are shaped and influenced by a wide set of interconnected influences (Auerbach, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Campbell, 2011). For example, factors such as a family's neighbourhood (mesosystem), accessibility to community-based resources (exosystem), the current cultural and political climate (macrosystem) and a family's economic circumstances (mesosystem) all interact to influence parents' potential involvement or engagement with their child's school or learning.

Throughout this paper, the broad term "parent" is used to encompass all adults with caring responsibility for a child and living within the child's immediate household unit (Goodall, 2018a). In addition, the terms "parental involvement" and "parental engagement" are used frequently. Within existing literature, these terms are often not consistently used, nor clearly defined. However, this paper uses the terms "parental involvement with schools" and "parental engagement with learning" in line with Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) model for the progression from parental involvement with schools to parental engagement with learning. The model theorises that parental involvement and engagement sit along a continuum, with parental involvement being a precursor to engagement. According to Goodall and Montgomery (2014), the progression from involvement to engagement is often not a simple linear process, but complex and related to "relational agency" (Goodall, 2018a, 2018b; Jeynes, 2018). Parental involvement with schools sees schools hold the agency and control the flow of

information. Whereas parental engagement sees parents holding a substantial amount of agency and taking some form of ownership over their child's learning with an equitable relationship being formed between the parent and the school. The model posits that a school can be at several points along the continuum at any singular point in time. Schools will typically have a range of parental involvement and engagement efforts which will be accepted or rejected by different cohorts of parents, as well as new cohorts of parents joining and leaving the school at the beginning and end of each academic year (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

This paper aims to explore the extent to which, and the ways in which, parents from areas of socioeconomic deprivation across Wales are involved with their children's school and engaged with their children's learning. The paper will consider how parents' involvement and engagement are affected by different levels of the ecological system, and support understandings of how these interactions can impact children's outcomes. Prior research and government departments have reported that parents from lower-SES backgrounds engage less in their children's learning than their more advantaged peers (Roksa & Potter, 2011). Yet there is limited research exploring the educational experiences and perspectives of children, parents and school staff from socioeconomically deprived areas in relation to parental involvement with schools and parental engagement with learning. The voices of those experiencing poverty can often be unheard. However, this research aims to emphasise those voices, and understand how poverty interacts with a range of different factors at different levels of the socioecological system to impact parents' involvement and engagement in their children's school and learning.

The paper will aim to address the following three research questions.

- (1) To what extent and in what ways do parents from socioeconomically deprived areas in Wales describe involvement with their children's school and engagement with their children's learning?
- (2) What methods do schools in areas of socioeconomic deprivation in Wales describe adopting to involve and engage parents in school and learning?
- (3) What are the perceived barriers and facilitators to parental involvement with children's school and parental engagement with children's learning in areas of socioeconomic deprivation in Wales?

## **Methods and materials**

The research presented in this paper was drawn from a doctoral thesis that explored how poverty impacts all aspects of family life, particularly focusing on the impact of poverty on families' educational experiences and children's outcomes through Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Framework. The research was conducted in Wales, at primary schools participating in the Welsh Local Government-funded School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP). The research involved semi-structured interviews with primary school children, parents and school staff during the 2019 summer holidays (at the "Food and Fun" SHEP). Whilst the specific ages of the children were not collected, the majority of children participating in the research were in Key Stage 2 (KS2) (aged between 7 and 11 years old), although exceptions were made if a younger child was interested in participating. The research was conducted in line with the Economic and Social Research Council's

core research principles and ethical approval was obtained from Cardiff University's School of Social Science Research Ethics (SREC/3208) in March 2019.

### ***Recruitment and sampling***

The SHEP was used as a vehicle to access primary schools in socioeconomically deprived areas in Wales, and four schools that were participating in the 2019 SHEP were recruited to partake in the research presented in this paper. The SHEP is a Welsh Government funded multi-agency school-based scheme that aims to provide healthy meals, physical activity and enrichment sessions to children and families living in areas of social deprivation during the school holidays (McConnon et al., 2017; Powdrill & Thomas, 2019). The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) provided a list of schools participating in the programme. From that, four schools were invited to participate through purposive sampling (Bryman, 2016) whereby variation in schools' geographical location and SHEP tenure was sought. One school from the north, mid, south, and west regions of Wales was recruited for the research, which included one school from each of the SHEP intakes of 2016, 2017 and two schools from 2018. School tenure was considered important as the development of school-family relationships over time could be explored, although the analysis of school - family relationships was not central to this paper. Due to the WLGA eligibility criteria for receipt of SHEP (school-level FSM eligibility population of over 16%), FSM entitlement was not considered in the sampling approach. However, the mean FSM entitlement of the participating schools was considerably higher than the 2019 mean primary school-age FSM entitlement figure of 18.5%. Pseudonyms have been given to the four schools participating in the research to protect their identity.

The WLGA contacted schools on behalf of the researcher, providing information about the study and the researcher's contact details. If schools were interested in participating in the research, the school was asked to directly contact the researcher. Schools were sent research information sheets and head teachers were asked to sign a study contract declaring their school-level agreement to participate in the research. The study information and participant information sheets informed the school that the research was independent from the WLGA, and the data would be collected for the purpose of a doctoral thesis. Schools were sent paper copies of study information sheets and consent forms for distribution to staff and parents prior to data collection. However, no parent or school staff consent forms were signed prior to the organised data collection dates, therefore information sheets and consent forms were redistributed and signed prior to data collection interviews commencing. For the recruitment of children, study information sheets and child consent forms for parents to sign were sent to the schools for redistribution to parents prior to data collection. Some schools collected signed consent forms prior to the arranged data collection, and some parents signed the consent forms for their child on the day of data collection. If parents had given consent for their child to participate, the child was given a child-friendly information sheet and assent form to sign.

### ***Data collection***

The data presented in this paper were collected during the summer holidays of 2019. Data were collected from children, parents and school staff via face-to-face interviews. Whilst

initially these interviews were planned to be solo interviews, due to time constraints and at their request, some participants were interviewed with one another. For example, a brother and sister and a group of school staff all requested to be interviewed together rather than individually.

A total of 30 interviews were conducted with a total of 39 participants. A similar number of participants from each school agreed to participate, with the lowest number of participants being 7 at Ferntree Primary and the highest being 12 at Hazelwood Primary (see Table 1).

### *Semi-Structured interviews with parents and school staff*

The parent and school staff interviews utilised a similar approach. Interview guides and interview materials were developed out of the literature and parent interviews were piloted with parents. Questions focused on parental involvement with schools, parental engagement with learning, and home-school relationships. Interviews took place on school grounds, in a private room or space.

### *Semi-structured interviews with children*

The semi-structured interviews with children were designed to be creative, supporting children to express themselves through verbal and non-verbal modes (Clark et al., 2014). Three activities were designed to support children to express their perspectives and views, and activities were piloted with children prior to data collection. Each activity was designed to elicit conversation and dialogue related to the research questions (Brady & Graham, 2019). The first activity asked children to draw the people, places, activities and things that were important to them in their world. The second activity involved children placing stickers on a timeline to illustrate how their typical school day unfolds, alongside verbally explaining their typical day. The final activity asked children to draw and write about what activities or events their parents or family members attend or participate in at the school. Photographs were taken of the drawings created in activities one and three, and all interviews were audio recorded.

**Table 1.** Total number of participants in interviews by stakeholder group and school.

	Stakeholder Group	Number of Interviews	Number of Participants	Total Number of Interviews	Total Number of Participants
Hazelwood Primary	Child	4	7	8	12
	Parent	3	4		
	School Staff	1	1		
Willowhill Primary	Child	3	3	9	9
	Parent	4	4		
	School Staff	2	2		
Ashberry Primary	Child	2	3	6	11
	Parent	2	4		
	School Staff	2	4		
Ferntree Primary	Child	3	3	7	7
	Parent	3	3		
	School Staff	1	1		
<b>Total of All Schools</b>		<b>30</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>39</b>

## **Data analysis**

All recorded interview data were transcribed verbatim, anonymised and uploaded into NVivo 12 software for analysis. Photographs of activities one and two from the child interviews were used to support understanding of the child's dialogue. The activities and drawings were used to elicit children's narratives and therefore the drawings were not analysed but supported understanding of the transcribed interviews. The data were analysed in the context of Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) model for the progression from parental involvement with schools to parental engagement with learning, specifically in relation to their theorising of the concept of agency. In this research, agency was central to understanding whether an activity discussed by stakeholders would be classified as parental involvement or parental engagement. Moreover, "the capacity of parents to act in relation to their children's education" (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014, p. 401) helped identify the barriers and facilitators to parents' involvement and engagement. This approach considered parents' capacity for involvement or engagement within the complexity of their environment, therefore avoiding the reinforcement of deficit approaches.

The data were analysed using framework analysis, a method that sits within the broad family of analysis methods termed thematic analysis (Gale et al., 2013). This involved a five-stage structured approach to analysis; data familiarisation, identification and development of a thematic framework, indexing of the data, charting of the data, and mapping and interpretation the data (Gale et al., 2013; Ritchie & Lewis, 2005). A deductive and inductive approach to data analysis was used whereby pre-established codes developed from the literature review or in line with the research questions were used and new codes were generated throughout the analysis process. For example, the broader pre-established codes were not inclusive to but included codes related to parental involvement and engagement, school-home relationships and family circumstances and poverty, considering parental involvement and engagement theories and parents' wider socioecological contexts. After the data were coded using framework analysis, some data were quantified to visually support understandings of parental involvement from different stakeholder perspectives (see Figure 1). This process involved recording whether an activity or event was discussed within an interview, and then calculating in how many interviews an activity or an event were discussed. If an activity or event was discussed one time or four times with in one interview, this would be counted as one.

## **Results**

The findings have been organised in accordance with theories and models that view parental engagement with learning as a progression from parental involvement with schools (Goodall, 2018a, 2018b; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). The findings are presented under four subheadings; school-level involvement and engagement strategies, perceptions of parental engagement with learning, the value of informal learning opportunities and activities and parental engagement and education inequalities across generations.

### **School-level involvement and engagement strategies**

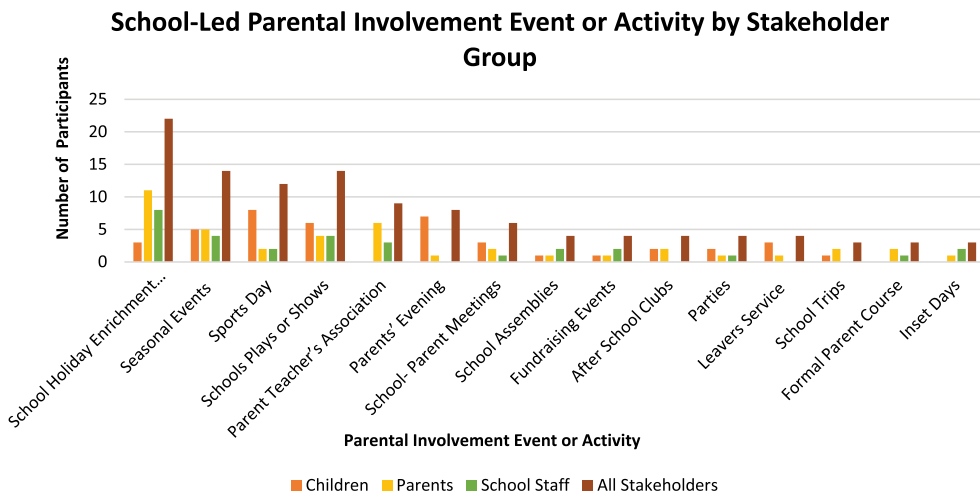
The schools in this research are facilitating parents' involvement with schools and parents' engagement with learning in many ways and throughout the school year. Children,



parents and school staff reported numerous family involvement and engagement activities including school assemblies, sports day, school plays and parents’ evenings.

- Parent 4: “Well we do Christmas plays every year, it’s really nice to see ... well obviously they do their sports day, they do activities when they go out of school as well, school trips which they really enjoy”.
- School Staff 14: “And then we have like concerts”
- School Staff 15: “Assemblies”
- Child 9: “Leavers service”
- Child 8: “Parents evening”

There was similarity in the events and activities mentioned across stakeholder groups, and the school involvement event or activity mentioned most frequently by school staff and parents was SHEP (see [Figure 1](#)). This finding was not surprising as the data was collected during the SHEP and therefore the programme would have been at the forefront of participants’ minds. Seasonal events such as the Christmas Fayre as well as the parent teacher’s association (PTA) and school plays were also frequently mentioned by school staff and parents. In child interviews, sports day was the most frequently reported involvement event, followed by parents’ evening. Parents’ evening can arguably be viewed as parents’ involvement with schooling, which is placed at the centre of Goodall and Montgomery’s (2014) continuum, between parental involvement with schools and parental engagement with learning. At this point agency is shared between parents and schools and information between parents and schools based around the processes that surround learning is two-directional (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). Interestingly, in this research parents’ evening was reported by several children but only one adult, suggesting parents’ evening had greater significance for children as passive recipients than for school staff or parents who are actively engaged in the event. [Figure 1](#) shows the range of activities and events families are involved or engaged in.



**Figure 1.** Graph of Parental Involvement or Engagement Activities or Events by stakeholder group.

Activities and events varied in their formality, and their purpose, and this intermix contributed to the degree to which parents participated. Most events posed as opportunities for parents to watch their child perform, celebrate an occasion or milestone or discuss how their child is doing academically. There was a consensus across the child, parent and school data that the involvement or engagement activities and events were typically school-led and limited active engagement from parents was required.

- Interviewer: School plays, so what happens at school plays?  
 Child 16: They [parents] just watch us.
- Interviewer: Why do you think parents are invited?  
 Parent 2: So they can watch their children have fun really.  
 Grandparent 1: And we can spend money [laughter] they are always asking for money, I must admit, there is loads of money wanting.

In addition to parents being seen as passive observers at school events, school events were also seen as opportunities for the school to fundraise, and parents felt they were often asked to financially contribute at events. Whilst some of the activities such as sports day or parents' evening could be seen to involve active participation from parents, such as participation in the parent race on sports day or contribution to discussions around their child's learning on parents' evening, it is difficult to decipher within the confines of the opportunities given the extent to which parents can exercise their agency. Moreover, findings indicated that parents did not report being asked for their input on what activities or events they themselves or their children would enjoy attending at the school.

### ***Perceptions of parental engagement with learning***

The child and parent data consistently reported that parents were engaging in their children's learning in various ways. The parental engagement activities described included both formal learning activities which were seen to be related to typical academic learning (i.e. homework or counting) and less formal learning activities such as playing cards or cooking which were still educational in their nature but not directly aligned with the curriculum. Unlike in the activities and events listed above, here parents have moved into agentic positions whereby they were acting in a beneficial manner in relation to their children's learning, albeit sometimes with school guidance (i.e. homework).

- Parent 13: Every night we sit down, and they have homework, we read books together, go through their homework and everything.
- Child 82: I get some homework to do and then once I have done it my mum sees and says how much my handwriting has improved and all that.

All family members supported learning within the home, and support could come from parents solely but also could come from siblings and/ or grandparents. Family members were seen to provide support in conjunction with one another, and different family members provided different forms of support for learning, such as support in different subject areas dependent on their personal strengths. For example, a parent explained that a specific technique for learning had been passed down through generations in their family and is now used by different generations in the family to support their child's reading.

Parent 4: My mum and dad used to teach me when I was younger how to learn or memorise words if we were reading a book they used to tell me to go to a page and then go to a word on that page then split it up if I couldn't spell it, so my kids have learnt that way how to read ... if they are going to Nain and Taid's, they are like do you wanna read with us and my mum will be like go to page 3 and look for this word and it helps them recognise what words they were.

Whilst parents and children reported engagement in children's learning within the home, school staff held a contradictory opinion on the extent to which parents were engaging with learning within the home. School staff often presented the view that there was limited engagement in children's learning within the home from the parents at their school.

Interviewer: Thinking about learning outside of the school, how do you see parents engaging with their children's learning at home?  
 School Staff 3: They don't.  
 School Staff 1: They don't.  
 School Staff 24: Some parents will want to engage with their children's learning, some will not.

The perception of limited engagement in children's learning was commonplace in the findings and school staff also reported low levels of homework being completed and returned. Three of the four schools participating in the research noted general challenges with the completion of homework, as well as difficulties with loaned school reading books being returned by families.

School Staff 1: No, we get barely any, you know like reading books, we don't get reading books back, they don't read them at home, homework has kind of gone off, gone off now because we don't really get that back do we.  
 School Staff 31: Homework then put it that way, we were sending homework home, but it doesn't get done.

In some cases, school staff recognised some of the challenges families could face completing homework within the home, which included the impact poverty could have on parents' capacity to support learning within the home or families experiencing digital deprivation. For example, school staff reported parents not feeling comfortable in supporting their child with learning activities directly associated with maths or English, impeding opportunities for engagement. Nonetheless, there was a general assumption by school staff that homework being returned was important, that children should be doing homework, and parents should either be encouraging children to do their homework or supporting their children with it.

### ***The value of informal learning opportunities and activities***

These differences in levels of parental engagement with learning reported could be attributed to differences in the types of learning which are viewed as valuable by families and school staff. As discussed, families are engaging in a range of learning activities within the home but these activities are not recognised by school staff. The data demonstrated there was a differentiation established between formal learning activities directly associated with academic learning (i.e. homework and counting), and informal learning activities indirectly associated with educational outcomes, but

which were educational in their nature and associated with learning and child development more generally.

Parents reported engaging in both formal learning activities such as supporting homework or helping with counting, and also reported engaging in informal learning such as playing games, cooking or throwing and catching a ball.

Parent 14: It's like my daughter cooking, she will cook her own food, I will stand there or sit there on the breakfast bar ... I am there when she's doing it but it is life skills it's not just learning your maths and being clever that way it's learning life skills, like how to cook, how to make stuff, how to put ingredients together, so it is a bit all mixed in in my house, I don't sit there and say read a book and memorise it, I sort of combine it with life skills, it's great to be brainy but if you've got no life skills and don't know how to cook then I am sorry but you are failing a bit.

Parent 9: She is just a sponge, so TV programmes, interactive programmes, umm the computer, what else do we do, crafts and that lot, at the moment we are concentrating on her hand eye co-ordination, watch her throw a ball.

Similar to the parents, children reported their parents engaging in a range of both formal and informal learning activities within the home and the community.

Interviewer: Read, and do you take out lots of books?

Child 16: Usually about one or two.

Interviewer: And how often do you do that?

Child 16: Err one is always but two is about twice a week.

Child 16: I always go swimming every Friday.

Interviewer: Every Friday, and who is that with?

Child 16: My Dad

The development of practical and life skills was not seen to undermine academic learning but rather illustrated how parents adopted a two-pronged approach to support their children's learning. Parents valued both formal and informal learning and recognised the importance of both forms of learning in their child's overall development. Learning here is understood in its widest sense (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014), and whilst parents are exercising their parental agency through choice of action and involvement there is limited recognition from schools of parents' engagement. In the school staff data, there was no recognition of parents' engagement in informal learning within the home, suggesting school staff did not value informal learning to the same extent as more formal learning activities directly aligned with the curriculum.

### ***Parental engagement and educational inequalities across generations***

Whilst there was consistency across the child and parent data about parents' own levels of engagement in their children's learning, some parents believed that other parents were not engaging in children's learning to the same extent as themselves, suggesting the "othering" of parents within their school. Some of the parents appeared to attribute other parents' limited parental engagement to the parents having limited intellectual capacity or parents having a child at a young age.

Parent 12: Some parents they've not I hate to say the word academically inclined but some of them are not, some of these parent and children are very close in age, they have had them very, very, young.

Parent 8: We went to school, you went uni, I wouldn't say we were Einstein's but we can help the kids but I suppose with some parents they can't even do that at all.

Moreover, school staff attributed limited engagement with learning to parents' individual and family circumstances. In over half of the school staff interviews, parents' limited engagement in learning was linked to parental choice, parents' personal characteristics or parents' histories. For example, a parent's poor upbringing was noted as likely to negatively influence their child's upbringing as the parent had limited knowledge and skills to support their child's learning. Whilst in some cases there was recognition of factors to parental engagement beyond the parent such as social conditions (macrosystem) and parents' local environment (exosystem), often parents' knowledge or intelligence were associated with the extent to which a parent could engage in their child's learning.

School Staff 3: I think some of our parents try damn hard but they don't have the skills or the knowledge, they weren't brought up.

School Staff 13: I think some of them probably haven't had the best upbringing themselves and now they are parents, and the cycle carries on, they don't know how to break that cycle.

Although parents' own histories were seen to have a negative influence on their own outcomes there was limited discussion around the impact of limited parental involvement or engagement on socio-economic inequalities in children's educational outcomes. Nonetheless, one school staff member explicitly discussed how children were not meeting the expected reading levels and experiencing speech and language difficulties, attributing this to parents not engaging with their children or supporting their development.

School Staff 3: Our kids are coming into nursery two levels below where they should be coming in, 75% of my class this year had speech and language difficulties ... cause they are not being talked to and engaged ... you know the parents that do read with their kids at home because they are the ones that have got the higher, I know that there are abilities involved in that but you know when parents practice read-write sounds ... you just listen to the kids read, you just know.

It was recognised that a child's ability impacts their development, yet how well a child is performing academically is often associated with the extent to which a parent is viewed to be engaging in their child's learning. Whilst school staff and parents viewed "other" parents as not engaging in their children's learning within the home there were cases where stakeholders recognised their efforts, although ultimately perceived educational inequalities as intergenerational in nature.

## Discussion

This research has found that parents from socioeconomically deprived areas in Wales are involved in their children's school and engaged in their children's learning although the extent to which this was reported varied between families and schools. Findings from this

research demonstrated schools lay on a wide range of parental involvement activities and events for parents and families throughout the school year. These events provided opportunities for parents to be involved in their children's school although these offerings are often tokenistic, offering limited opportunities for meaningful engagement (Hingle et al., 2010; Inchley et al., 2007; Nielsen et al., 2015; Torres & Simovska, 2017). Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) model of progression guided understandings of parental involvement with schools and parental engagement with learning in this research by providing a continuum and justifications for how activities and events could be understood and categorised.

The schools in this research adopted many methods to involve parents in school although direct methods to engage parents in learning (i.e. supporting parents to support their child's learning within the home) were discussed to a lesser extent. Formal school involvement events such as the PTA, parents' evening and school-parent meetings were reported in the research but more commonly methods adopted by schools to encourage parental involvement were less formal and had a certain element of fun (i.e. SHEP, seasonal events, sports days, and school plays and shows). Events that were typically informal in their nature often provided some opportunities for parents to participate but primarily parents remained passive observers. Parents, children and school staff all listed multiple parental involvement activities and events demonstrating parents from socioeconomically deprived areas in Wales are altogether relatively involved in their children's school. Whilst these informal events may feature educational elements this was uncommon. These events were more likely to promote the development of family-school relationships and contribute to parents becoming comfortable within the schooling environment, which can positively contribute towards school-level and individual-level mental health and wellbeing as well as overall increased child educational attainment (Patton et al., 2000). The informality or fun nature of these school events was arguably seen as a facilitator to involvement, with this involvement having wider benefits.

Parental involvement and the development of home-school partnerships are identified as one of the key characteristics of effective school improvement (Hamad, 2022; Reezigt, 2001). Parental involvement events pose as opportunities for communication and relationship development with classroom teachers often being predominately responsible for the development of communication between the school and home (Durand & Secakusuma, 2019). Research has consistently shown that in low social and economic neighbourhoods strong and positive home-school relationships contribute towards school effectiveness and students learning and achieving (Sanders & Sheldon, 2009). Without positive home-school relationships and clear communication, schools cannot understand the child within their wider socioecological context and therefore the needs of the child and the family can remain relatively unknown.

The findings from this research highlighted that the conditions for good communication and the establishment of trust were not necessarily met. A primary failing of schools in this research was the limited consideration of the financial impact of schooling and school events on families which arguably impeded the development of home-school relationships, a known key characteristic of effective school improvement (Hamad, 2022; Reezigt, 2001). Limited consideration of the financial cost of parental involvement events and activities at the schools acted as a barrier to parental involvement. Financial costs can take the form of donating goods for a fundraising event, purchasing goods at a

fundraising event, paying for a child to attend a school trip or purchasing a particular item or outfit for a child to wear for a school event.

In some schools, parental involvement events failed to consider impact of poverty and financial hardship on families and their potential to participate illustrating how schools did not consider some of the families within the communities which they serve. In these circumstances, some parents can be left torn between trying to find money for their child or themselves to attend an event or missing out and feeling excluded. Unfortunately, families' limited participation in such events or activities could be seen as a rational mechanism to defend against the shame and stigma families could face in relation to not being able to afford to participate. Nonetheless, the structural conditions, which impede their participation, are often not considered by school staff and other parents who view limited participation as fecklessness. The failure to consider the structural forces that impede lower SES families from parental involvement or engagement are often ignored in the literature, and this was apparent in the organisation of school events, and in school staff's perceptions of parents' limited involvement and engagement in this research.

To a certain extent, schools were attempting to move along Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) continuum and encourage parents to exercise greater agency to support their children's learning through the distribution of homework to children. School staff placed importance on homework and there was an underlying assumption by school staff that children should be doing homework, and parents should be supporting children with their homework. There was evidence in the findings of parents supporting children with their homework, as well as parents supporting children to learn in additional ways. Nonetheless, wider literature on the value of homework is varied, and a review of studies within the field found no strong evidence of an association between homework and achievement for children aged between 5 and 12 years old (Cooper et al., 2006). The impact of parental support with children's schoolwork on children's progress in a range of subjects at 7 years old was also mixed (Stafford, 2023). In this research, whilst school staff placed high value on children doing homework and parents supporting formal learning within the home, a more rounded approach to learning was valued and supported by parents.

Many of the school-level findings implied a belief that parents were not engaging in their children's learning within the home. However, family-level data indicated parents were engaging with their children's learning demonstrating divergent opinions on levels of parental engagement. Interestingly, findings highlighted a clear distinction between informal learning activities not directly associated with traditional educational outcomes and formal learning activities which directly aligned with the curriculum. Whilst parents placed equal value on engagement in formal and informal learning activities, informal learning activities were generally not recognised by school staff, who focused almost exclusively on formal school-based learning and outcomes. At this point on Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) continuum parents have exercised the most agency, as support for their child's learning and development is self-directed and guided, however in some cases this engagement was not recognised by school staff. In addition, there was limited consideration by school staff of the impact of poverty on parents being able to foster choice, recognise, and use their agency (Eisenstadt & Oppenheim, 2019). Poverty impedes parents' practical abilities to provide what children may

need in terms of parenting, as parents' energy is consumed worrying about ensuring their family's basic needs are met (Eisenstadt & Oppenheim, 2019).

Historically, children have been expected to learn through participation in their tribe and acquire information and skills through engagement in activities related to their daily lives, religion or warfare (Fisher, 2021). The development of skills valued in families' local communities has been recognised as important to working-class families, with these families' aspirations for their children often being linked to the needs of their communities (Fisher, 2021; Wheeler, 2018). However, the education system arguably does not support children to develop the skills necessary for employment but rather is focused on ensuring children get the best grades in performative tests (Fisher, 2021). This has been recognised as a global issue by UNICEF (2022), who reported that less than half of young people across 38 countries attain the necessary skills needed to thrive in school, employment and general life. Education in its current form sees a standardised curriculum taught to children with performative tests being used to indicate success (Fisher, 2021) meaning informal learning is not necessarily valued or measured and therefore parents' engagement in this learning is not recognised. From this paper, it is evident there were differences in the value placed on different types of learning within the home, which contributed towards misunderstandings in the levels of parental engagement within children's learning for parents from lower SES backgrounds. Whilst this was not a barrier to parental engagement with learning, these findings suggest that current understandings of limited parental engagement with learning within the home from low-income families are not a fair representation, and are therefore reinforcing existing negative stereotypes and perceptions.

The premise of the deficit model of parenting is based on the notion that the gap in achievement between children from different SES backgrounds is constructed by the belief that parents are not engaged in their children's learning, or not engaging in the "right" ways in accordance with schools or the education system (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Goodall, 2019). Perceived deficiencies in parenting are often closely aligned with the concept of a culture of poverty which assumes that some parents do not have the skills, materials or values to support their child's learning and development (Baxter & Toe, 2023; Davis & Museus, 2019; Goodall, 2019). In line with existing literature, there was evidence of deficit thinking towards parents by school staff and by parents towards other parents in this research (Goodall, 2019). At times, blame for limited parental engagement was attributed to parents' personal or family characteristics rather than the complex interplay between parents' genes and families' social environments (Horwitz & Neiderhiser, 2011). Parents' personal characteristics as well as their upbringings, and their personal histories with schools and the education system were all noted as barriers to parental engagement with learning. This theorising of socioeconomic disadvantage in deficit terms reinforces negative societal perceptions of, and stigma towards, parents from lower SES backgrounds and feeds political rhetoric which promotes ideas that parents need to be reeducated and adopt the values and ideals of previously successive parents (Gillies, 2005; Goodall, 2019).

The barriers and facilitators to parental involvement with schools and parental engagement with learning in areas of socioeconomic deprivation in Wales have been discussed throughout. In terms of parental involvement, the primary facilitator to involvement was ensuring school events were informal and fun in their nature, which arguably could



contribute towards future increased involvement and onwards positive school-home relationships. Barriers to parental involvement with schools included parents having limited input into the purpose or planning of school events, and schools having limited consideration of the financial impact involvement might have on parents. This limited consideration of the impact of poverty on parents was also a barrier to parental engagement with learning as digital deprivation was recognised as a barrier to engagement. Deficit approaches towards parents often meant parental choice, parents' personal characteristics and parental limited capacity to support learning were reported as barriers to engagement by school staff and parents. This paper has highlighted two potential future facilitators to parental engagement with learning. First, a more rounded approach to learning, and secondly, school-level recognition and encouragement of informal learning and life skill development within the home.

This research has exemplified clear examples of parental involvement with schools and parental engagement with learning, however, there were challenges in characterising some events or activities as either involvement or engagement as the degree to which schools as a whole are facilitating involvement and engagement can be difficult to decipher. In the analysis of the findings, there is subjectivity in the interpretation of agency exercised by school staff and parents, and parental involvement and engagement are arguably an independent endeavours and therefore difficult to understand at the school level. Although it is challenging to pinpoint where a school may be on the continuum due to schools offering a range of events for different purposes, with different levels of formality and varying levels of engagement opportunities, it is evident in the findings schools were offering parents a range of involvement with schools' opportunities.

Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) model of progression provided a guide to understanding how parental involvement with schools, parental involvement with schooling and parental engagement with learning are all different but related concepts as evidenced by the participants in this research. However, the reality of applying such a model to understand parental involvement and engagement at a school-level poses a challenge. Schools are complex systems where multiple components interact to influence one another at any given time, therefore meaning there are challenges pinpointing a school's place on the model of progression. Nonetheless, other frameworks such as Bronfenbrenner's socioecological theory (1977) provide a theoretical framework to support understanding of parental involvement and engagement within the complexity of the school system, as well as wider systems.

Whilst deficit approaches to parents were apparent in this research, there needs to be a move away from involvement and engagement as solely a consequence of parental choice and agency, and a move towards involvement and engagement being a consequence of a wider set of interconnected influences (Auerbach, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Campbell, 2011). Research on school belonging has highlighted that a student's sense of school belonging is influenced by individual, relationship and organisational factors related to the school and within political, cultural and geographical factors related to the unique school setting (Allen et al., 2016). These components are likely to be similar when considering parents' sense of school belonging and parents' potential to participate in involvement or engagement activities. This research has shown there is a greater need to consider factors external to the school and parents, as wider societal

influences on parents and families more generally inevitably impact parents' involvement and engagement. In particular, this research has highlighted limited consideration of how the macrolevel system factors of poverty and social class interact with all other factors of the socioecological system to form constraints for parents and children. There are further opportunities for schools to consider families within their socioecological environment to increase parental involvement with schools and parental engagement with learning. For example, greater focus on developing home school-relationships (microsystem), consultations with parents from lower SES backgrounds on school-level processes and practices (mesosystem) and consideration of the financial burden of school events and access to these events for some families (macrosystem) could improve parental involvement and engagement for lower-income families.

Whilst this research study was a small-scale piece of research, the findings provide insight into parental involvement with schools and parental engagement with learning in socioeconomically deprived areas in Wales, which could be translatable to other schools in areas of deprivation across the UK. The research used SHEP as an infrastructure by which schools and families in areas of deprivation in Wales could be accessed. However, the families attending the programme are arguably families that are typically involved with their child's school and engaged in their child's learning, meaning that the research did not reach those underserved. Nevertheless, accessing schools via SHEP allowed for the targeting of schools with lower FSM entitlement in varying geographical locations around Wales, meaning that that parental involvement and engagement in areas of socioeconomic deprivation in Wales could be explored.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this research indicate that parents from socioeconomically deprived areas in Wales are participating in a range of school involvement activities and are engaging in their children's learning in a range of different ways. However, the extent to which parents are involved and engaged is unclear due to divergent school-level and family-level perceptions of parental involvement and engagement. The expectations placed on parents typically reflect the social, economic and cultural contexts of successive parents meaning parental involvement or engagement outside of these expectations is not recognised or valued. The findings indicate a crucial need to reconceptualise learning and its value, in order to capture different forms of learning and fully grasp the extent of parental engagement with children's learning. Much of the work in the field of parental involvement and engagement intends to influence social justice and equality with the aim of creating a fairer system for all. Therefore, a shift from exclusively associating learning and outcomes with formal standardised academic benchmarks alongside a greater recognition of informal learning could support more reflective insights into parental engagement and alleviate some of the societal stigma placed on parents from lower SES backgrounds.

Schools were seen to offer an array of involvement opportunities, however it is less clear if schools provided an environment and support for parents to exercise their agency in relation to their parental engagement. In order for parents to exercise choice and agency, they need the practical ability and energy to do so, which for parents experiencing poverty can be expended just getting by. The financial cost of events and

parents' personal histories and characteristics were noted as barriers to involvement and engagement in this research. This research has considered Bronfenbrenner (1977) and how the impact of poverty as a macro-level structure interacts with all levels of the ecological system to impact parental involvement, parental engagement and ultimately children's outcomes. Many of the findings in this research are in line with existing research within the field, which demonstrates the existence of deficit approaches towards parents from lower SES backgrounds. There is a limited consideration of how families are embedded within nested ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), which shape their behaviours and interactions, and therefore blame for lack of involvement or engagement remains centred on parents. For deficit approaches towards parents from lower SES to be quashed, there needs to be societal understanding of the impact of poverty and hardship on all aspects of a family's life including their ability to participate in their child's school and learning.

The findings contribute to existing literature around parental involvement with schools and parental engagement with learning, providing insight from the perspectives of children, parents and families in socioeconomically deprived areas. Building upon this research, there would be merit in exploring parents' from lower SES backgrounds engagement in both formal and informal learning (i.e. non-academic outcomes such as creativity, social skills, and practical abilities) further as well as exploring how engagement with the different forms of learning can impact a range of learning outcomes. Additionally, further research could explore if and how teacher training addresses the intersection of poverty, parental engagement, and their collective impact on children's outcomes. It is recommended that schools and teachers seek to further understand the complexities of the environments in which children and parents live and learn. This could help schools to understand how to alleviate some of the effects of poverty on families, enabling them to better meet their financial, social, and emotional needs of the families they serve. In turn, this could foster greater parental agency and choice, enhancing parents their ability to be actively involved and engaged in their child's education.

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