

**Fostering ‘parental participation in schooling’: primary school teachers’ insights from the  
COVID-19 school closures**

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## **Fostering ‘parental participation in schooling’: primary school teachers’ insights from the COVID-19 school closures**

### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 school closures presented an unprecedented challenge to primary education on a global scale, with teachers, parents, and children having to rapidly adjust to a remote learning environment, and with concerns that this would exacerbate educational inequalities. Parental engagement has been widely acknowledged to have a positive impact on children’s academic achievement, and previous studies have found that efforts by schools to foster parental engagement can help close the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils. We therefore sought to explore how teachers perceived parental engagement during the school closures, and how they fostered this in a remote learning environment. Our research involved an exploratory mixed methods study with primary educators in England, with an online survey (n = 271) and semi-structured interviews (n = 24) in June and July 2020, after the first school closures in England, and then again after the second closures in April 2021 (n = 14). We found that teachers’ expectations for parental engagement during the school closures could be conceptualised as ‘parental participation in schooling’, with parents required to enable children’s access to learning resources provided by teachers, and participate in or supervise the completion of the learning activities set by teachers. There were however many barriers for parents in participating in schooling, particularly for those in disadvantaged groups. The strategies that teachers used to effectively foster parental participation in schooling have implications for encouraging parental engagement in children’s learning beyond the school closures.

### **Keywords**

COVID-19; parental engagement; primary schools; remote learning; school closures; teachers

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic caused school closures in at least 191 countries around the world (UN, 2020), resulting in a wholesale shift to remote teaching and home learning over prolonged periods (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). In England, as in many other countries, the initial closure period in 2020 was followed by another closure period in 2021 as cases of COVID-19 in the population rose for a second time. This presented serious challenges for schools and families, as unscheduled school closures can negatively impact pupils' academic achievement (Marcotte & Hemelt, 2008; Thamtanajit, 2020), and increase educational inequalities (Andrew et al., 2020; Cullinane & Montacute, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). UNESCO (2020) note a global 'digital divide' in distance learning regarding access to computers and the internet, and children from low-income families are more likely to live in homes without access to the internet, a suitable place to do homework, or books at the appropriate reading level, plus inadequate heating, lack of healthy food, and limited access to outdoor leisure space (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Lucas et al. (2020) proposed that it would be essential for teachers to work with parents during the school closures to minimise these inequalities. We therefore explore how teachers perceived parental engagement during the school closures, and how they fostered this in a remote learning environment.

## **Parental engagement and involvement**

Current understanding of parental engagement with children's learning and involvement with school/schooling builds on the work of Epstein, who identified six types of parent

involvement – parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Epstein 1995) – and three overlapping spheres of influence – family, school, and community – where children’s learning takes place (Epstein et al., 2002). Authors have developed from this a distinction between ‘parental engagement’ and ‘parental involvement’, which is particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 school closures. ‘Parents’ here refers to the adult(s) with caring responsibility for a child, so could include parents, grandparents, other family members, carers, and foster parents (Goodall, 2013). Parental involvement takes place in and around the school (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014; Goodall, 2017), through activities such as attending parents’ evenings, workshops, and social events (Goodall 2013; 2018) and volunteering in the classroom (Lewis et al., 2011). Parental engagement takes place away from school, either in the home, or during leisure and family activities (Goodall & Ghent, 2014). It includes activities where parents support their child’s learning and academic achievement (Watt, 2016), as well as a positive attitude and commitment towards education and learning (De Gaetano, 2007; Goodall, 2013; 2017, Goodall & Ghent, 2014; Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Goodall and Montgomery (2014) conceptualised a continuum, with ‘parental involvement with the school’ at one end, and ‘parental engagement with children’s learning’ at the other end. However, not all parental involvement and engagement activities may provide the same benefits. Jeynes (2005) and Hill and Tyson (2009) both found that parents checking on and helping with a child’s homework did not have a positive impact on academic achievement, and could even have a negative impact. In contrast, a supportive home learning environment, including conversations around learning, active interest in the school

curriculum, and parental expectations and aspirations for their children, has been found to have a beneficial impact on children's success (Goodall, 2018; Jeynes, 2018; Leithwood & Patrician, 2015; Ule et al., 2015; Torre & Murphy, 2016). Overall, parental engagement with children's learning has been widely acknowledged to have the greater impact on children's attainment and achievement (Cabus & Ariès, 2017; Goodall & Ghent, 2014; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Jeynes, 2012; 2014), but in itself can be supported by parental involvement with the school (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Spear et al. 2021; Torre & Murphy, 2016; Watt, 2016).

During the COVID-19 school closures, physical involvement with the school was not possible, and other parent involvement activities, such as two-way communication and parent-teacher meetings (Goodall, 2013; 2018; Jeynes, 2018), had to be adapted for the remote learning environment. Parental engagement activities such as taking children on cultural outings (Watt, 2016), and providing learning opportunities through clubs and groups (Goodall & Ghent, 2014) were mostly suspended too. Other aspects of parental engagement were therefore arguably more crucial than ever, such as reading with children (Jeynes, 2012; 2018; Watt, 2016), and creating a supportive home learning environment (Cabus & Ariès, 2017; Jeynes, 2018; Sylva & Jelley, 2017; Sylva et al., 2008; Torre & Murphy, 2016). The pool of people who might have usually participated in engagement activities with children, such as grandparents and other family members, was also reduced, when restrictions were in place on households mixing. This put the onus on parents/primary carers in supporting children's learning during the school closures. It is clear in the literature however that parental engagement can vary widely between different groups of parents, with subsequent implications for children's development and achievement.

### ***Differences in parental engagement***

Parents' own educational background, attitudes towards education, and self-efficacy, are all factors which can affect parental engagement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Waanders et al., 2007). Parental engagement has been found to increase with social status, income, and parents' level of education (Harris & Goodall, 2008), whereas language barriers, negative experiences with previous schools/teachers, difficulties during parents' own schooling, lack of confidence in their own academic ability, and a belief that school is responsible for their child's education, can all hinder parental engagement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Lareau (2008) described middle class parents' approach to their children's academic and social development as 'concerted cultivation'. This approach includes providing children with a diverse range of extracurricular and cultural activities, being attentive to their schoolwork and school activities (Matsuoka, 2019), and having high aspirations for their achievement (Redford et al., 2009), and has been strongly associated with family socio-economic status, and with student learning behaviours which are effective in the current system and therefore lead to academic achievement (Bodovski & Farkas, 2008; Goodall, 2019).

In contrast, Lareau (2011) described working class and poor parents as taking an approach of 'accomplishment of natural growth' to their children's development. Here, parents provide comfort, food, shelter, and other basic support to their children, but view education as the responsibility of teachers and school staff. Mayo and Siraj (2015) found that this approach was evident amongst parents with low socio-economic status and with children progressing poorly in school. However, parents with low socio-economic status but with children who were academically successful, emphasised the value of education and were more involved with their child's school, and their child's learning at home (Mayo & Siraj,

2015), in line with the concerted cultivation approach. This illustrates how parental engagement can mitigate differences in socio-economic status and family background, as also noted by Leithwood and Patrician (2015). Parental engagement therefore offers particular benefits for children from low socio-economic status groups who are facing an 'educational debt' from the cumulative effect of the inequalities in their environment (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Despite the potential value of parental engagement, initial studies from during the first COVID-19 school closures found that over half the parents of primary school children were finding it hard to support their children's learning at home (Andrew et al., 2020). We therefore sought to address the following research questions: 1) how did teachers perceive parental engagement during the school closures? 2) how did teachers encourage parental engagement in a remote learning environment? 3) did teachers perceive differences in parental engagement activities in families from disadvantaged backgrounds? Addressing these research questions will bring insight into how teachers and parents could work together to support children's learning at home during the school closures and beyond.

## **Methodology**

We undertook an exploratory mixed methods study to investigate the experiences of primary teachers in England (encompassing classes from reception to year six, with children aged four to eleven). The study involved a longitudinal design in three phases – an online survey (collecting predominantly quantitative data), followed by qualitative semi-structured interviews, carried out in June – July 2020 (after the first school closures from March – June 2020). We then undertook a further phase of semi-structured interviews with the same participants in April 2021 (after the second school closures from January – March 2021).

This combination of methods over 11 months enabled us to gain a comprehensive understanding of the area of enquiry (Bryman, 2006) from participants' experiences of both periods of school closures.

### ***Procedure***

Ethical approval was obtained prior to the start of the study from the lead author's University ethics panel. The online survey access page contained the study information, including that participation was voluntary, responses would be anonymous and kept confidential, and participants had the right to withdraw prior to submitting their survey form. Respondents were given the option to enter their contact details at the end of the survey if they would be willing to participate in a follow up interview. Potential interview participants were contacted via email and provided with an information sheet, which included guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality, and that their data could be withdrawn up until two weeks after the interview had taken place. Participants' informed consent was also confirmed before the start of the interview. Participants were contacted again after the second period of school closures, to request a follow-up interview, and we again provided an information sheet and confirmed consent before the start of the interview.

### ***Participants***

The eligibility criteria for the survey was that participants were primary teachers in England, and filter questions at the start of the survey ensured that respondents met this criteria. Survey respondents were recruited via a convenience and snowball sampling strategy, with the researchers using social media (Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook) and email to share the



survey link with their networks (which included academic colleagues working in or with primary schools, and primary school teachers, leaders, and governors) and request that this was then further circulated to their own contacts in primary education. The target number of responses was 250, including respondents working in schools with differing levels of pupil premium (PP). The PP grant is additional funding provided to schools from the government, according to the number of disadvantaged pupils within the school (identified as pupils from low income families who receive free school meals, and pupils who are, or were, looked after by the local authority). The funding is intended to be used by schools to improve the attainment of these disadvantaged groups by providing additional academic and pastoral support for pupils (DfE, 2021a). The level of PP received by a school therefore indicates the level of disadvantage in the community they serve. Gathering data from teachers in high and low PP schools would enable the researchers to address the study research questions, exploring teachers' perceptions and encouragement of parental engagement, and any differences in parental engagement activities in families from disadvantaged backgrounds. Participants were recruited during a one-month period, from 5<sup>th</sup> June to 5<sup>th</sup> July 2020. Schools began reopening from the first period of closures from 5<sup>th</sup> June, and so this was a suitable time to reflect on the closure period. The final number of responses was 271.

For the second phase of the study, the researchers used a purposive sampling technique to select interviewees from the pool of survey respondents who provided their contact details for an interview. Responses to the background questions at the start of the survey were used to select participants from schools with different levels of PP. Twenty four semi-structured interviews were conducted in July 2020 via video call or telephone, due to the COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time. We contacted these participants again for the

third phase of the study in April 2021, when schools had reopened after the second closure period, and conducted 14 follow-up interviews, as not all original participants could be reached.

### ***Measures***

The survey was developed for the project, based on the parental engagement literature and initial studies on primary teaching and parental engagement in the first school closure period, such as Andrews et al. (2020) and Lucas et al. (2020). Survey measures collected predominantly quantitative data, with a few free text boxes to allow respondents to expand on their answers, which provided qualitative data. The survey was pre-tested with a small number of teachers and academic experts, to ensure its face validity in measuring the concepts of interest in the study (Bryman, 2015). Example survey measures are shown in Figure 1. The first semi-structured interview schedule was developed based on the survey findings, to explore key issues in greater depth, including how teachers' approach to remote learning, their use of technology, and communication with parents, affected parental engagement, and differences in parental engagement within the school community. The second interview schedule followed on from the first interviews, to reflect on how parental engagement evolved over the school closure periods, and consider how teachers' experiences of encouraging parental engagement in a remote learning environment may also have implications for fostering parental engagement in the future. Example questions from the interview schedules are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Example study measures

**Phase 1 – survey items**

What technologies have you used to support children’s learning remotely since the pandemic started? (select all that apply) Email/Text message/School website/ School app (please specify)/Google classroom/Teams/Zoom/ Youtube/Twitter/Vimeo/ Purple Mash/FrogLearn/Other (please specify)

What online resources have you used to support children’s learning remotely since the pandemic started? (Please specify).

What proportion of your pupils do you believe have sufficient access to the following in order to be able to learn effectively at home? All/Over half/About half/Less than half/None

Broadband

Computing equipment (PC/laptop/tablet)

Software (Microsoft Office/apps etc)

Adequate work space (for example, with a desk/chair)

Did the move to an online learning environment affect your concern for safeguarding your pupils? Increased concern/Stayed the same/Decreased concern

Please use the space below to make any other comments about online safeguarding.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements, **in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic**: Strongly agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Strongly disagree/N/a

My pupils have generally engaged well with learning remotely.

I have spent more time than usual providing pastoral care for my pupils during the pandemic.

I feel more worried than usual about the wellbeing of some of my pupils.

Some of my pupils have been particularly disadvantaged by the school closure due to their home circumstances.

Please use the space here to make any comments related to your pupils and their parents/carers (without providing any personal or sensitive details) during the pandemic.

**Phase 2 – interview questions**

How did you approach remote learning during the school closures?

Did your pupils have access to the technology required for remote learning during the closure period?

How did you keep in touch with parents throughout the closure period?

How did parents engage with remote learning? Were there differences between particular groups of parents?

What feedback have you had from pupils and parents about remote learning during the closure period?

**Phase 3 – interview questions**

How did you approach remote learning in the second period of closures? What was the same/different from the first period?

How did you find parents engaged with children’s learning in this second period compared to the first one? Did the expectations for supporting children’s learning change?

How did relationships between school and parents change over the course of the first and second closure periods?

What feedback have you had from pupils and parents about remote learning during the second closure period?

What (if anything) from the closure periods will you be continuing to do now that schools are reopen?

Using an interview guide enhanced the reliability of the study by facilitating consistency in, and future replication of, the data collection process (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982) and still enabled the interviewer to clarify and explore additional issues as they arose (Newby, 2010). This was important for the interpretive validity of the study (Maxwell, 2002), in order to ensure that inferences made from both the survey and interview data reflected participants’ actual experiences during the school closures.

***Analyses***

Survey data were analysed using SPSS version 24, and PP level within the schools was used as a variable to investigate potential differences in teachers’ perceptions of parental engagement according to higher or lower levels of disadvantage in the school community.

As the majority of the respondents worked at schools with <25% of the students on the

scheme, we created two groups that we used in the rest of the analysis: teachers at schools with <25% of the children being on the PP scheme (low PP), and teachers at schools with >25% of the children being on the PP scheme (high PP, indicating a greater level of disadvantage in the school community). We then calculated frequencies and descriptive statistics for the relevant variables before turning to exploratory inferential statistics to investigate differences between high/low PP teachers on a range of factors. Within each scale that we investigated, we controlled for multiple comparisons using Bonferroni corrections.

Qualitative data from the interviews, and from the free text survey comments, were input into NVivo 11 and analysed thematically after each interview phase, following the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The research team initially coded the data separately, and then met to discuss and agree the themes and sub-themes. A combination of deductive and inductive approaches to the coding was undertaken, with some codes based on the quantitative survey findings/previous interview findings, and others developed from the interview data itself. The quantitative survey results and qualitative survey and interview results are presented below, using illustrative quotes from interview participants and survey respondents (with code names assigned to maintain anonymity). Survey results refer only to the first period of school closures, whereas we specify whether interview data relates to the first or second period.

## **Results**

The results are presented here in relation to three key areas which relate to the research questions. Firstly, we outline how teachers had approached remote learning in the closure periods, and the implications this had for parental engagement. Secondly, we detail how

teachers perceived parental engagement within their school communities. Finally, we consider the ways in which teachers fostered parental engagement. Throughout this section we will also report on any differences in the results depending on PP levels within schools, as a measure of disadvantage within the communities served by the schools.

### ***Remote learning approaches and implications for parental engagement***

Across all schools, remote learning was mostly provided online, including through email, school and educational websites, social media, apps, virtual learning platforms, and video platforms such as Zoom. There was no difference between PP levels on the number of technological solutions used to teach remotely ( $M_{PPlow} = 3.80, SD = 1.65; M_{PPhigh} = 4.11, SD = 1.59, t(269) = 1.50, p = .136$ ). All teachers provided resources for parents to use at home, either those they had created themselves (including PowerPoint slides, videos, and worksheets) or from sources such as the BBC, Oak Academy, Twinkl, and White Rose Maths. This created an initial requirement for parental engagement, for parents to provide children with access to devices, log in to emails, apps, and platforms, and print or collect worksheets. However, not all children's home environments had the necessary resources for this learning provision. Teachers rated their pupils' access to resources in the survey, and pupils from low PP schools were significantly more likely to have access to all resources than those from high PP schools, including broadband ( $M_{PPlow} = 4.18, SD = 0.58; M_{PPhigh} = 3.12, SD = 0.80, t(120) = 10.73, p < .001$ ), computing equipment ( $M_{PPlow} = 3.93, SD = 0.69; M_{PPhigh} = 2.87, SD = 0.87, t(133) = 9.77, p < .001$ ), software ( $M_{PPlow} = 3.75, SD = 0.77; M_{PPhigh} = 2.60, SD = 0.87, t(141) = 10.09, p < .001$ ), and an adequate workspace ( $M_{PPlow} = 3.49, SD = 0.83; M_{PPhigh} = 2.37, SD = 0.74, t(171) = 10.48, p < .001$ , all  $p$ 's after correction). This was elaborated on by interviewees, with teachers explaining that in many families, where parents were working

from home and siblings also needed to access home learning resources, there were simply not enough devices to go around. Children and parents were frequently accessing resources using smartphones rather than computers or laptops, as this teacher described:

People said we've got one laptop, four kids, how are we supposed to space it out? (...) We've been using this platform called Purple Mash, which we used at school anyway. And the feedback we were getting was that people were finding it hard to access on phones, because the majority of people were accessing the Internet on their phones. (Natalie, high PP school, period one)

The next requirement for parental engagement was for parents to oversee their children in remote learning. There was again a difference between low and high PP schools, with pupils from high PP schools less likely to have engaged well with learning remotely ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) than those from low PP schools ( $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ,  $t(136) = 4.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This example from an interviewee demonstrates the importance of parental oversight:

I've got one parent who was convinced her son was turning in every piece of work. But what she didn't realize he was turning in a blank assignment for everything...So that was a tricky conversation with her to say, 'Actually, you do need to be supervising him doing his work.' (Holly, high PP school, period two)

Some remote learning activities required more active participation from parents than others, and this was particularly the case for remote learning for the youngest primary children. Early years education, with children up to the age of five, is based on learning through play, and teachers noted the impracticality of providing resources for this age group to use independently:

The reception year teacher made it really clear from the beginning. She said [to parents], 'I can't teach your children from worksheets, that's not what early years education is about. You're going to have to do this for yourself'. (Sarah, low PP school, period one)

Providing access to resources, supervising remote learning, and participating in remote learning activities, were therefore typical expectations for parents throughout the school closures.

### ***Teachers' perceptions of parental engagement***

Teachers perceived vast differences in parental engagement during the school closures. In some cases, parents were highly engaged with children's learning at home, as described by both survey and interview respondents:

A lot of it was driven by parents. You know, we have a lot of really supportive parents, they want the best for their children. Even though they were in year six, and actually, by lockdown, they all knew what schools they'd got... they worked really, really well. (Alice, low PP school, period one)

For a very small % of my pupils (3/27) because of their excellent 1:1 parental support, their education has exceeded the one I could have given them in school with a class of 30. (Survey respondent, low PP school)

However, many teachers were concerned about some of their pupils' home environments. The vast majority (84.9%) of survey respondents felt that some of their pupils had been particularly disadvantaged by the school closures due to their home circumstances, and this



was higher in high PP schools ( $M_{PPhigh} = 4.47, SD = 0.62; M_{PPlow} = 4.02, SD = 1.00, t(269) = 3.86, p < .001$ ) (after correction). Teachers in high PP schools were also more likely to have been worried about some of their pupils' wellbeing ( $M_{PPhigh} = 4.40, SD = 0.70; M_{PPlow} = 4.05, SD = 0.88, t(269) = 3.25, p < .008$ ) (after correction), and to have provided more pastoral care to pupils during the closures ( $M_{PPhigh} = 3.90, SD = 1.10; M_{PPlow} = 3.51, SD = 1.07, t(264) = 2.77, p < .04$ ) (after correction). There was a significant difference in the rise of safeguarding concerns during the school closures between the low and high PP schools, where an increased concern was noted by 76.1% and 53.6% of high and low PP school respondents respectively, and only respondents from low PP schools reported decreases in safeguarding concerns (2.2%) with the remainder of the respondents reporting no change in concern (23.9% for high PP schools and 44.3% for low PP schools,  $\chi^2 (2) = 13.17, p = .001$ ).

Interviewees described safeguarding issues they had experienced during the lockdown:

We've had a lot of domestic violence reports (...) And then we've kind of phoned the family just as a 'I'm checking in to see if you're ok', but there's been so many cases where they've said, 'Oh, yes, everything's fine'. And yet, you know it isn't. If it was a face to face thing, you'd feel more inclined to say, 'Look, we had a notification', whereas over the phone I think we've felt that we couldn't do anything. So that's been difficult. (Natalie, high PP school, period one)

Aside from these concerns about children's welfare, teachers described a range of difficulties facing parents in supporting children's learning, particularly for parents from disadvantaged groups:

I think for some parents, they found it very hard if they've got other children, or they haven't had the technology, or they themselves struggle, either with the [English as

an additional language] aspects of things or their own use of English or Maths.

(Jolene, high PP school, period one)

Some parents struggled to take on the role of 'teacher' rather than 'parent', and ensure that school work was completed. School work was seen as distinct from play and other home based activities, and viewed by parents as a chore which they were supposed to make their children do. Many parents were unable, or unwilling, to enforce this amidst a myriad of other competing demands:

Some of it is that the parents just couldn't cope with it. I've got one of my parents, got five children under six. She just couldn't cope with supervising five children to do it [school work]. (Hayley, high PP school, period one)

Another family I spoke to where the mum said 'No no, we're not doing that, but I am doing stuff with the children, I'm just not doing the stuff that you're sending me.

Another mum said 'I've got no way of getting him to do any work because he's playing with his other two brothers'. (Natalie, high PP school, period one).

Teachers also noted that work created a barrier to engaging with children's learning for parents in higher socio-economic groups:

I would say that that lots of our children in many ways are deprived, just not in a financial way, because the parents are often highly academic, or motivated to work and earn lots and lots of money. So being locked down for lots of our families meant they were working from home more steadfastly than ever before. So the children had very little kind of engagement in the home. (Cassie, low PP school, period one)

This was exacerbated in the second period of closures across all groups, when more parents were back at work, and teachers generally reported lower levels of parental engagement in schooling compared to the first period:

Far fewer parents were on furlough, most were trying to work at that time, as well. So back in the Spring, Summer of last year, everything shut down. People weren't working. So they had the time to dedicate to home educating their children, which did not happen this year. (Rebecca, high PP school, period two)

In light of these challenges for parents, teachers played a key role in encouraging parental engagement during the closure periods.

### ***Fostering parental engagement***

One fundamental way in which schools supported parental engagement was addressing lack of access to technology. In the first school closures, the government's laptop scheme provided devices for disadvantaged children in England (DfE, 2020), and schools were responsible for distributing these to pupils, as this teacher describes:

We were given 80 iPads. And the school distributed those to year five pupils that didn't have access or were sharing one between all the siblings. (Lily, high PP school, period one)

Not all pupils were eligible for this scheme though, and some schools provided their own devices to families who were struggling with access but did not meet the government's criteria. By the second closure period, more devices were made available for schools to

distribute, but teachers reported that in some cases these were quickly broken, left unused, or simply refused:

We had about 29 [laptops]. In the end most families didn't want one, we actually gave out about four of the 29. I think, possibly because if you've got a computer, then you need to be doing the learning...[parents would] be like, 'No, no, I don't want one of those'... genuinely I think it was then the accountability will be, 'I'll have to do the learning'. (Rebecca, high PP school, period two)

In some cases, it was more effective for schools to offer an alternative provision, usually paper copies of work, rather than try to persuade parents to use devices and access resources online:

We've got paper copies of things, that we had outside of the fence (...) the way the home learning is structured (...) it's always been equal between online and not. (Belinda, low PP school, period one)

The volume and nature of resources provided by teachers for remote learning also affected parental engagement. In the first closure period, many teachers focused on English and Mathematics, either as a choice by the school to deliver a narrower curriculum whilst teachers and parents adapted to the new situation, or in response to feedback from parents, as one teacher described:

We sent an online form to the parents to say, what do you think about this? Is it too much? Is it not enough? Is it the right balance of activities? And the feedback that we got was fairly positive, but most of the parents said, I don't think there's enough Maths or English. (...) So we adjusted that. (Sandra, low PP school, period one)

In contrast, all interviewees noted that the second remote learning period saw teachers providing a greater volume of school supported learning, across a more varied range of subjects. This was explained by one teacher:

The reason it was so different [to the first closure period] was because the government told us that we had to do exactly what we would have been doing in class. And we had to provide four hours of good quality teaching and learning every day. That's what people could expect. (Rebecca, high PP school, period two)

The DfE set this requirement for primary schools (see DfE, 2021b), yet this sometimes had a detrimental impact on parental engagement, when parents struggled to keep up with the amount of work provided. One teacher noted:

“They [parents] would do the morning stuff, English and Maths, then all those [other subjects] were the ones that got ditched, even though the provision was there” (Stacy, low PP school, period two).

Some teachers addressed this directly with parents, trying to alleviate the pressure they were facing, and taking a broader view in encouraging parental engagement with children’s learning:

I sent out [letters] about parents not putting themselves under pressure about the amount and quality of work that their child should be submitting each week. I had quite a number of emails from some parents saying ‘Oh my goodness, you don't know how much that letter meant to me when I read it. I've been putting myself under so much pressure. I was really worried about this’. (Sandra, low PP school, period two)

Really early on having spoken to some parents and families saying they were finding it pretty stressful at times and their children were finding it stressful. You know, it was causing difficulties and arguments (...) We have said to families, just having experiences, just like cooking at home or gardening, these are all equally as valuable. And so I think generally the feedback we've been getting, parents haven't felt pressured into sitting their children down to a worksheet or laptop, actually they've just got outdoors. (Jolene, high PP school, period one)

School that had already used online learning platforms before the first closure period were able to use these platforms to provide work remotely. These platforms also supported parental engagement, by enabling teachers to track pupil engagement with learning resources and then discuss this with parents, as described by one teacher:

We do some Mathletics anyway, we did Purple Mash as well. And so those we could track what the children were doing, that gave us real data back on a daily basis if we wanted and then enabled us to have those conversations with parents, 'Oh I can see you haven't logged onto Mathletics or Purple Mash for the last 21 days. Is there a problem?'. (Jack, high PP school, period one)

The DfE encouraged schools to set up an online learning platform in the second closure period, if they did not already have one. However, similarly to the devices, not all parents welcomed this, and one teacher commented, "Once the platform got up and running, a lot of parents still said 'I don't want to do this. I still just want the paper copies please.'" (Mary, low PP school, period two).

Understanding and responding to parents' and children's needs was a key theme throughout the interviews. During the school closures, teachers kept in touch with families via phone or video calls, written communications (email/messaging through apps), and sometimes even home visits (either to drop off resources or if there was a particular concern about a child). Increased interaction compared to the usual school routine meant that teachers gained a greater understanding of children's home environments, for example:

It's been lovely to get to know them in a different sense. Because lots of them have spoken to me about their jobs, about tricky days, and it's not just about 'this is what we're working on'. (Mary, low PP school, period one)

Getting to know the parents at a deeper level...we actually sort of moved further on I think in the relationships, and I think trust really helped...I think we built more [trust]. (Jolene, low PP school, period two)

This served to highlight the differences in children's home environments, and teachers described the lengths that schools went to in supporting their communities during the first closure period, in schools with both high and low levels of PP:

We had free school meals and those parents that we knew were already accessing food banks, we've got in touch with the local church near our school (...) Things like we used to run, like The Breakfast Club for Magic Breakfast, which is a charity that provides bagels for any older children. So we've been trying to make sure those have been going out or something similar has been going out. (Nina, high PP school, period one)

We have also provided over 600 food hampers, 300 hygiene hampers, 300 baby hampers, 500 cooked meals (all on top of the FSM vouchers), we have loaned parents money, and white goods. (Survey respondent, low PP school, period one)

The enhanced communication between parents and teachers, and the technologies used to facilitate this, had the potential to support future parental engagement beyond the remote learning period. One teacher described this after the second closures:

We're never going to have to worry about parents unable to attend parents evening sessions again, because we can give it all online...I think there are some of the meetings that we have in school about phonics and things like that could now be online as well...for parents that would normally be unable to commit to come in. And for homework, being able to put up a video explaining how to do the homework task might be something that we could do going forward. (Gary, low PP school, period two)

Teachers identified that upskilling parents was key to enabling them to support their children's learning, as parents were (unsurprisingly) unfamiliar with the curriculum content and the methods of teaching it. One teacher described this; "you've got a class of 30 children with individual needs. We also had a class of 30 parents with individual needs" (Jolene, low PP school, period two). Some teachers provided additional resources and sessions specifically for parents, for example:

The parents doing phonics were like 'This is tricky'...So, they [teachers] would be like 'OK, here's the video for the different sounds.' Yeah, but that's been really good, so



the fact that our parents now seem more knowledgeable on what phonics is (Mary, , low PP school, period two).

We were getting feedback from the parents that they weren't feeling comfortable with the methods that we teach in school now. So I did an hour one evening with Zoom and basically showed the parents all the methods that we would use for the four operations and fractions, and that helped a great deal. I got a lot of very positive feedback there. (Gary, low PP school, period two)

In contrast, other teachers changed their planned content rather than trying to teach the more 'difficult' topics remotely, as one described:

I was meant to be doing fractions, decimals, and percentages with year five. Now there was no way I was going to do that remotely because, you know, that's traumatic enough when you do it face to face. (Alice, low PP school, period two)

This could be a missed opportunity for teachers to foster parental engagement by collaborating with parents to teach these subjects, although their reservations were understandable.

## **Discussion**

This study contributes to the existing parental engagement literature by introducing new understanding of the expectations on parents during the school closures, which we have conceptualised as 'parental participation in schooling'. We also identify where disadvantaged (and other) groups faced barriers to participation in schooling, and highlight

effective strategies for fostering parental participation and engagement in children's learning which have implications beyond the school closures.

### ***Parental participation in schooling***

Teachers' expectations for and perceptions of parental engagement during the school closures were distinct from what is currently defined as parental engagement in children's learning in the literature. Parents moved from supporting learning at home, based on what children were doing at school (through homework assistance and general positive attitudes towards school), and by providing outside school activities, to being integrally involved in schooling within the home. We conceptualise this as 'parental participation in schooling', to denote this new parental demand during the school closures. This involved enabling children's access to learning resources provided by teachers, and either participating in or supervising the completion of learning activities set by teachers.

For some teachers and parents, the expectations of parental participation in schooling reinforced a demarcation between 'school' and 'home' activities. The work set by teachers belonged to the school curriculum and often came with specific requirements as to how it should be taught. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) emphasise that parents' sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school, and their parental role construction, determine how parents became involved in their child's education. The sudden demands of remote learning during the school closures required parents adjust their role construction, taking on a 'teacher' role within the home. Using learning resources and teaching methods with which they were unfamiliar, and teaching subjects they knew little about, posed a challenge to parents' sense of self-efficacy. While some parents embraced this and became fully immersed in schooling at home, many others struggled with the new expectations.

Goodall and Vorhaus (2011) have previously noted that many parents lack the confidence and knowledge to know how best to support children with their learning, and require clear, specific, and targeted information from schools to help them in this. Amongst disadvantaged groups, parental participation was often further inhibited by parents' educational background and language skills, echoing previous studies on barriers to parental engagement (such as Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Waanders et al., 2007). Upskilling parents by providing videos, workshops, and one-to-one guidance on the curriculum content and teaching methods, was therefore a vital strategy to increased parents' confidence and encourage their participation in schooling, particularly in the second closure period where there was a greater expectation for academic learning.

Focusing on academic learning however meant that other activities that could benefit children's learning were often neglected. This was previously acknowledged by Goodall and Vorhaus (2011), who noted that many parents engage in their children's learning in ways that are not adequately recognised by teachers and schools. Some teachers took a more inclusive view of the value of everyday family activities and play in supporting children's learning during the closure periods, such as family walks, cooking, and reading together. This aligned with parental engagement as understood in the literature, and was a more comfortable fit with parents' existing role construction, reducing the pressure on parents.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a difficult and stressful time for many people, and for some families it caused, or exacerbated, socio-economic difficulties. As Lareau (2011) notes, if parents are struggling to provide food, shelter, and other basic requirements, this leaves little time and energy for engagement in children's learning. In the first closure period in particular, many schools prioritised child and parent wellbeing, and even helped some

families to meet basic needs for food and other essential supplies - highlighting, as Doucet et al. (2020, p. 1) put it, 'Maslow before Bloom'. The communication between teachers and parents during the initial closure period in many cases strengthened relationships between school and home, with one-to-one communication through phone calls, video calls, email, messages, and even home visits, creating a dialogue between parents and teachers (Goodall, 2017), which deepened understanding and built trust.

However, the existence of a 'digital divide', affected both communication between school and home, and engagement with remote learning for parents and children in disadvantaged groups. Researchers have conceptualised the digital divide into three levels; 1) access to information and communication technology (ICT, including computers, smartphones, and the internet); 2) ICT skills and usage patterns; 3) outcomes associated with ICT usage (van Deursen & Helsper, 2015; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010). The inequalities evident during the school closures related to both the first and second levels. Disadvantaged groups were less likely to have sufficient technology and internet access for remote learning, as also found by Andrew et al. (2020). However, teachers found that simply providing devices to families was not always effective, indicating inequalities at the second level in how parents and children used ICT and their willingness and ability to use this for school work at home. These barriers support the argument by Owens and de St Croix (2020) that there are structural inequalities in the educational experience of many children, and emphasises how the educational debt experienced by children from disadvantaged groups was exacerbated by the school closures.

Parental engagement has previously been found to increase with social status, income, and parents' level of education (Harris & Goodall, 2008), but our results showed, similar to

Andrew et al. (2020), that parents in the middle of the income distribution also struggled to support their children's home learning. Parental participation in schooling in these families was predominantly impeded by parents' work responsibilities, with (both) parents likely to be working, and long hours and high-pressured jobs leaving little time for supporting children's home learning. This was exacerbated in the second closure period, with more parents working, and increased expectations for children's learning. Only the richest families had access to resources, such as private tuition and intensive private schooling, that alleviated these pressures.

In acknowledging these barriers, it is important to recognise that lower levels of parental participation in schooling do not necessarily mean a lack of parental interest or concern (Lendrum et al., 2015), but may rather represent the barriers which arise from systemic issues affecting parents' personal and socio-economic circumstances. This highlights the interconnected nature of family circumstances and children's learning, with children enmeshed in a series of networks and environments that affect their educational outcomes (Epstein, 2018).

### **Limitations and future research**

This was an exploratory study, investigating parental engagement in a new remote learning context, and there are several areas which warrant further attention. Firstly, the study used PP as a measure of disadvantage in the communities served by the schools, and analysed the data using this measure. However, other measures, such as the Indices of Deprivation in the UK (MHCLG, 2019) could provide greater insight into the relative deprivation of different neighbourhoods, for future work on parental engagement and disadvantaged groups.

Teachers mentioned the difficulties faced by parents who spoke English as an additional

language, but there was otherwise little discussion of differences between ethnic groups in the interviews. The parental involvement literature has previously noted the “bias of white middle class values” (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011, p. 41) which can create barriers to engagement between certain groups of parents and schools (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Future research with parents from a range of ethnic groups would be valuable to understand their experiences of remote learning. Finally, this study focused on England, and research exploring parental engagement during the COVID-19 school closures in other countries would bring further insights into the challenges during this time, but also best practice approaches which can benefit teachers, parents, and pupils past the pandemic.

### **Implications for practice**

Following from these findings, we make several recommendations for primary schools and teachers to foster parental participation in schooling in future remote learning environments, as well as encouraging parental engagement more generally. Firstly, schools should consult with parents when determining any requirements for learning at home, to ensure that this is inclusive for the families in their community. Schools should pay particular attention to ICT access, usage, and skills, and consider parents’ self-efficacy and capacity to participate in schooling. This is likely to differ widely across different school settings, so it is important for schools to determine what approach is most appropriate for their communities, and what additional resources and support are required for families. Secondly, teachers can help to upskill parents, so they feel better able to engage in children’s learning and participate in schooling. Technology has the potential to facilitate this upskilling, for example teachers can deliver online workshops or record short videos to introduce parents to key concepts in the curriculum, the methods used to teach pupils, and

how parents can help children learn at home. Technology can also enhance one to one communication between teachers and parents, for example through video calls to provide individual support for parents and children, and online parents' evenings for parents who are unable or reluctant to come into the school. Virtual learning platforms can provide parents with up-to-date information about their children's learning and progress (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). With this though comes the need to tackle the digital divide, in order for technology to increase inclusivity within school communities, rather than contribute to educational inequalities. Addressing this will require efforts not just from schools but also from local authorities and government.

Thirdly, teachers should recognise the value of informal ways of learning and promote this to parents. Guiding parents on how family activities, household tasks, and playing at home can have cross-curricular educational value would expand the potential opportunities for supporting children's learning – cooking, for example, can have possibilities for maths, language, science and other subject areas. This would also encourage a view of learning as not just something that happens at school, but as something that can be ingrained into everyday life, with parents and teachers playing a mutually supportive role in children's education.

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