

NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY

**Parents as Agents of Change:
Understanding and Developing
Home–School Partnerships in
Response to Parent Voice**

Doctor of Applied Educational Psychology

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Overarching abstract

This thesis begins with a qualitative systematic review conducted as a meta-ethnography. It explores the views of parents from areas of low socio-economic status on the factors that influence their involvement in their children's education. The findings suggest that 'power', 'communication', 'relationships' and 'role construction' are influential factors that impact on home-school partnerships. Existing research appears to have had little impact on the development of home-school partnerships responsive to the perspectives of parents. Moreover, studies selected within the meta-ethnography did not recognise parents as agents of change. The bridging document brings together the epistemology and research design, making links between the literature review and the research project. A Participatory Action Research framework was used to elicit and then communicate parent views so that they were listened to and responded to by the school. Inclusive and democratic approaches were adopted in a multi-ethnic inner-city school over a period of thirteen months to facilitate the co-learning of those involved in the project. The processes involved using tools in an interactive manner (including focus groups and interviews) and a graphic elicitation (the Ishikawa Fishbone technique) to consult with parents. School staff were invited to reflect on the parent consultation. Outcomes of the project reflected several ideas and priorities for parents. Procedural and interpersonal communications between home and school were identified by them as key themes. Time and space were created for teachers and head teachers to receive feedback and to build upon parents' views with their own contributions. A meeting with head teachers led to reflective questions being asked that linked to next steps and actions.

The thesis discusses the project outcomes in relation to four ideas: 'concrete versus abstract ideas: procedure and artistry in learning', 'professionalism and authority', 'teacher efficacy in response to the parent link worker' and 'communication space for

professionals'. I conclude that parents' participation and agency proved difficult to develop and scaffold within this context. However with the time, space and structure afforded by a Participatory Action Research frame, members of staff were able critically to consider and reflect upon the complexities of parents' involvement and that school staff were able to consider the implications for an organisation.

Section 1. Systematic Literature Review

Parents' views of their involvement with their children's school: A meta-ethnography exploring the factors that influence the participation of parents from areas of low socio-economic status

1.0 Abstract

A meta-ethnography approach was used systematically to synthesise existing literature exploring views of parents from areas of low socio-economic status about their involvement with their children's schools and the factors that may influence their involvement. Each search found between 58 and 1850 papers and final search outcomes were later refined following in-depth analysis of the papers against search criteria to ensure that the final papers included parent views of their involvement in their children's education. Five papers were selected to be used in the meta-ethnography and the seven steps of Noblit and Hare's (1988) meta-ethnography approach were followed to analyse them. This allowed the papers to be compared and overlaps in their ideas identified and translated to one another. Key concepts spanning all the studies included 'power', 'communication', 'relationships' and 'role construction'. The line of argument generated an interpretative theory from these concepts and their interactions. This was represented by using gravity as a metaphor to demonstrate the strength of pull between the concepts and how they influenced one another. Each has been discussed and linked to existing theory and literature.

It was concluded that the review had been a useful process in critically considering the existing literature and reflecting on possible questions arising from its gaps. It was reflected that much of the research had helped to understand and challenge existing narratives in the parental involvement literature, but that the conclusions of each paper are complex and may be difficult for professionals to address in their everyday practice.

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this literature review has been systematically to search and analyse existing literature exploring parents' views about their involvement and to identify factors that they believe are influential. There is increasing emphasis being placed on the involvement of marginalised groups of parents in education, often perceived by schools to be less involved in their children's education. This area is relevant to my practice as I work with schools in areas with a high population of multi-ethnic and low-income families, so I have been interested in exploring research that may provide further insights into ways that educational services could become more inclusive and accessible to these parent groups.

The literature review will also contribute to the development of a doctoral research question relating to home-school partnerships. It will highlight a number of complex concepts that parents hold are factors influencing their involvement with schools. I will go on to discuss some of the theoretical ideas that may underpin these findings, beginning by discussing the historical and political context of parental involvement and relationships with schools to explore how these may be viewed in the existing literature by professionals and by parents. I will then link this to current narratives about 'hard to reach' groups in particular groups from areas of low socio-economic status.

1.2 Historical and political context

Importance has been afforded to parent involvement historically, yet the nature of the practice shows some variation. It became a particularly significant idea in education in the 1960s with the introduction of documents such as the Plowden Report (1967). More recently, educational research has focused on issues relating to parental participation and this is also reflected in current government policies and legislation (Children's Plan: DCSF, 2007; Every Child Matters: DfES, 2003). Key initiatives and government documents suggest that parent

participation is an influential factor in children's achievement associated with adjustments in later life (e.g. Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Children's Plan: DCSF, 2007).

There are competing norms of involvement behaviour in different sectors of society. It has been argued that views and beliefs about parent involvement are likely to change in response to priorities set out within educational policies and politics (Vincent, 1996). Vincent (1996) suggests that government policies are influenced by the views and values of a middle-class population and that early policies discussing parent involvement may promote the need for parents to adhere to the practices and models of the school environment. Today there appears to be a greater understanding that a 'one size fits all' approach may not cater for family networks with differing experiences, values and beliefs (Crozier, 2001). Nevertheless, it may be the case that early expert views on parent involvement continue implicitly within government objectives and initiatives (Vincent, 1996).

Although the importance and benefits of working in partnership with parents are discussed politically and referred to in a number of initiatives, there appears to be no legal requirement for schools to involve and work in partnership with parents. This feature may influence which groups, parents and professionals believe that they must adapt or change in order for there to be a successful partnership. There is often a lack of understanding about what type of parent partnership is the most effective and how parent engagement in services might be defined in practice. The next section of this review will consider existing understandings of the various terms associated with parent involvement, in order to make a decision about the usefulness of a definition within this review.

1.3 What is parent involvement?

By discussing existing understandings it is hoped to bring further transparency to the process and my own understanding of the term 'parent involvement'. There are a number of terms to

describe similar concepts and ideas that are used interchangeably within the literature on parental involvement whose meanings could be constructed differently by readers (Crozier, 2001). The most frequently occurring phrases and terms that appeared during an initial scoping and information gathering exercise have been used to search for papers in the systematic search, as it would not have been possible to use every term or phrase.

Definitions of parent involvement vary in the literature. Fishel and Ramirez (2005) broadly suggest that parent involvement can be defined as: 'Parents' participation in their children's education with the purpose of promoting their academic and social success'. Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) explore the possibility of there being three component views of parent involvement, suggesting that it could be broken down into behavioural, cognitive and personal features. Similarly, Epstein (1995) categorises parent involvement into six types or functions, including 'parenting', 'communicating', 'learning at home', 'volunteering', 'decision making' and 'community connections'.

Although I have considered definitions of parent involvement, I acknowledge that they may not serve an operational purpose (Fan & Chen, 2001). My view is that they are influenced by government's agendas (Vincent, 1996), motivated by findings that it relates to educational achievement. Differences between parents' and schools' understandings of what is parent involvement are thought to be a key tension in developing relationships between the two parties (Georgiou, 1997). The differing perspectives leave room for dictating what 'good parenting' should be, rather than placing the parents in a position of agency to decide themselves (Crozier & Davies, 2007).

During the searching and inclusion criteria phase of the review I have considered and drawn upon characteristics of the broader definition of parent involvement used by Fishel and Ramirez (2005). I believe that this has avoided placing limits on the initial searches.

However, I have been cautious about defining parental involvement in my future research project and want the parents to decide what this means to them. This broader definition encompasses many of the principles of the more specific or multi-dimensional definitions and does not assume a within-school parent behaviour focus. The review has also placed an emphasis on articles that have obtained the views of parents about their involvement. From my reading of parent involvement literature it appears that very little is understood about this area in terms of a systematic literature review. Parent views will help provide an informative picture of the factors that influence their interactions with school and with their child's educational and social progress.

1.4 Is parent involvement important?

The link between parent involvement and academic outcomes is well documented in the literature (e.g. Fan & Chen, 2001; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Jeynes, 2003). Authors have explored or suggested possible links between parent engagement and other variables impacting on children's learning and development at school. Some of the factors explored include motivation (Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005), intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 2001) and academic self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). This literature suggests that there may be some form of relationship between the involvement or support of parents and children's achievement at school. Studies have also suggested that parental interest in their children's education alone can have a positive impact, emotionally and academically (Flouri, 2006). Flouri suggests that the promotion of certain aspects of parent participation could be a useful contribution in terms of improving a variety of outcomes within education for children. Although there appears to be a body of research suggesting correlations between parental involvement and parental interest and positive outcomes for children, there is little evidence of a causal link between the two variables.

Despite an overwhelming body of research suggesting the importance of parental involvement in children's education, very little is known about home–school relationships and the skills or theories of action that may be required to nurture relationships between home and school context. Parent partnership suggests that there should be a two-way relationship between professionals and parents and that their roles should be equally respected. Nevertheless, this is not the reality for a number of parents and there are many who lack the confidence to work and communicate with schools.

1.5 Parental involvement and socio-economic status

Goodall and Harris (2008) suggest that levels of parental engagement are affected by a family's social context. They report that a key factor in parental involvement is socio-economic status, often identified through occupational class or parental level of education (Goodall & Harris, 2008). The relationship with socio-economic status appears frequently in educational research (e.g. Lareau, 1987; Feinstein & Sabates, 2006; Reay, 2000). Its impact on parents' and professionals' interactions has been highlighted in theories about social or cultural capital and the importance of reflecting on this idea in educational practice (Bourdieu 1986; Lareau, 1987). Social and cultural capital will be revisited in a later section of the review.

Hanafin and Lynch (2002) report that socio-economic status and its relationship with parent involvement is currently a focus due to the attention moving from social and cultural contexts of families to the processes adopted within school, and the role of the parent within this context. They state that this shift within research may impact on the opportunity for this particular population of parents to be heard. This further supports the rationale of the present review paper.

1.6 Rationale

This paper will explore the literature on parental views of school involvement using a meta-ethnography approach to draw together the existing strands. It is hoped that by focusing on literature exploring views of parents the review will be able to develop a rich picture of the factors for parental involvement in their children's education and the interactions of these influences. It may also more provide an insightful understanding of the useful areas for development in educational services (Goodall & Harris, 2008). The aim of this review is also to contribute to the development of a doctoral research project and the composition of an original research question.

1.7 Methodology

In order to answer the qualitative review question I used a meta-ethnography approach to identify structure and synthesise relevant literature (see Table 1). Meta-ethnography allows for a systematic approach. It also aims to maintain interpretive elements of the initial data (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005).

1. Getting started
2. Deciding what is relevant to the initial interest
3. Reading the studies
4. Determining how the studies are related
5. Translating the studies into one another
6. Synthesising translations
7. Expressing the synthesis

Table 1: Seven-step meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare 1988)

1.7.1 *Getting started: Research aims and questions*

The aim of the review is to explore literature concerned with the views of parents about their involvement with their children's schools. It is hoped that this will add to understanding in the field and interpretations of the factors for parental involvement with school.

A question was developed and phrased as: ‘What factors do parents from low socio-economic backgrounds believe influence their involvement with their children’s schools?’

1.7.2 Deciding what is relevant to the initial interest

Locating relevant studies

I built upon and adapted the search aspect of Noblit and Hare’s (1988) and Britten et al.’s (2002) process by incorporating a more exhaustive search. This method has been applied in other meta-ethnographic papers such as by Atkins et al. (2008) and was a pragmatic response to the requirements of a brief set out by Newcastle University emphasising the need to make literature searches extensive and exhaustive. I began by screening the literature by using a search process that is comparable to that in the works of Cole et al. (1999).

Making decisions on inclusion

Key search terms were generated with reference to relevant literature in the area (see Table 2). All possible synonyms were selected using the electronic database thesaurus facility, but due to confusion arising in the results from the large number of search terms, only the most frequent synonyms were those later applied to the searches.

Key search terms: What do <i>parents</i> from <i>low socio-economic</i> backgrounds view as the factors that influence their <i>involvement</i> in their children’s schools?	
Parents involvement	(‘parent involvement’ OR ‘parent engagement’ OR ‘parent partnerships’ OR ‘home–school’ OR ‘family-school’ OR ‘parent-professional’)
Socio-economic	(‘social class’ OR ‘social depri*’ OR ‘hard to reach’ OR ‘low income’ OR ‘socio-economic’)
Views	Due to the limited studies that emerged from the searches in relation to the above terms, parent views were matched against the criteria using a hand search method.

Table 2: Key search terms

Literature searches were carried out between September 2010 and December 2010 in three relevant electronic databases, two individual journals, and reference and citation

searches in relevant articles (see Table 3). Additional searches were made through individual knowledge of the literature and through discussions with key informants in this research area.

Electronic database searches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web of Knowledge (147) • ERIC (Educational Resource Index and Abstracts) (1850) • British Education Index (58)
Hand searches and reference searches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urban Education (3 that were already found in the database searches) • Thesis.com (1) • Reference searches within relevant papers (6, some included in database search)
Individual knowledge and use of key informants in the area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading keys texts on parent involvement suggested by a key informant who was knowledgeable in this particular area of research. (2 discussed but were already present in database searches)

Table 3: Literature database searches

Each search found between 58 and 1850 papers and final search outcomes were later refined following in-depth analysis of the papers against search criteria to ensure that the final papers included parent views of their involvement in their children's education.

Relevance and inclusion criteria were applied to the remaining 30 papers (see Appendix 1). Application of inclusion criteria provided a further systematic method of selecting relevant papers and addressing the review question. This process was carried out with a key informant in the review process in order to reduce reviewer bias. Five studies were selected for the next stage of the meta-ethnography and all underwent further checks to evaluate their quality, using weight of evidence as a tool adapted by Atkins et al. (2008) (see Appendix 2).

Reading the studies

A mapping table was used initially to present the key findings from each paper and to begin to draw similarities and differences. Summaries of the key findings were documented in a grid; this technique facilitated and structured the reading and interpreting process. In addition,

a second individual was involved in the reading and development of concepts to support the reliability of the interpretations, translations and synthesis. First, second and third order concepts (Schutz, 1971) were used as a framework for developing, translating and synthesising the concepts that emerged (see Table 5).

1.7.3 Determining how the studies are related

Initial relationships between the concepts identified in each study were considered. The mapping of findings and key concepts was revisited and comparisons and overlaps drawn between them. In order to be transparent about the interpretation of relationships between the studies and the concepts, the ‘first order concepts’ were recorded in a coding grid (see Table 4). Comments were made on the relevance of the concept to each study in order to identify the strongest concepts that appeared most frequently across the literature.

1.7.4 Translating the studies into one another

Following the ‘reading of the studies’ step it was decided that the focus and outcome of the articles largely supported one another and therefore it was appropriate and relevant to carry out a reciprocal translation analysis on the papers (Noblit & Hare, 1988). The first order concepts from each paper were recorded using a mind mapping technique to draw comparisons and translate metaphors or concepts from each article to another (see Appendix 2). The outcome of this was transferred into a grid and every effort was made to ensure that the concepts and use of language commenting on the relevance of each concept remained close to the original source. From this grid, links were drawn between each code to establish overlaps or broader concepts that could encompass some of the initial ideas. Table 5 is a grid to demonstrate the first, second and third order concepts developed during the ‘determining how studies are related’ phase.

Concepts	Do parents know they matter? Engaging all parents in learning (Goodall & Harris, 2008).	Hard to reach parents or hard to reach schools? A discussion of home-school relations, with particular reference to Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents (Crozier & Davies, 2007).	Voices of parents and teachers in a poor white urban school (O'Connor, 2001).	Peripheral voices: Parental involvement, social class and educational disadvantage (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002).	Is it a case of 'we know when we're not wanted? The parents' perspective on parent-teacher role and relationships (Crozier, 1999).
<i>'Power discrepancies between home and school'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some 'hard to reach' parents felt that the school was 'hard to reach'. • Intimidation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expert model emphasised in schools - knowledge is emphasised – Parents disempowered to make decisions. Transplant vs. expert model. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents reported that they were aware of the power differences between home and school. This power was described in terms of knowledge and expertise of the profession vs. parent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some parents reported feeling that contact with teachers was off-putting and frightening. • 'For a long time when my children started school, I was in awe of the teacher, I was filled with dread'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent's responses interpreted as deference to what they perceived to be greater knowledge held by teachers and therefore value their choices and decisions. • Power differences between teachers and parents (bounding of professional knowledge - reinforces power differences). • Dependency - parent relying heavily on teacher's professional qualification and feeling under-qualified.
<i>'Separation between home and school'</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bangladeshi parents did not see the need to be involved in their children's education or to attend meetings. 'If there was a problem they would hear about it' (p. 302). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working-class families are independent from school in that they turn the education of their children over to school rather than collaborating with school inter-dependently • Believed that it was the school's 'obligation' to them to provide their children with 'the basics'. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separation from school and family preferred.

Helplessness to change					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helpless to change - 'well I can't change their education, can I, really?' (p. 321). • Dependency - parent relying on teacher's qualification - feeling under-qualified.
Beliefs about parent role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents felt more motivated to become involved if they believed such involvement was a key part of being a responsible parent/carer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bangladeshi parents saw their role as helping their children to construct a Muslim identity. • Study found few indifferent parents, many non-participant and independent families. 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents' and teachers' roles seen as separate. • Role of the parent viewed as distinct from the role of the school.
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparisons made between primary and secondary - 'camaraderie' at the school gates - relationships between parents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents as consumers - Pakistani parents. 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considerable trust placed in teachers by parents. • Teacher-parent relationships included the bond of friendship (or attempted).
The importance of education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents valued education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pakistani parents interested in education. • Bangladeshi parents - barely any contact with the exception of issues with behaviour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents expressed great interest in their children's schooling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents emphasised the importance of children's education. 	
Consultation, communication and decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools described as closed systems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication was difficult and this impacts on relationships. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little consultation in decision making. • Communication between parent and teacher was often seen as difficult. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents did not want responsibility for decision making. • Reliant on professional judgement.

Table 4: Coding table

1.7.5 Synthesising translations

From the reciprocal translation used to interpret and synthesise the data, it became clear that many of the findings supported one another and that many concepts were consistent across the research papers. Third order interpretations that focused on the relationship between the concepts were then formulated by considering the concepts further and the links between the first and second order concepts. This allowed for some maintenance of the first order data and also for analysis of concepts presenting the most influence, as reported by the majority of the studies (Noblit & Hare, 1988). A line of argument began to emerge.

1.7.6 Expressing the synthesis: Findings and discussion

Further consideration was given to the likely audience for the paper that would find the outcome useful in practice. Professionals working within the education and children services directorates, at both a practical and systemic level, may find this document of service in their work. Similarly to other educationally focused documents, it was decided that the line of argument would be best presented in visual form to facilitate understanding of the concepts and their relationships or interactions in a clear and concise manner.

First order concepts and metaphors	Second order interpretations	Third order interpretations
Feelings of difference and inadequacy relating to knowledge.	Power discrepancies between home and school.	Power: relates to and impacts many of the other concepts and features heavily in the literature.
Relationships of trust.	Relationships facilitated by interpersonal communication.	Relationships are facilitated by positive communication (both verbal and non-verbal) in turn impacting on the effectiveness or participation and which could increase or decrease confidence of parents to play a greater or lesser role in the decision making processes.
Contact with teachers and closed systems.	Communication both formal and informal is important - communication links to discussions about consultations and decision making.	Communication (positive both verbally and non-verbally): facilitates the development of better relationships, trust and respect between home and school. Relationships are likely to be developed by good communication and relationships support better communication.
Consultation and decision making.		Consultation and decision interlinks with power, communication style and relationships.
Education school's responsibility.	Separation between home and school.	Related to 'beliefs about parental role and school role' concept.
Influence over school change.	Helplessness to change.	Parental self-efficacy is influenced by both relationships/communication and beliefs about role of parent and school and links into power relations.
Views about parental role – motivation - beliefs about education.		Role construction: Parents viewing education as important interpreted as a 'shared understanding' between school and home that could be built on. Parents' core beliefs and views about education factor into this concept.
Parents view education as important to them & their children.	The importance and value of education.	Related to 'Beliefs about parental role and school role' concept.

Table 5: First, second and third order concepts

The idea of gravity has been used as a metaphor to represent the gravitational pull of the relationships and interactions between each of the third order concepts to the most dominant concept, 'power' (see Figure 1).

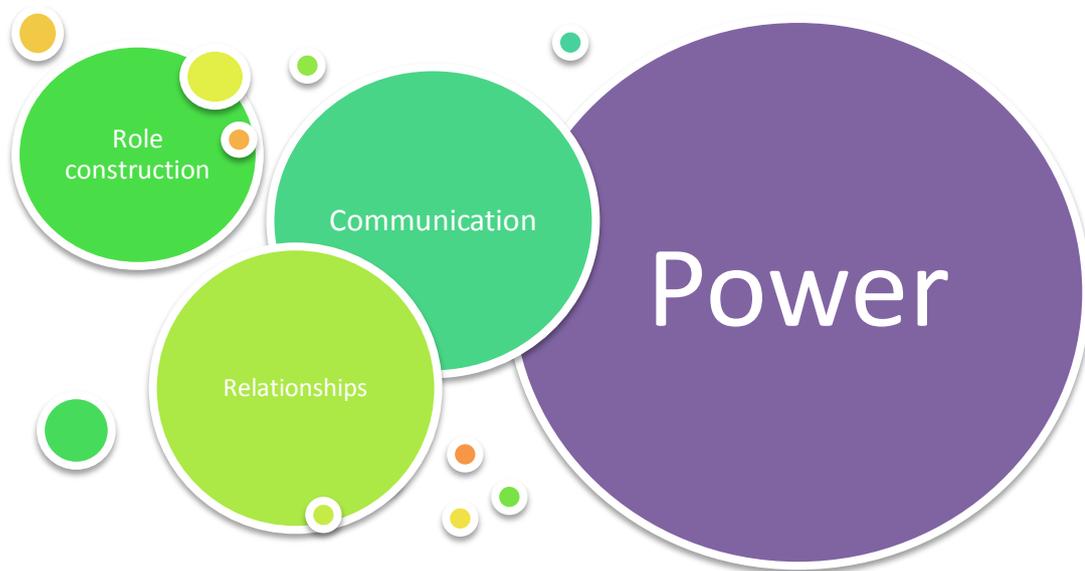


Figure 1: Line of argument gravity model

1.7.7 Power

Power differences between home and school featured strongly in all five of the included articles. The coded studies picked up on a number of phrases, such as 'hard to reach schools', 'intimidation', 'disempowerment to make decisions', 'bounding of professional knowledge' and 'feeling under-qualified', and this was found to be represented as differences in power between home and school. This suggests that in these cases parents viewed themselves as holding less power than professionals in their interactions with them. The line of argument suggests that power is a central influence and relates to the other concepts. If power is more balanced between a professional and parent, then it may be possible to have more informal

relationships and have more effective and meaningful communication. If this was the case, parents may be able to take a more active role in consultations and decision making with school. It could then also be argued that parents could begin to have further influence over school processes and how they are developed. In turn, parents' beliefs about school, based on prior knowledge or experiences, may have an opportunity to change or be redefined in relation to their new experiences and interactions.

Power has been presented in the diagram (Figure 1) as a larger and more dominant concept in relation to the other ideas presented. Communication and relationships have been interpreted as being closely linked with power and could be viewed as the product of power differentials between home and school. The diagram presents the concepts visually as a solar system to show that the other concepts are gravitating towards power at the centre. Power relationships are dependent on how authority is drawn upon or released by professionals within the environment and within interactions between home and school.

Power can be both an implicit and an explicit concept (Todd & Higgins, 1998) and it is experienced by individuals to a greater or lesser extent and changes in response to different interactions and social groups or situations. There is literature suggesting the significance of this concept in education, between parents and professionals, for instance by Vincent (1996) and Todd and Higgins (1998). A theory often drawn upon within the parent involvement literature concerning power is that of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu suggests that schools may use an unbalanced range of human and concrete resources, constructed by a society's social and cultural influences. For instance, schools may use a particular structure of language in the classroom and a curriculum associated with, for example, a middle-class social and cultural framework. The experiences of children who grow up with slightly different social and cultural resources and experiences may act in reducing social capital. Lareau (1987) relates this theory to issues surrounding parental

involvement in schools by suggesting that school expectations of parental involvement are not 'neutral' and are potentially influenced by differing social and cultural models to that of the parents they are striving to involve. Therefore, it is implied that these expectations and experiences may reduce the social capital of parents who have differing cultural and social backgrounds and experiences. The theory of social and cultural capital links to concept of 'power' in this review and could suggest possible explanation for the differences in power relationships between home and school. A limitation of the review may have been the inclusion of two papers written by the same author, Crozier, who discusses the idea of power in much of her work, perhaps adding unduly to the influence of power as a concept. However, both met the criteria for inclusion and were relevant to the review's question. Moreover, three articles by different authors also reported findings that linked to this idea, suggesting that it is an idea relevant to different groups of parents and is the view of other authors discussing parental involvement.

The line of argument suggests that it could be beneficial for professionals to become more aware of invisible power relations and for these to be made explicit by school. If professionals are more aware of their own social capital and are transparent about their roles and differences between themselves and parents, this could reduce the fear of the unknown. Breaking down the use of the professional language and jargon might reduce the effect of the 'knowledge is power' belief reported so frequently in the literature studied, and emphasise the parent as an expert (Lawson, 2003). This idea has led me to reflect on the literature of parent views concerning parent involvement and to consider the difficulties that educational professionals may face when addressing complex issues, such as power differentials, in practice. Findings of qualitative literature explored in this review may not be easily applied to everyday practice.

1.7.8 Communication leading to relationships

The developing line of argument suggests that both relationships and communication are important factors for parental involvement, and the concepts have been discussed together as they interact in many ways. Relationships originate in a series of successful communication exchanges and are more likely to be successful when there are balanced power relationships. Crozier and Davies (2007) write that ‘communication was difficult and that this impacts on relationships’. Other studies report that parents perceived communicating with teachers as ‘off-putting and frightening’ (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). In some cases, cultural differences in preferred communication style were reported. Crozier and Davies report that the Pakistani parents in their study saw their relationships and interactions with teachers as those of a consumer, whereas Crozier’s (1999) study involving White parents suggested that parents preferred to have less formal communication exchanges and thought relationships were more successful when they perceived a ‘bond of friendship’.

During the development of this line of argument, relationships started out as being more dominant than communication, but with further consideration it was interpreted that the two concepts could be co-dependent, with communication featuring more in the five studies; communication helps build better relationships. Communication may be more challenging when there are negative relationships. Similarly, when there are more secure relationships communication may be likely to improve and therefore reduce power differentials (Lawson, 2003). This idea links to earlier discussions about use of language in communicating and the bounding of knowledge that professionals can often exercise in practice.

1.7.9 Role construction

Parental constructions and beliefs about different roles were coded in three out of five papers. However, other initial themes in the coding table link to this idea of parents seeing themselves and their role as separate and different from the school. For example, O’Connor

(2001) reports that parents viewed their role as ‘distinct’ from the role of the school and also states that parents saw themselves as ‘independent’ from the school and that parents ‘turn their children over to a school to educate them’. Crozier and Davies’ (2007) parent participants reported feeling more motivated to become involved in school activities when they could see the relevance of this involvement to their personal understanding of their role as a parent.

The concept of ‘role construction’ refers to the beliefs and values that parents may hold about their role as a parent, as well as their views and beliefs about the school’s role when supporting their child’s education. The positioning of the concept within the line of argument diagram is represented further away from ‘power’, ‘communication’ and ‘relationships’, but the metaphor suggests that it gravitates towards the other concepts when communication and relationships are perceived as meaningful and positive by parents. When relationships become stronger through effective interpersonal verbal communication and trust, parents’ beliefs about their role and the school’s role may change. This concept has been positioned more distantly from the other concepts for a reason. Research suggests that parents’ role construction is likely to have been influenced and learnt through prior knowledge, their own experience at school and their own parents’ roles and the community and culture in which they are situated (Crozier, 1999; McNamara et al., 2000; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Goodall & Harris, 2008). The line of argument suggests that parents believed their role and schools role were separate and therefore did not overlap. In other words, parents did not make the connections between their role and school’s role and saw them as distinct. This is in keeping with the work of Lareau (1996), who adopted the term ‘separation’ and ‘interconnectedness’ to explain differences in parental involvement behaviour between parents from areas of low socio-economic status and middle-class parents.

Laueau suggests that it is this separation that further distances parents from school culture and therefore their children's education.

It could be argued that beliefs about roles could be influenced and developed through a shared understanding or appreciation of different viewpoints and perspectives. Themes within the papers suggest that the idea of parents' perceptions of role is an important idea to include as this is likely to influence the extent to which a parent will be involved in school.

1.8 Conclusion

The meta-ethnography explored research on parents' views of their involvement with school in order to answer the question, 'What factors do parents from low socio-economic backgrounds believe influence their involvement with their children's schools?' This review has provided several insights into the findings of existing literature. Firstly it has identified that several overlaps in findings between papers exploring parents' views of their involvement with school: power, communication, relationships and role construction. The line of argument has discussed the interaction of these concepts according to the line of argument synthesis. Power was interpreted as being the central factor in parental involvement that can be mediated by communication and relationships between parents and professionals. 'Role construction' was another influencing factor of parental involvement, but this was also a product of personal experience outside of the school interaction and was therefore less impacted by other factors, although it could be argued that this might be influenced over time by positive experiences with school. These findings have been discussed and referred back to existing research and theory. This review has led me to ask questions about the complexity of the terms and information that can be taken from the parent views literature, and whether it is possible to apply these challenging and complex ideas in school practice.

This meta-ethnography was used to build on existing research and to add further interpretation to the literature in a systematic way. This approach to systemic review is relatively new and there are limited examples to follow. Whilst the meta-ethnographic process has been useful in structuring the review in a systematic way, it led me to ask questions and to develop a number of reservations regarding aspects of the procedure. The identification of the studies initially proved to be problematic, as Britten et al.'s (2002) paper, a key example of the meta-ethnography process, did not describe an exhaustive search in their paper. This was overcome by finding a slightly more clinical version of the process by Atkins et al. (2008) who adopted a systematic literature search into their overall methodology.

Other examples of meta-ethnography report using research teams as a means of identifying the most relevant papers and triangulating their interpretations and developments of concepts (Atkins et al., 2008; Britten et al., 2002). Although this would have been ideal, it was beyond the scope of the resources available. During the development of first, second and third order concepts a colleague assisted, and also helped synthesise the line of argument.

There were difficulties finding papers on this topic of interest relating especially to parent views of their involvement, in the first instance, and therefore the search terms needed to be broadened. Once the final papers were subjected to more in-depth inclusion criteria it became clear that studies in keeping with the review question varied in terms of culture, ethnicity and location. This needs to be taken into account in the outcomes of the synthesis. The variation in sample and home country of the research is likely to have had implications for the conclusions that may be drawn. It may be the case that aspects specific to culture, religion and beliefs of diverse groups were overlooked in the reciprocal translation analysis stage, yet it was clear from this process that there were many similarities within the metaphors and concepts that were initially identified.

Although on a personal level the review has been a helpful exercise in drawing together overlapping ideas and to reflect upon what this means for educational practice, applying a process like this to papers based largely on an ethnographic and emancipatory approach, not written to make generalisations, means that the findings from this paper are not necessarily relevant and transferable to the general population. Conversely, it has be argued that generalisation in social science research is possible when taking into account variables such as ‘variation’, ‘context similarity’ and through the ‘recognition of patterns’ within and between research studies (e.g. Larsson, 2009).

All of the concepts identified within the literature are important factors in every individual’s social interactions and these ideas should be continually reflected upon by professionals in order to become more aware of any differences between individuals and to reduce hierarchical power divisions that could be implicit in our practice.

Section 2. Bridging Document

2.0 Aims

- To bridge the systematic review to the research project.
- To discuss epistemology, methodology, quality, ethics and reflexivity.

2.1 Introduction

This bridging document will bring together the epistemology and research design, making links between the literature review and the research project. It is an important document in terms of adding further clarity to my position in the research process. It will explore the impact of my world views on how I have interacted with others in the research project and look at their influence in relation to the learning and conclusions I have drawn from the research process. Ethical considerations and reflexivity are embedded throughout the document to demonstrate the importance I have placed on ethics, professional integrity and reflective practice throughout the project.

It is important to note that the systematic review and the research project have been presented as two distinct documents. This decision was taken as it was felt that it would be important for both papers to be standalone research papers of publishable quality. The bridging document will therefore be important in explaining the links between the systematic review and research project and how they influenced one another. I will begin by discussing the qualitative systematic review and my choice of review question. I will reflect on how the process influenced my research ideas and the methods I later adopted. I then consider the link from this activity to my research question and reflect on my position within the context of a school at which I have worked. I will discuss Participatory Action Research and issues of quality in research of this nature.

2.2 Development of research focus

I am interested in exploring parental engagement in educational services as I grew up with a sibling with special educational needs. I had an awareness of some of the challenges my parents faced when communicating their views to local authorities and schools and how this impacted on the extent to which they felt listened to. The importance I place on equal opportunities and the impact of this on the rights of marginalised groups has fuelled an interest in working with parents of different backgrounds and experiences. This has led me to reflect on the additional barriers that parents may face, leading to a lack of confidence in communicating their views or their voice not being responded to by schools.

My literature review explored factors that influence parent involvement, according to the views of parents from areas of low socio-economic status. This was useful and relevant to my work in a primary school as a traded-service Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). The meta-ethnography approach was selected as it was an appropriate methodology to draw the literature together, preserve and further interpret qualitative data to contribute to the generation of new knowledge (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005). The line of argument synthesis (theory) concluded that ‘power’, ‘communication’, ‘relationships’ and ‘construction of roles’ were the strongest emerging concepts from the data in five papers selected by a systematic search process. These concepts appear to be the overarching factors that parents reported as influencing and interacting with their involvement. However, these concepts are very complex to unpick and challenging to address in practice with schools.

Reflecting on my choice and wording of the review question, I have been interested in why I included the word ‘views’ from the very start of the process. I feel that this demonstrates the personal importance I place on listening to the stories and realities of others when conducting a research enquiry, rather than focusing on how many people are involved in a study in order to make generalisations. Carrying out the review helped me to become

more confident and aware of my core beliefs and world views. I was able to reflect on the different methods of data collection and the analysis of the studies I read. The techniques adopted by the authors in the review, such as interviews and focus groups, were in keeping with my position. However, it became clear early in the review process that the final papers had not included or considered the change process and the outcomes for the parents. I concluded that participation of parents in the research process could have been enhanced. It became evident by the time I concluded the review that the literature findings discussed complex ideas with no easy answers. I believed that this would be likely to require support to develop in schools. I therefore began to consider the Educational Psychologist's role in facilitating school improvement and development in the area of home-school relationships that had become a core feature of my work. When deciding on the research design I decided that Participatory Action Research (PAR) would be an ideal framework as it would allow me to promote the agency of the parents in working towards change and to allow me to practice my values and core beliefs as a practitioner-researcher. My decision to focus on 'hard to reach' parents and low socio economic status, rather than issues of SEN or ethnic minority, was decided following the negotiation of the research topic with the school in the initial stages of process. I believed that this would make the project relevant and motivating for the organisation. There were also resource restrictions to take into account such limited funds to utilise interpreters and translators.

2.3 Epistemological considerations and implications for the research method

The systematic review led me reflect on how PAR could scaffold reciprocity in home-school relationships. I also considered how this approach could facilitate co-learning of school staff about the complexities of parental partnerships in order to inform their action in response to parents' views. The questions were identified as:

- Can the action research scaffold parental agency within the home-school context?

- Can schools be supported to reflect on and understand the complexities of involving parents and act on parent's views within their context?

Given the importance I have placed on listening to the views of others in the review, I was clear that the perspectives of others in this research would be crucial. I did not want the research to be based only on my interpretations of others' realities. I believed that I would be continually constructing the world in collaboration with those involved and together we would be making sense of multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge (Robson, 2002). This is in keeping with a social constructivist methodological paradigm that suggests that individuals construct understanding through their experiences and by reflecting on experiences. It suggests that a learner's understanding of knowledge develops from a meaning-making search and from engagement in constructing their interpretations. It also suggests that experiences derive from examination, questioning and analysis of tasks and experiences (Applefield, 2001) and that our learning is filtered through social interactions and negotiation between a collective group (Brown et al., 1995).

My position within the action research process and my relationship with those in the context is interesting because of my role and the arrangement with the school in terms of my training and traded services. I could be described as both an insider and outsider because I am a professional working for an external service, yet spend much time in this school and am viewed as a member of staff. Herr and Anderson 2005 refer to this as an 'insider-outsider' position. Bartunek and Louis (1996) argue that being an insider and outsider in a research context has significant advantages for the knowledge generated. They suggest that it can enhance knowledge about practice within an organisation and about an organisation with the researcher acting as both enquirer and as a critical friend. I reflected later on my position and by the end of the project found that, working at a school level in an attempt to enhance

parental agency, my position changed and I became more of an insider. I had become more entwined in the process and in the school system. I had started to feel a pull towards the school's processes and perspectives in an attempt to meet them in their thinking. I have been aware of and reflected upon the influence of political systems on my actions and have discussed any conflicts throughout my university tutorials so that this continued to be a conscious process.

The matter of positionality also links to issues surrounding power of researchers and their relationships with others in the research process. I have continually been aware of the power I have been likely to hold as 'the researcher' and power within the system with which I have been collaborating. This also aligns my research with aspects of emancipatory research (Robson, 2002). I have been mindful of power differentials within my interactions and in the design of the methods and approaches, in an attempt to empower those with whom I have worked. In order to ensure I have conducted myself ethically throughout the process I have considered what it might be like to take part in the research process as a participant. For example, parents might have felt uncertain when they first met me and heard about my role and my relationship to the school and its staff, whereas members of staff may have had a view that Educational Psychologists are 'experts' and that in some way I could be judgemental about their practice with parents and have 'the right answers'. I worked hard to be transparent about my position and my professional identity in the research project, as an insider, an outsider and as a Trainee Educational Psychologist. I spent time building up relationships of trust, and ensured confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any point in the research process. I critically evaluated the language I was using with parents and professionals. I emphasised the complexity of the issues we discussed and my own learning, and made this explicit alongside the parents and school staff to find out about how we could improve the issues together. When reflecting back on the audio recordings with parents, I

tended to adapt my communication style so that it was less formal and my accent to be more similar to the communication style of the parents. I hoped for the research to be as participatory as possible so that parents and professionals were able to work with me to decide on the direction and actions in the project. Despite my efforts and intentions for the project to be as inclusive and participatory as possible, I acknowledge that it is unlikely that participants perceived this to be an equal power dynamic as it was essentially a research project that I was carrying out for my own purposes, and which I would take away with me at the end of our meetings.

I believe that it has been important to understand the different values and perspectives of individuals involved in the research. In working towards social justice and change, it has been essential for me to adopt a flexible and pragmatic stance when considering and using different methods and tools within a constructivist methodology. A pragmatic approach to research refers to the use of 'whatever philosophical or methodological approach works best for a particular research problem at issue' (Robson, 2002, p. 43). Dewey (1933) addresses the idea of democracy in education and links this to the selection of methods in an inquiry. He suggests that the use of the most effective and accessible tool to the teaching and learning of others can be justified as the most appropriate to use within an inquiry (Dewey, 1938). The pragmatic attitude and respectful approaches I have used has valued individual views and perspectives and helped those involved to begin to develop a shared language and understanding. An example is using the 'stickers' validation activity to obtain more parents' views and establish how representative they were, to satisfy the head teacher's concerns about validity and to move forward and work towards change. This activity was also beneficial as it allowed more parents to become involved in the project and to have an opportunity to say 'I agree' or 'I disagree' with the research data in a non-threatening manner. Ethically, the idea of others validating interpretations was important as

communicating the ideas publically and involving others in the interpretation aspect of the process improved the participatory and trustworthy nature of the project.

2.4 PAR: Process and analysis

PAR provided an ideal framework to work to make meaning together with others and was in keeping with my constructivist position. It also allowed for a more flexible approach and choice of methods or tools to be applied in order to respond to parent and professional voice within the research that, in turn, facilitated the learning of everyone involved in the process.

By using PAR I was trying to understand rather than predict, and to liberate rather than control (McNiff et al., 2003). I was keen for the research journey to be experienced alongside others and for co-learning and collaborative reflective practice to take place and to be a key outcome of the research. Kemmis (1985) describes action research as:

a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations (including educational) in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own social and educational practices, (b) their understanding of these practices and (c) the situations in which the practices are carried out. It is most rationally empowering when undertaken by participants collaboratively, though it is often undertaken by individuals, and sometimes in cooperation with 'outsiders'. (Kemmis, 1985, p. 1)

Herr and Anderson (2005) suggest that action research allows for a more in-depth and sophisticated understanding of questions constructed throughout a process. Therefore, findings of action research reported by some can focus on the process itself, rather than a product of the process (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The project was analysed on an on-going basis during the parent focus group and validation in order to carry out further reflective action and develop our knowledge and understanding in collaboration. This approach to analysis at the start of the project, in keeping with the inclusive and participatory nature of the project, aimed to avoid imposing my own interpretations of the meaning of the data within the context wherever possible.

The parents' part in analysing their views links to the constructivist nature of the project and the value I placed on emancipatory approaches. I was keen for the parent focus group to be developed and analysed by the parents wherever possible and to validate any of my own understandings and interpretations by 'checking this out' with them in a narrative way. During my write-up, I tried to make sense of the large amount of data I had gathered, and at this point I felt I had begun to own the research. From this data, I decided that it would be useful to bring in my own interpretations regarding the final head teacher meeting. I did this with the understanding that some of these ideas were implicit in the dialogue I had with professionals, but the political influence over what was able to be said may have been a barrier to expressing views openly within this more structured and perhaps more formal context. I was able to back up these interpretations with notes from less structured dialogues with the head teacher present. Following the reporting of the data, I shared my interpretation with the head teacher, who agreed that the areas I covered were fundamental outcomes of the project.

During each action research cycle I followed guidance from the British Psychological Society Code of Conduct (2009) and HPC (2008) criteria in thinking about the information I have given to the participants, collecting consent to take part and in making ethic statements and the right to withdraw at each cycle. The information provided to those involved is presented in Table 6.

Action research cycle	Ethics processes
Scoping	Information sheet detailing the aims of the process and the nature of action research presented and discussed. Ethics statement included. Verbal and written consent gained from parent link worker, parents and head teacher (right to withdraw clearly stated).
Parent focus group	Parents involved at this stage had already consented and were happy to be involved. Parents took an active role in deciding next actions in the research.
Poster 1: Parent validation activity (sticker activity)	Parents were informed verbally about the process and given a choice to participate. Information slips given to parents following their participation. This detailed process so far and expected next steps and actions. It clearly stated that they could withdraw their vote.
Poster 2: Teacher feedback activity	Posters placed on the staffroom wall with information sheet and ethics statement. Expected next steps and action were included. Information sheet states right to withdraw at any point.
Head teachers' problem-solving meeting	Information sheets given with verbal discussion about research so far. Consent forms filled out by new participant (Head Teacher 2).

Table 6: Ethics and action research process

I have been mindful of the philosophy of the research methodology and how traditional ethical approaches have been designed to fit methods that view work with participants as ‘others’ (Eikeland, 2006) or subjects. This has been described by Eikeland as ‘condescending’ ethics developed for more traditional research approaches. It is argued that ethics of this kind are less appropriate for action research projects. For example, from my own experience of planning and negotiating the research with others and wanting others to decide on the direction of the research with me, it has not always been possible to predict the steps of the process and provide fully informed consent. I maintained personal and professional integrity throughout the process by keeping those involved up to date on any

developments and congregating together if any decisions needed to be made as a group. Communication with those involved has been essential in creating relationships of trust with parents and professionals and this was possible due to my on-going and regular involvement with the school and the parent link worker. The sharing of data and communication of parents' views was agreed by the parents as the next step. I was able to keep parents' identities anonymous to the professionals throughout the process. Sharing of any data with others in the school system was always checked with its owner and kept anonymous in the school wherever possible. People were assured that data discussed in my research report would be kept fully anonymous.

In carrying out a PAR process with the aim of facilitating change, it has been important for me to be aware of my educative influence (McNiff et al., 2003) and the importance of justifying it. In all aspects of my work I have acted honestly and with the best interests of others in mind (McNiff et al., 2003), and have only focused on areas identified by those in the system as requiring action. The educative influence can be justified as I was learning alongside the school and believe that my own learning mirrored those outcomes of the research for the school. Initially I felt that, in my role as a researcher, I needed to have all the answers to the school's issues and questions. I also felt that I needed to have a clear idea of the direction of the research process. However, using action research as a framework allowed me to say 'I don't know' to the school and explain this by using a theoretically informed framework as a 'concrete justification' the school could appreciate.

2.5 Quality

Quality is part of a much more complex debate regarding knowledge, what constitutes knowledge in qualitative research and whether it is possible for it to be judged (Mays & Pope, 2000). McNiff et al. (2003) suggest that action researchers make 'claims to knowledge' and that validating these claims and assumptions about the knowledge-generating process

ensures the enhanced quality of subsequent claims to knowledge. McNiff refers to validation as ‘a process of testing the truthfulness of the knowledge claim by making it public for critical scrutiny in relation to appropriate standards of judgement’. Validation links to the issue of power and who owns the power to make the judgement over the validity of knowledge. In this case, the power lies with the parents, and later with teachers and head teachers. I carried out a number of validation activities at each stage of the process in order to ensure that the knowledge I had gathered was confirmed to be valid by those in the context. The validation of data gathered also facilitated an on-going feedback loop that ensured that knowledge was shared and influenced cycles of communication and on-going change.

Several papers discuss different factors that can be used to judge the quality of qualitative data and methods that can be used to increase the rigour of project (Mays & Pope, 2000; Barbour, 2001; Torrance, 2012). Ethics in practitioner research practice is thought to be one of the three basic tests of quality in qualitative research (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007) and, for this reason, ethics has been referred to throughout the bridging document. I have conducted my research project in a way that has allowed opportunities for those involved to challenge the observations and interpretations (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007) to improve the validity of the knowledge generated.

Triangulation is also referred to in the literature on quality. It refers to the use of more than one data source in order to answer a question (Barbour, 2001). This research technique seemed an obvious step to take, given that I was coming from a constructivist position and believed that it was my role to make sense of multiple social constructions of those with whom I was collaborating . I drew upon a number of data sources from a variety of perspectives and recorded these by making notes in a research diary, audio recording conversations, developing visual representations from a focus group with participants and gathering perspective about this data from a larger group to validate the information. Another

indicator of quality in qualitative research is a demonstration of the reflective and reflexive practice that has featured throughout this document and in the research paper.

2.6 Conclusions

Research included in the systematic meta-ethnography had made little impact on the development of home–school partnerships responsive to the perspectives of parents. Moreover, studies selected within the meta-ethnography did not recognise parents as agents of change. It was also highlighted that the subject of parental involvement and home-school partnership is complex and that it is likely that more reflective practice is needed that is responsive to the needs of an individual context. This linked strongly to the research projects focus which was interested in promoting parental agency within a home school context and in scaffolding a schools learning about the complexities of parental involvement using action research as a framework. In drawing together the systematic review and the research project in this bridging document, I have critically considered the epistemology and research design and have made links between the literature review and the research project. I have also explored the impact on my world views on the research process, quality in qualitative action research and have considered ethical practice throughout.

Section 3. Research Project

Reflective Home–School Partnerships: Using Action Research in Educational Psychology Practice as a Scaffold for Home–School Communication

3.0 Abstract

Developing home–school partnerships responsive to the perspectives of parents, recognising them as agents of change in their own right, is an on-going challenge. A PAR framework was used to communicate parent views so that they were listened to and responded to by the school. Inclusive and democratic approaches were adopted in a multi-ethnic inner-city school over a period of thirteen months to facilitate the co-learning of those involved in the project. The processes involved using tools in an interactive manner (including focus groups and interviews) and a graphic elicitation (the Ishikawa Fishbone technique) to consult parents. Staff were invited to reflect on the parent consultation. Outcomes reflected several ideas and priorities for parents, who identified as key themes the procedural and interpersonal communication between home and school. Time and space were created for teachers and head teachers to receive feedback and to build upon parents' views with their own contributions. A meeting with the head teacher led to reflective questions being asked that linked to next steps and actions. The paper discusses the outcomes in relation to four ideas: 'communication between professionals' 'concrete versus abstract ideas: procedure and artistry', 'teacher efficacy in response to parent link worker' and 'professionalism and authority: the home school difference'. This paper concludes that, with time, space and structure afforded by an action research frame, parents and staff are able critically to consider and reflect upon the complexities of parents' involvement and that staff are able to consider the implications for their organisation. Parents' views were authentically involved in the research process, but their representation at later stages diminished.

3.1 Research context

This home–school partnership project is not a traditional ‘intervention and outcomes’ study, but focuses on processes, changes and relationships, and how particular tools question and disturb normal communication patterns in a school. The data collected is neither concerned with numbers of participants, nor motivated by outcomes. Rather, it is an exploration of a process and the learning that has taken place from disruption to a school’s usual organisational functioning.

I have explored parental engagement in a primary school using action research as a framework for parent views to be listened to and responded to by staff with the purpose of supporting parents as agents of change and encouraging the school to learn about the complexities of parental involvement. The school, in the north east of England, is in an area of low socio-economic status and hosts a diverse community with different languages and cultures. There are outreach programmes designed to include more vulnerable families in school activities and the school draws upon additional support from agencies such as social care and educational psychology, with parent link workers to promote parent partnerships. Whilst it has achieved a great deal, receiving ‘outstanding’ in a recent OFSTED inspection and striving to improve, there is concern that some parents do not engage with the school.

Before the action research began I worked with the school as a Trainee Educational Psychologist. In this two-day a week role I applied psychology in a variety of ways with individuals, groups and the whole school to improve outcomes for children and developed a relationship with one of the parent link workers, well-known and respected in the parent community and trusted by those lacking the confidence to come to school. This helped to build links with parents and allowed me to carry out a self-reflective enquiry and to work collaboratively with parents and school in order to improve the rationality, justice and understanding of the social and educational practices (Kemmis, 1985).

3.2 Home–school partnerships

Parent involvement and home–school partnerships have featured in government policy and educational legislation for over thirty years (O’Connor, 2008). It is generally agreed that parent participation enhances outcomes for children (e.g. Fan & Chen, 2001; Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005; Jeynes, 2003; Flouri, 2006). However, between contexts and individuals there is variation in the effectiveness of interventions (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003), suggesting that a ‘one size fits all’ approach to encourage and mediate parental involvement is an inadequate model and that professionals may need to think differently about how they develop partnerships (Crozier & Davies, 2007).

Parent and professional partnership has become a popular term with professionals and parents (O’Connor, 2008). It involves working reciprocally and is a complex ideal (Vincent, 2000) with a number of barriers to successful practice. Some would argue that achieving equality in a home–school partnership is difficult due to the imbalance of power between parents and professionals in schools (Vincent, 1996; Crozier, 1999; Reay, 2004). This is particularly the case in schools with parents of different backgrounds as there is a mismatch of the social and cultural framework of parents’ lives and the models that a school may adopt (Vincent, 1996). Power differences can lead to parental lack of confidence in their skill to engage with the school (Bourdieu, 1986; Reay, 2004).

As schools have become more accountable to parents (DFE, 1992), teachers’ expectations of parents have increased (Crozier, 1998), yet partnerships are often led by their own or school’s agendas. In cases where parents do not share these possibly middle-class values this can leave them without a voice and lead to tensions in relationships (Reay, 2004; Crozier, 1998). Partnerships are influenced by individual and group interactions (Reay, 2004), but the idea of interaction and process in a home–school partnership is poorly understood.

There has been a call for parents to be involved since the 1944 Education Act (Dent, 1947) and following Acts. Nevertheless, policy and legislation continues to be directed by professionals. Parents' views are often assumed by professionals, based on their own world views. Whilst research suggests that partnership with parents can be fruitful, schools do not make use of parents' abilities to know how to involve them.

I developed a research plan to involve parents, teachers and head teachers as fully as possible in a research process to enable them to learn together and communicate about home-school partnerships. Given that partnerships and policy are nearly always led by professionals, I was interested to find how parents could gain a more central voice and leading role in the research process. I wanted to use a methodology that might increase parent participation and confidence in their expertise and create opportunities for the school to listen and to reflect on home-school partnerships. The aim was to facilitate its learning about the complexity of parent partnerships and, in turn, foster improvements in its policy and practice. Therefore the research questions became:

1. Can the action research process increase parental agency?
2. Can schools be supported to reflect on and understand the complexities of involving parents and act on parent's views within their context?

3.3 Participatory Action Research (PAR)

The intention was to work as reciprocally as possible. Action research was adopted as the most suitable research framework, because it was clear that it would be important to be guided by those with concerns and, to make the process relevant and motivating, would involve working with others. Action research allows direction to develop over time and for others to influence it and shape the development of the process (McNiff et al., 2003). It also allows for a number of approaches to be used flexibly and pragmatically and would facilitate

co-learning and collaborative and reflective problem solving (Christ, 2010), supporting a process of on-going development and change.

It has been important for me to reflect upon my position and to be transparent about political agendas and influences (Herr & Anderson, 2005; McNiff et al., 2003). In my role as a practitioner-researcher, I could have been viewed either as an insider or outsider (Herr & Anderson, 2005). In my two-day a week role, I had developed working relationships with members of staff involved in the project and was considered as one. Nevertheless, I believe that my role as a psychologist, representing an external service within the local authority, brought a degree of criticality and objectivity as an outsider-researcher to the process (Bartunek & Louis, 1996) and, moreover, acknowledge that I may have been influenced by the political actions and agendas of the system in which I was working.

3.4 Research design

In this section I will discuss the methods used as a series of separate events. Each will be presented as a 'cycle'; a visual representation of the action research process may be found in Figure 2.

The 'scoping' cycle involved mapping the research by conducting discussions with parents and with staff. Next, the 'focus group' cycle was carried out to discuss parents' involvement and create a visual representation of their views for others in the system. Following this, the 'poster 1' cycle presented this data at parents evening for more to see the opportunity to be involved and to validate the data by voting.

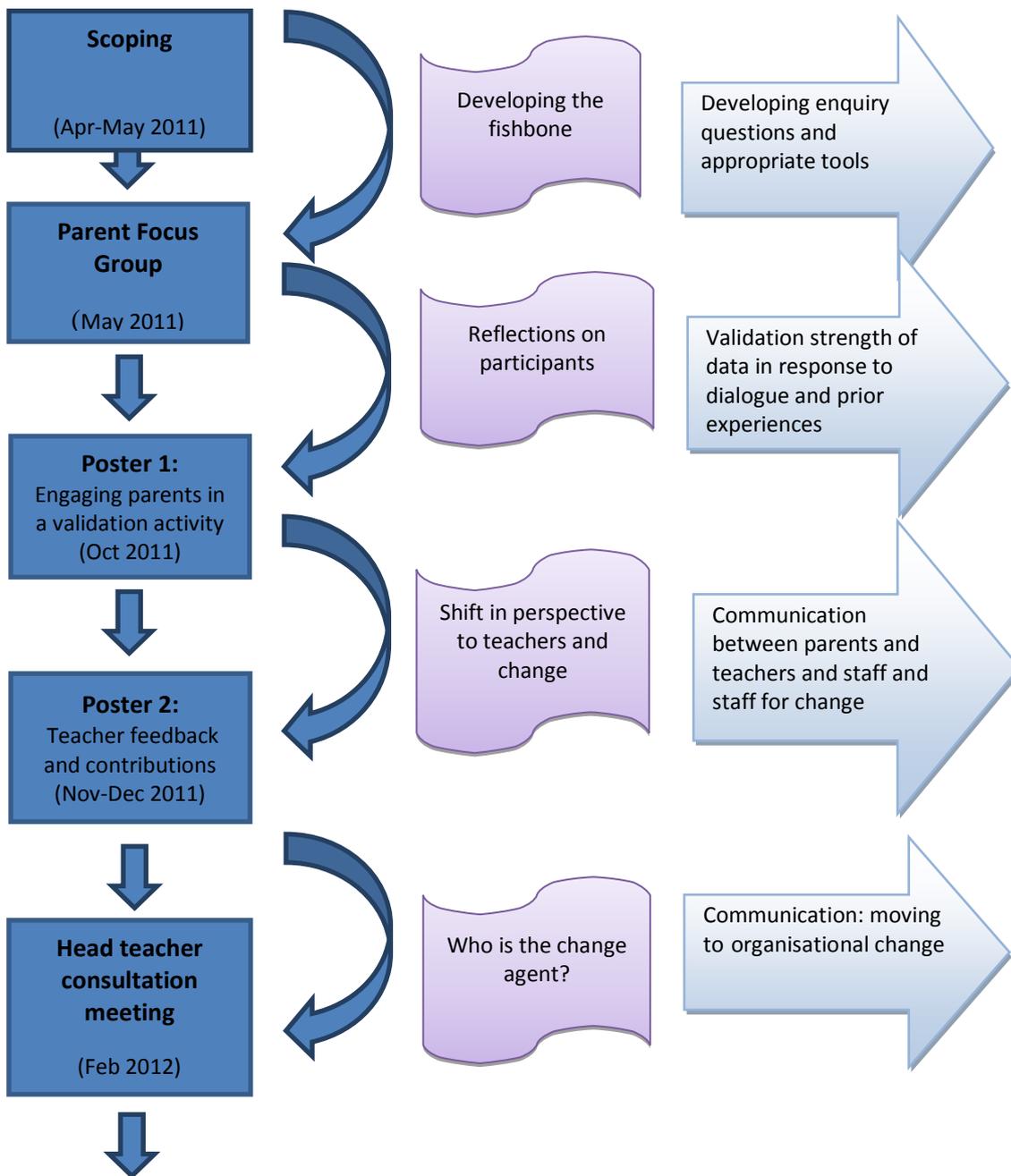


Figure 2: Cycles of communication, action and reflection

The ‘poster 2’ cycle displayed the poster, duly annotated with parents’ views and validations, on the staffroom wall for teachers to contribute their views. Lastly, the ‘head teacher consultation’ cycle discussed findings from earlier cycles to reflect on the data and consider the next steps and action for the school.

Due to the breadth and scale of the process over thirteen months, the methodology section presents only the cycles most beneficial to the development of reflective home–school

partnerships in school. However, in reality the research process involved much overlap and revisiting of ideas (McNiff et al., 2003). Resources including audio recordings, notes, posters, transcripts and an action research diary logged both information and my personal reflections (McNiff et al., 2003; Baumfield et al., 2008).

3.4.1 Scoping

The scoping cycle considered appropriate and informed data gathering and analysis tools. Earlier I had considered a range of methods, yet believed that I needed first to act in order to let the process develop. The process began with a weekly dialogue with the school's parent link worker once a week over a period of three weeks. A parent meeting was organised involving six parents selected by the parent link worker to discuss parent involvement in school. I also spoke to the head teacher to ensure that the direction of the research would be helpful to the school's development.

It became clear that a key would be communication between home and school, and between professionals, as this proved to be a recurring theme. The parent link worker and I decided that it would be helpful to carry out a focus group activity with parents to obtain their views about their involvement in a more structured way as a vehicle to communicate these to other parents and teachers.

3.4.2 Parent focus group

The parent focus group cycle involved meeting parents to discuss their views about what school did to support parent involvement, considering what worked and what needed to be developed using a visual tool. The Ishikawa Fishbone technique (Turner, 2002) was selected from several possible methods to facilitate communication between parents about parental involvement and used to scaffold the parent's construction of their views (Prosser & Loxley 2008). The method was selected to avoid over-reliance on language (Bagnoli, 2009). Of

seven selected by the parent link worker, two parents participated. They had been described by the parent link worker as uninvolved parents who had recently started coming in to the school to help and to engage in a number of activities and were thus chosen for convenience. I presented the two women with a blank version of a ‘fishbone’ (see Figure 3), a diagonal with lines extending out from it to organise themes around several subthemes. It can help to guide a broad discussion into one that is more focused and was used interactively to support the analysis of data by developing concepts from the discussion using their own words (Hopkins, 2010).

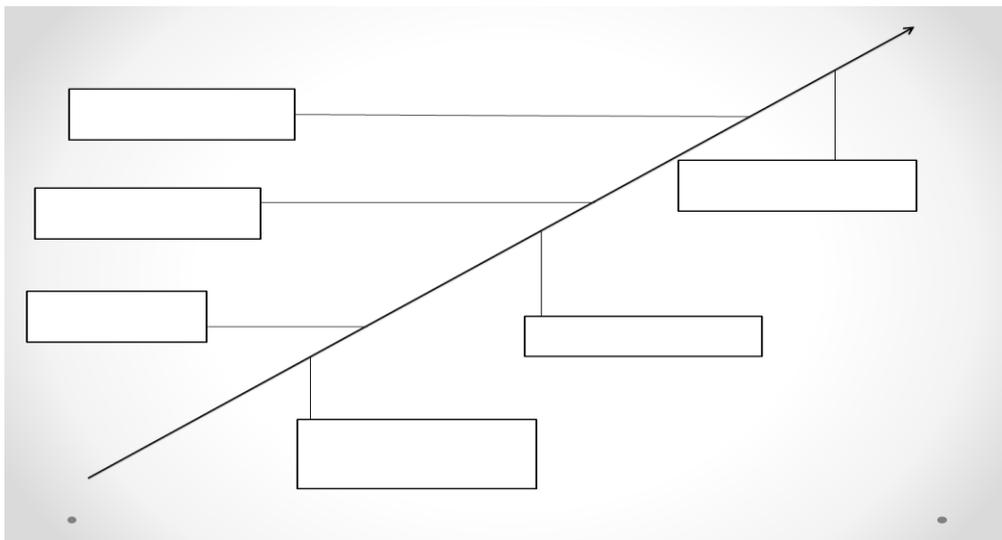


Figure 3: Blank fishbone diagram

I obtained consent to audio record the session so I could check the accuracy of the contributions noted on the ‘fishbone’ and ensure that I had not missed or misinterpreted parent views while I notated the poster. The aim was to follow the conversation using two open questions linked to the initial scoping cycle. Each was placed at the top of a ‘fishbone’, resulting in two diagrams. Parents analysed and categorised their ideas as the activity evolved by grouping their points and thinking of a word to describe each grouping.

Although I aimed for parents to take a lead role in analysing the focus group data, I acknowledge that they may have followed the direction they believed I wanted to discuss, based on previous meetings. I used a diamond ranking approach (Woolner et al., 2010) to decide on which areas they wanted the school to focus first. Concepts that parents placed on the diamond were noted higher on the 'fishbone' as a priority for the school. In addition, the method was used in conjunction with discussion to help them to prioritise their contributions.

Subsequently the head teacher and I considered the low attendance at the focus group. We decided that it would be useful for the school to share the outcomes and obtain the views of the wider school community, and consent was sought from the two women.

3.4.3 'Poster 1': engaging parents in a validation activity

The 'poster 1' cycle presented the 'fishbones' from the focus group on posters at parents evening to obtain views about their validity and relevance (Torrance, 2012; McNiff et al., 2003; Barbour, 2001). To be as democratic, interactive and as non-threatening as possible and to engage and represent more parents in the research process (Torrance, 2012), a participant validation activity was developed. Parents were asked to place a single sticker on each concept represented by a box on the 'fishbones', coloured according to whether they agreed or disagreed (see Figure 3), in keeping with the project's inclusive and collaborative nature and as a way of reaching out to the wider parent community. Parents also had an opportunity to comment on the posters using 'post it' notes. My observations of the validation activity suggest that this activity was well received and that a more representative mix of ethnic groups in the school took part. Parents who did not speak English accessed the activity through their children supporting their reading of the questions and concepts.

My discussions with the parent link worker led me to reflect on the engagement of teachers in the research process. We believed that it would be important for them to be aware

of parents' views and to have an opportunity to contribute, to continue to communicate and to raise awareness of parents' views amongst staff.

3.4.4 'Poster 2': teacher feedback and contributions

The parents' validated fishbone posters were displayed on the staffroom wall with an information sheet and an ethics statement (see Appendix 4) informing teachers of the research process so far and the expected next steps. This was done to feed parents' views back to teachers and provide an opportunity to participate. A slightly different method was adopted with the teachers compared to the 'parent validation' activity, as there was more time available for teachers to view the posters within this context. The parent validation took place during a parents evening over a three hours. Teachers were asked to respond with 'post-it' notes offering suggestions for next steps and actions (see Figure 3). It was hypothesised that the display would create space for reflective communication between teachers about parent involvement and it was hoped to motivate them to develop their practice with parents through active participation in the research process, potentially to influence change at a whole-school level. I critically considered the implications of using slightly different methods with the teachers and parents and how this may have impacted on power relationships within the research. All effort was made to ensure that parents had an opportunity to express their views on the poster within the time constraints of the context.

Based on conversations during the 'poster 2' activity with the focus group, the parent link worker and teachers, I decided next to include the head teacher, who would be able to implement whole-school change.

3.4.5 Head teacher consultation meeting

A meeting was organised to create a reflective space for the parent link worker, the head teacher (Head Teacher 1) and the head of a partner school (Head Teacher 2) to reflect on the

data together, the last attending because any procedural developments would affect both schools. I gained consent to audio record the session so that I could listen after the meeting, using a mapping or ‘looking for patterns’ approach (Robson, 2002), to draw out questions and actions that were discussed, feed back to the school the outcomes and support any next steps and actions that were identified.

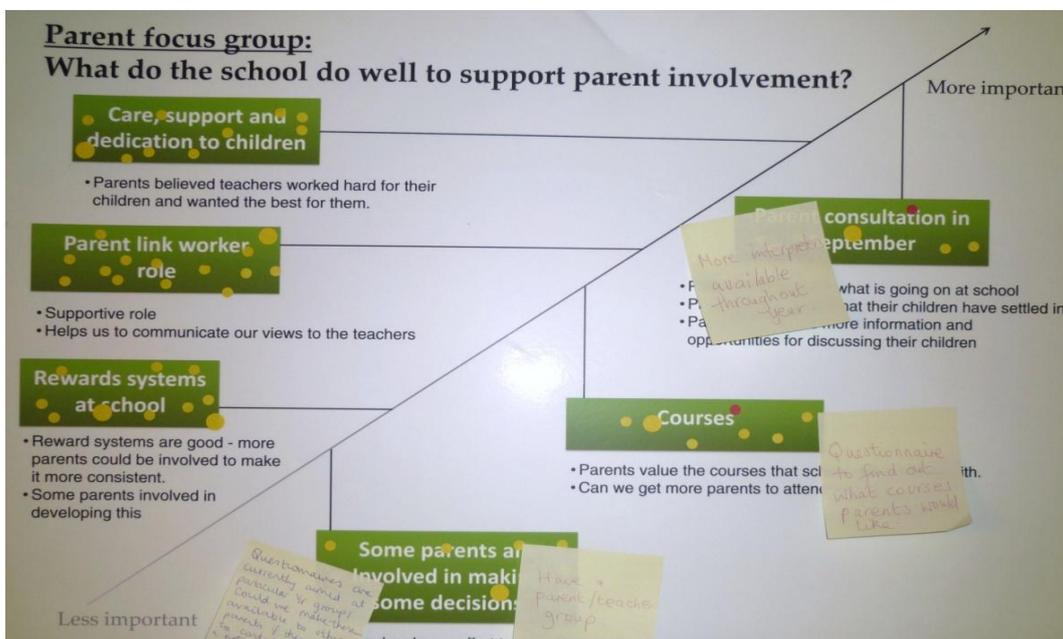
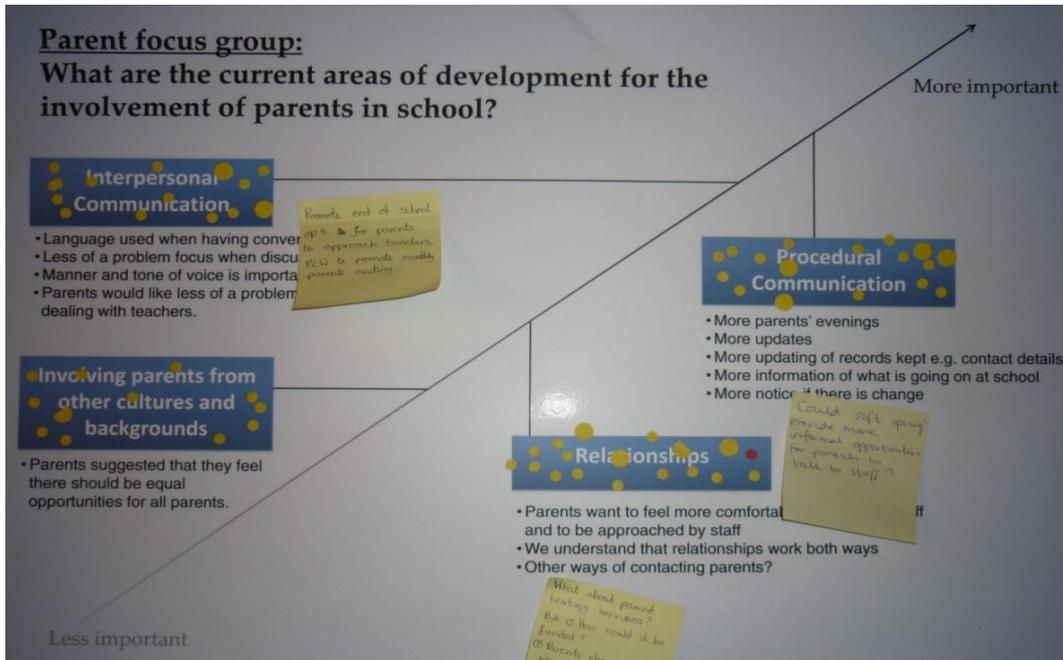


Figure 4: Posters following parent validation activity and teacher feedback activity

My role in this meeting had been intended to be minimal, as I wanted the professionals to take ownership of the problem, but I began by explaining the process. My role then became facilitator of the discussion. Having prepared a number of prompting questions should the discussion falter and to evaluate the usefulness of the research, I encouraged the head teachers and parent link worker to reflect on the data and ask questions, suggesting that it would be helpful to consider next steps and actions for the school so subsequent cycles of action could be constructed. With an understanding that at this point I was beginning to own the research and incorporate my own interpretations, I carried out a visual mapping exercise (see Appendix 4) using 'post-it' notes to crystallise the information from the head teacher consultation meeting note data and address the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

3.5 Learning and insights

In this paper I focus on the process, rather than the outcomes, of each activity (Herr & Anderson, 2005), devoting more attention to the insights and learning regarding home–school partnerships than the outcomes, which are referred to in the relevant appendix. The insights have been presented with a focus on the learning from parents and professionals in school at different stages of the research.

3.5.1 Parents

The two women who took part in the parent focus group discussed what was working well to support parental involvement and which areas to develop in school. The fishbone diagram appeared to help, as they could focus their attention on the diagram together rather than be asked questions individually. At times they appeared to lack the confidence to organise aspects of the focus group data and to describe the groups of ideas and I needed to make suggestions and to give examples to support them .

The parents made many positive comments about the school, believing that staff promoted the interests of children (see Figure 4). When considering areas for development relating to how the school involves parents, they decided on the word 'communication' as a concept and gave examples such as 'wanting more parent evenings', 'wanting teachers to think about the language they use when communicating with them' and 'more notice of updates of events happening at school' (see Figure 4). The parents discussed issues such as 'lacking confidence to approach school staff', 'relationships with staff working both ways' and 'contact with parents being less problem-focused', labelling these ideas as a 'relationships' concept. Another point was the different cultures and ethnic groups; there was concern that parent interventions tended to target diverse groups of parents to the exclusion of others who wanted to take part. They labelled this idea as 'involving parents from other cultures and backgrounds' (see Figure 4).

Following the session, I noted that the 'communication' concept was broad, encompassing many ideas. The time had been spent discussing communication between home and school, and between professionals in the school, yet I noted that the parents were discussing different aspects, for example relating to school processes or associated with human interactions. I suggested that it might add clarity if the concept was split into two distinct types; 'interpersonal and 'procedural' communication. I checked if this was a valid interpretation and still captured parent views. The two parents agreed it would add more detail and that it was a priority for the school to improve on procedural communication and interpersonal communication, so these concepts were placed at the top of the 'fishbone'.

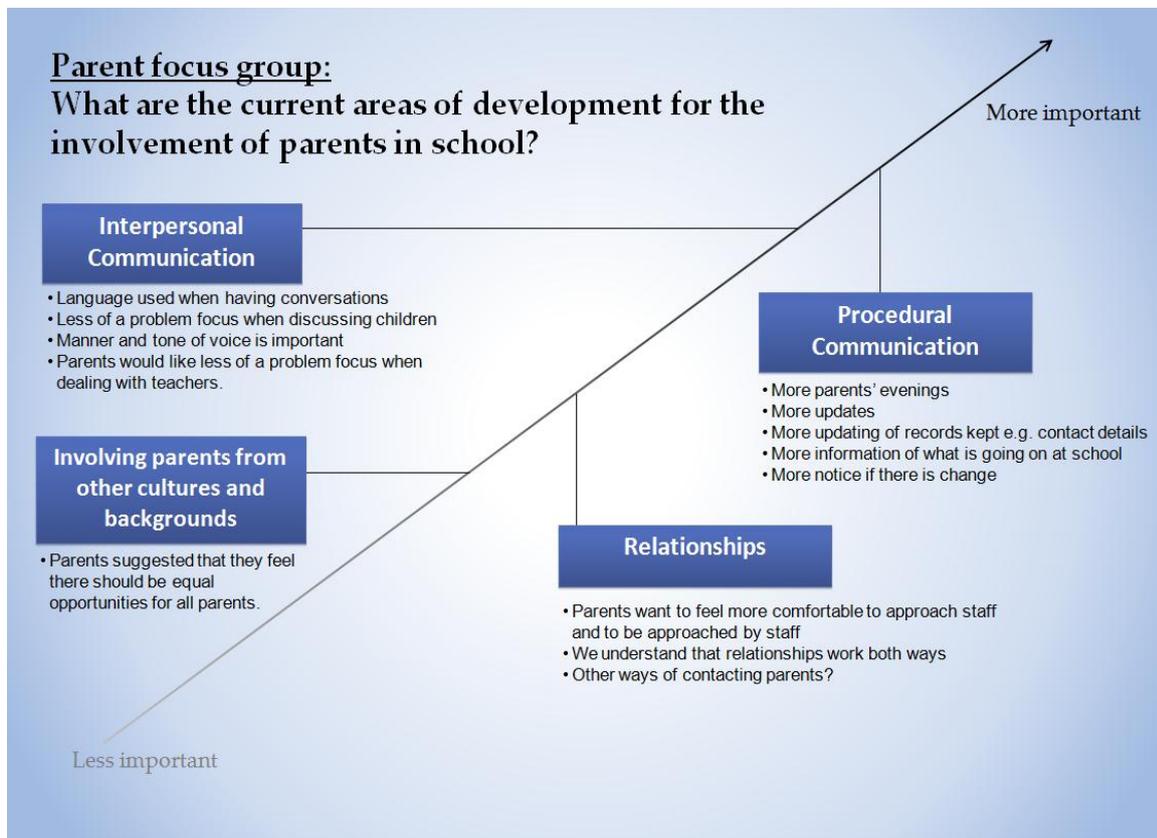
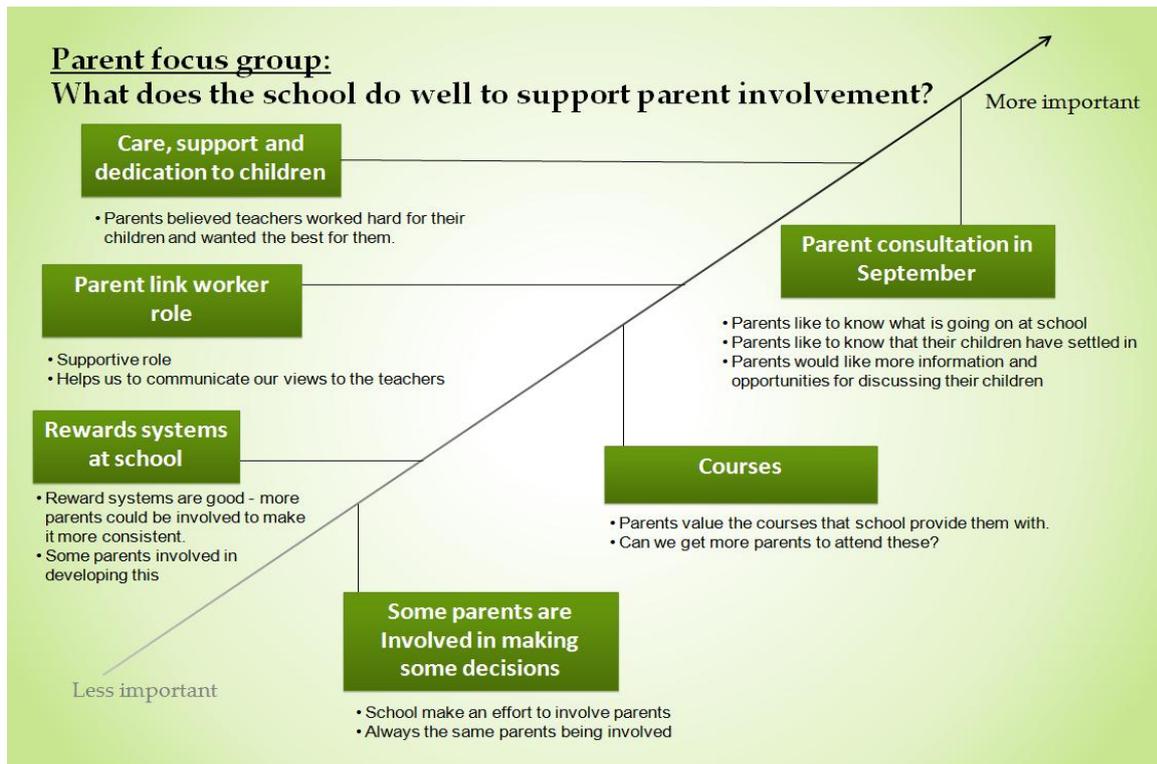


Figure 5: Diagrams that show parents' views of what is working well at school to involve parents and what school could do to develop parent involvement

Communication between home and school has been highlighted in previous studies exploring parents' views about home-school partnerships (e.g. Goodall & Harris, 2008; Crozier & Davis, 2007; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002), and the 'poster 2' voting activity, completed by approximately 17 people, suggested that there was agreement with the concepts from the focus group. Dialogue with voters suggested that they shared similar concerns about the areas for development with interpersonal communication and relationships, comprising the concept both most voted and agreed upon (see Appendix 5).

Following the focus group and parents evening activities I asked the women from the focus group if they would, as I had hoped, consider feeding back the diagrams and taking part in a problem-solving meeting with other parents and professionals. Whilst they felt it would be important for staff, particularly the head teacher, to be aware of the diagrams, they reported that they lacked the confidence to take part in a meeting with the head teacher and felt intimidated (Reay, 2004). It had been my hope that at this stage in the research project the parents would have felt increased confidence in their ideas to discuss areas that were working well and areas for development in school, but they were very clear that they wanted me to do this on their behalf. This raises questions relating to the idea of participation in action research and how far this may be possible when inequalities and power differences are perceived between groups of individuals within a school system (Vincent, 1996).

The validation activity at the parents evening ('poster 1') gave parents the opportunity to take part in the process in a way that was intended to be unthreatening, quick and interactive, and a larger group of parents that I observed to be engaged participated. This may have been due to the reduced demand on people's time and the absence of direct questioning. The approach was adopted by the head teacher in subsequent parent activities, but caution needs to be taken when conducting this kind of voting activity as it does not provide detailed information and may limit parents' voice if it is the only method of obtaining their views. At

the parents evening, there was an option to extend responses to the data on 'post-it' notes to ensure a forum for greater detail, shared with the head teacher at a later consultation meeting to back up and extend upon the fishbone concepts.

3.5.2 Teachers

In the 'poster 2' activity presenting feedback on the fishbone diagrams to teachers, seven staff members, out of a possible forty-five, participated by adding 'post-it' notes with comments and suggestions. Outcomes from the activity may be found in Appendix 6, and from the head teacher consultation meeting in Appendix 7. Initially, I aimed to engage teachers in a focus group activity to explore the parent data and obtain views about home-school partnerships but, due to the time constraints caused by teachers' lifestyles and timetables, it was decided that the research project needed to be realistic if teachers were to be able to engage.

Discussions with teachers and my informal observations in the staffroom suggested that displaying the posters for feedback was not the most effective means of communicating parents' views to staff. Staff were busy at the time with other priorities over the Christmas period. Those who did take part made positive contributions (see Appendix 6), suggesting that some may have felt optimistic about their work with parents and willing to learn about this area if additional time was available. Over the two weeks, I was not always present so could not have identified who had commented, making any follow-up challenging.

3.5.3 Head teachers

In this section I will refer to the learning of the PAR process based on the 'head teachers meeting' activity. I noted the actions discussed that could lead to change (see Appendix 7), allowing me to reflect these notes back to the parent link worker and head teachers to support them in setting an agenda for what the school might do next.

I wanted to gain further insight into discussions during the head teacher consultation meeting, as there appeared to be a genuine exploration of ideas at this time. I have presented key themes relating to the learning from this meeting that I developed using a visual mapping technique by Miles and Huberman (1994), and have provided examples and quotations to support claims to knowledge.

3.5.4 Communication space for professionals

The space that the PAR process created for the head teachers served to raise awareness of the importance of communication within the school. The head teachers witnessed the benefits of using the expertise of different individuals, well informed in a particular area of practice; during the initial scoping exercise parents had reported that lack of communication between professionals was a key area of concern and impacted on procedural and interpersonal communication between home and school.

During the head teacher consultation meeting I observed many questions from the head teacher directed at the parent link worker to obtain further knowledge of the school's parent community. An important outcome of the meeting was the 'dates for the diary sheet', a leaflet sent to parents about forthcoming events. The parent link worker later developed this idea in response to the focus group and discussions with parents about procedural communication and was a direct result of communication within the research project between this worker and the head teacher and received much positive feedback from parents not directly involved in the research project. Before the project started, the parent link worker's knowledge had not been fully used to benefit the school at a procedural level; contributing to the sheet had not been seen as her role. As a result of raised awareness of her expertise, regular meetings with the head teacher about parent engagement were scheduled. Interestingly, the head teacher later reported an interest in carrying out further research on

communication between professionals within the school and plans to use action research. Although difficult to evidence, this is another outcome of the action research process.

3.5.5 Concrete versus abstract ideas: procedure and artistry in learning

The head teacher reported that it might be difficult to respond and develop the 'interpersonal communication' and 'relationships' concepts presented on the fishbone diagram because, from the terms used, it was not clear what the school needed to do to improve. It would have been helpful if parents could tell the school how to change the interpersonal communication and relationships concerns, they felt, but agreed that separating communication into two concepts would make it more manageable to address. The head teacher welcomed clear suggestions made by the parents, for example to send out more letters to parents or having more parents' evenings. This made improving procedural communication a 'quick fix'. It was felt that these matters were 'concrete ideas' that could be implemented at a whole school level over a short period of time. By contrast, the 'interpersonal communication' and 'relationships' concepts might require change to individual reflective teacher practice, and generally interpersonal communication was interpreted as being a complex and more abstract idea, because of variation between teachers and parents, and depending on the context and the skill of the teacher. It was suggested by Head Teacher 1 that thinking about these complex ideas at an individual teacher level would be time consuming and that it was less clear to address:

If they were able to give us clarity in their terms like 'what do you mean by this?', don't worry about dressing it up or anything, if you just mean that it's a certain teacher not saying please and thank you that is something we can fix, like the diary letter going out, that's such a quick fix [pause] and it's not just about a quick fix, there is commitment behind it and an acknowledgment of what the parent wants... (Head Teacher 1)

The head teacher discussed how the school might support teaching staff to gain experience, to develop creativity or artistry (Eisner, 2002) and become more reflective in

their individual practice with parents. It was acknowledged that communication is complex and that professional adaptability would be required to develop communication and relationships with different parents. Ideas discussed included training and allocating more time to building both relationships with parents and teacher confidence in working with them. Time constraints on implementing these ideas were seen by Head Teacher 1 to be a significant barrier to improving communication and relationships.

The head teacher's 'quick fix' idea and preference for procedural learning opportunities might be explained by research concerning the different phases of learning and inquiry. Within a learning process there are different stages of knowledge development through which an individual passes in order to be more critically engaged with the research and co-learning process (Hall, 2009). Reflecting on their comments regarding 'quick fixes' and a preference for procedural communication, it could be the case that the head teacher's learning was currently in a position of procedural autonomy (Ecclestone, 2000, 2002); knowledge and skills acquired by a teacher, associated with training and instruction (Hall, 2009). However, the one hope for this meeting was that it would scaffold the learning of professionals about parent views so that it would support a move towards initiated learning (Stenhouse, 1975) and personal autonomy (Ecclestone, 2000, 2002) through participation in the research (Hall, 2009).

3.5.6 Teacher efficacy in response to parent link worker

The head teachers reflected on their understanding of the parent link worker role and its benefits for parents, and also on potential problems for teachers' practice with parents. Whilst they felt it was appropriate for parents to have an advocate in the school, there was concern that teachers' using the parent link worker to communicate with parents might result in a decrease in reciprocity:

It used to be that SEN [Special Educational Needs] was somebody else's responsibility. So children with SEN was the responsibility of teaching assistant [pause] and we've done an awful lot of work in both schools to make sure you need to know exactly what is going on with children with SEN. So is it that, parents are parent link workers' responsibility? So if there is an issue like, I don't really want to speak to them about their homework or I don't want to discuss this school with them, I'm going to use the excuse that Parent Link Worker 1 or Parent Link Worker 2 have a much better relationship with them than I have. So I am going to let them deal with those conversations and there they go. And what in fact is happening is that staff are becoming deskilled in their communications with parents. (Head Teacher 1)

This example shows Head Teacher 1 questioning teachers' use of the parent link worker to communicate with parents, asking about teachers' views of the parent link worker role. It was hypothesised by Head Teacher 1 that teachers might rely on the link and thus take fewer opportunities to develop their skills and confidence in building relationships. It was reported that many teachers in this school were newly qualified teachers, due to the challenging nature of the school, and that many teachers had little experience of working with parents of different life experiences and cultures. The head teacher discussed teacher training and asked about developing skills in communication with parents, believing that it is not a part of most courses and arguing that it could limit teachers' personal experiences and development. Head Teacher 1 reported that it would be beneficial for confidence if teachers experienced and managed conflict, built relationships and had time to adapt their interpersonal communication skills with parents in the school environment (Bandura, 1997).

It was recognised by Head Teacher 1 that support would be needed at school at a procedural and policy level in order for teachers to develop efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and agency in building effective partnership skills (Vincent, 1996; Chrispeels, 1996). However, they believed that there was a limit to the time and resources available to support these areas, given other priorities. The head teachers reported that feedback of this work to teachers would be important, that the manner of feeding back would need to be sensitive to their feelings of confidence, and expressed interest in the use of positive and solution-focused approaches to training and using successful case studies.

3.5.7 *Professionalism and authority: the home school difference*

Head Teacher 1 reported being aware of a ‘difference’ between home and school and that some parents might perceive members of school staff as authority figures (Vincent, 1996; Reay, 2004). In some cases, the head teacher believed this could lead to difficult relationships and communication between home and school:

No matter how we try and dress up or change it there is a difference between our professionals and the community and the relationships they have with some of the parents we have... something that is worthwhile looking at a bit more closely, is about some staff’s perceptions of parents and some parents’ perceptions of staff, and this idea of professionalism. Do all parents respect teachers as professionals? Or are there images of the teachers tinged by their own experiences and seeing teachers as an authority figure? On the other side are some of our professionals, there might be some professionals who patronise and look down on them... (Head Teacher 1)

Similarly, there were later discussions between the head teachers and the parent link worker about the importance of school staff maintaining a professional distance from parents and the community in order to protect professionalism and keep teachers safe, as professionals (Crozier, 1999).

In discussion, the two head teachers appeared to construct the word ‘professional’ differently to the word ‘authority’. Both believed that the separation of professional and parent was also an important factor in the profession, yet they stated that, for trust to develop between parent and teacher, school staff needed to be able to ‘put themselves in parents’ shoes’ and for them to learn skills of communication so that they ‘did not patronise parents’. There appeared to be some cognitive dissonance in these discussions. It was realised that parents could perceive school as authority, and they claimed that they wanted to address this power difference between school and home, yet they reported feeling hesitant about reducing the separation between professional and parents in relation to roles, knowledge and expertise about education processes that may keep teachers safe, as professionals. The head teacher provided an example about situations where they may have less formal relationships with

parents and then, later, their role requires them to become a professional authority figure, adhering to statutory child protection guidance to protect a child against harm.

3.6 Conclusions

This project was a consultation to draw together the views of different groups within a school system. It was a process of change and unfolded over time, leading to different problems, reflections and actions. The PAR process has supported members of staff at a school to reflect on the complexities of parent involvement, in response to parents' views. Several ideas emerged from the visual mapping exercise during the head teacher consultation meeting. My outsider role in this process was crucial in scaffolding communication and the participants' reflections.

Firstly, the idea of 'communication space for professionals' was a key insight and learning outcome during and following the process, which itself facilitated communication and reflective space for professionals and was particularly evident during the head teacher meeting. It refers to the increased awareness of head teachers of the importance of dialogue between professionals and the usefulness of the knowledge of other professionals for improving practice at a procedural level and for engaging in action research about this very issue.

The next idea of 'Concrete versus abstract ideas: procedure and artistry' appears significant. The head teachers reflected that they were able to respond to procedural communication issues more easily and that enhanced interpersonal communication and relationships would be a long-term goal, problematic in terms of time and the extent to which individual interactions between teacher and parent could be supported.

A third concept developed from the consultation was 'Teacher efficacy in response to parent link worker' about the role of the parent link worker and its use by teachers to replace

face to face communication with parents. It was the head teachers' hypothesis that its use in this way could deskill teachers and lead to a lack confidence in developing relationships.

Finally, the idea of 'Professionalism and authority: the home–school difference' developed, referring to the conflict between teachers as professionals and awareness that parents see professionals as authority. In this sense the head teachers reflected that they were aware of the difference between professionals and parents, yet may not be willing or able to reduce this difference, to maintain professional boundaries in cases where there are social care-related concerns.

The PAR process aimed to place parents in a leading role, determining the focus of the project and the issues to be addressed. Parents' views were authentically present using the focus group and fishbone methods, but in the later cycles parent representation is questionable, attributed by parents to their lack of confidence and feelings of intimidation when working with staff. Possible next steps could therefore be to explore how to foster confidence in a more leading role in communicating views. Work is also required to continue to collaborate with the school and develop the project so that the research insights are communicated and reiterated to the teachers, parent governors and Local Authority representatives. With support at a procedural and policy level, creating time and space may enable the school to develop this area further.

Implications for EP practice

This research project has highlighted several implications for EP practice that would benefit from being shared and developed through research and EP practice.

- The role of research in EP practice and the extent to which this may be possible within traded services work.

- The role of EP as school improver and consultant and the usefulness of the action research process as a tool to facilitate collaborative work and change.
- Traded services leading to an increased opportunity for EP's to work both as outsiders and insiders. This could may result in improved relationships and a greater understanding of school systems when facilitating change.

Appendix 1: Systematic review inclusion criteria

Participants	Parents/carers of children attending school parents of all nationalities and backgrounds included.
Social status	From areas of low socio-economic status. This must be clearly identified in methodology or rational section of papers.
Parent views	<p>Papers must include an aspect of parent voice/views of parents</p> <p>Views only relating to individual or others parents involvement in schools and factors influencing involvement.</p> <p>Examples given of views in papers (for example not responses to closed questionnaire questions)</p> <p>Papers included must not relate to views of the outcomes of parent involvement programs or interventions.</p> <p>Papers included must not relate to parental behaviours or observations in school.</p>
Parent involvement	Looking at aspects of involvement within and outside of school.
Setting	Home, school ideal - any location.

Rationale for including parent views

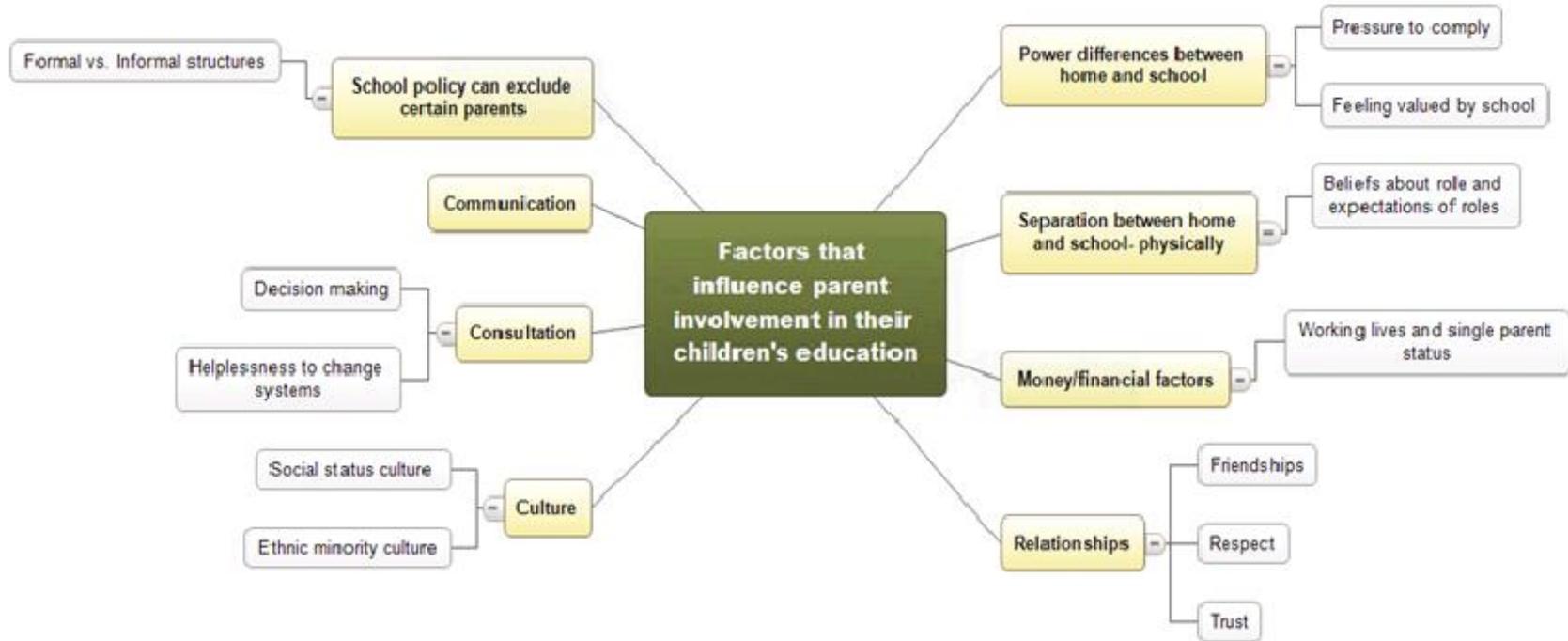
There is already a meta-analysis exploring quantitative information about parent involvement and achievement/outcomes of children. I was interested in parents' stories and perspectives rather than parents views fitting in to theories and models that already exist. This would be more interesting and useful from my research practitioners' perspective.

Appendix 2: Weight of evidence: Atkin et al. (2008) quality criteria (adapted from CAS quality assessment programme)

Question	Do parents know they matter? Engaging all parents in learning Goodall & Harris (2008)	Hard to reach parents or hard to reach schools? A discussion of home-school relations, with particular reference to Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents Crozier and Davies (2007)	Voices of parents and teachers in a poor white urban school O'Connor (2001)	Peripheral voices: Parental involvement, social class and educational disadvantage. Hanafin & Lynch (2002)	Is it a case of 'we know when we're not wanted? The parents' perspective on parent-teacher role and relationships. Crozier (1999)
Is this study qualitative research?	Mixed (however the questions regarding parent views of their involvement in school are qualitative data)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Are the research questions clearly stated?	Yes	Yes "why are schools hard to reach" rather than "why are parents hard to reach".	Yes "voices of parents on home school relationships" to explore the emergence of Lareau's (1987) notion of the "independence"	Question not clear from the introduction. Abstract suggests that it is interested in "working- class parents views of home-school links" and "The primary aim of the research was to give voice to parents on the periphery"	Investigating views of parents about their relationship with the child's secondary school.
Is a qualitative approach clearly justified?	Yes, Goodall and Harris state that, " a particular aim of the research project was to capture the views and voices of parents, students and teachers. The project explored the barriers to engagement ..."	Yes because they were interested in exploring views of parents on home-school relations.	Yes, looking for parent perceptions of home school relationships.	Yes- related back to literature and why we may need to seek parents' views.	No explicitly discussed in the paper, however fits what they are trying to achieve.
Is the approach appropriate for the	Yes- rich data is gathered on parent views of the	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

research question?	barriers to their involvement. Examples are provided in the text.				
Is the study context clearly described?	Yes	Yes- lots of information on context surrounding area the schools are situated.	Yes	Yes	Some context given, however little information on the school it collects sample from.
Is the sampling method clearly described?	Yes- parents involved were selected from schools the project were involved in.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not discussed
Is the sampling strategy appropriate for the research question?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Seems to come from a project within a school, assumed that this was appropriate for purpose.
Is the method of data collection appropriate for the research question?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes - taped "brain storming focus groups" and individual interviews (taped)	Yes- draws upon case studies, interviews data
Is the method of analysis clearly described?	It is clear that the data has been analysed however it is not made explicit what type of analysis is used. It could be inferred that they use thematic analysis from their findings.	Yes- grounded theory described and referenced	Paper talks about analysis but does not detail method of analysis. Paper refers to themes so inferences can be made that this was thematic analysis.	Paper appears to have sectioned findings into distinct areas of discussion. Examples are given under each heading. Method of analysis is not made explicit	Yes- grounded theory used
Is the analysis appropriate for the research question?	The analysis links to their research questions and conclusions.	Yes	If thematic analysis then yes	Possibly – findings are themed or organised in a way that draw the findings together.	Yes
Are the claims made supported by sufficient evidence?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Claims made tied to findings and refer back to existing literature.	Claims made refer back to data and existing literature

Appendix 3: Factors that influence parent involvement in their children's education



Appendix 4: Teacher information sheet (poster 2 activity) and ethic statement

What helps or hinders parent involvement?

Please feel free to add your views and ideas to the diagrams below!!

Ethics (please read)

Please note that if you do choose to comment on anything or add your ideas this will confirm that you have read the information below and that you are consenting to participate in the research. No names need to be given and it will be completely anonymous. If at any point you would like to withdraw your comments please inform me of this in person or by contacting me on the number below.

Information

Having worked with School over the last academic year I can see that you value and prioritise parents' contributions and that as a school you believe that working with parents is essential in order to improve outcomes for children.

As part of my doctoral research (using action research) I have hoped to make a further contribution to your good work by collaborating with parents and exploring their views about their involvement in school. I have conducted interviews and a focus group so far. The focus group explored what parents believed School already do very well to involve parents. We have also explored what parents believe could be developed further. Due to a small number of parents attending this group I then took the parents ideas out into the foyer at the parent consultation evening to validate the data with a larger sample of parents.

Please take a moment to look at the fishbone diagrams on the notice board. This data was analysed and ranked by the parents. The concepts at the top of the fish bone were considered the most important factors in our discussions.

As part of the action research processes the next steps will now be to feedback these findings to all members of staff at school to gain your views about the findings and to give you an opportunity to contribute and collaborate further ideas to the diagrams. This may even be a good way of starting a conversation about parent involvement amongst staff.

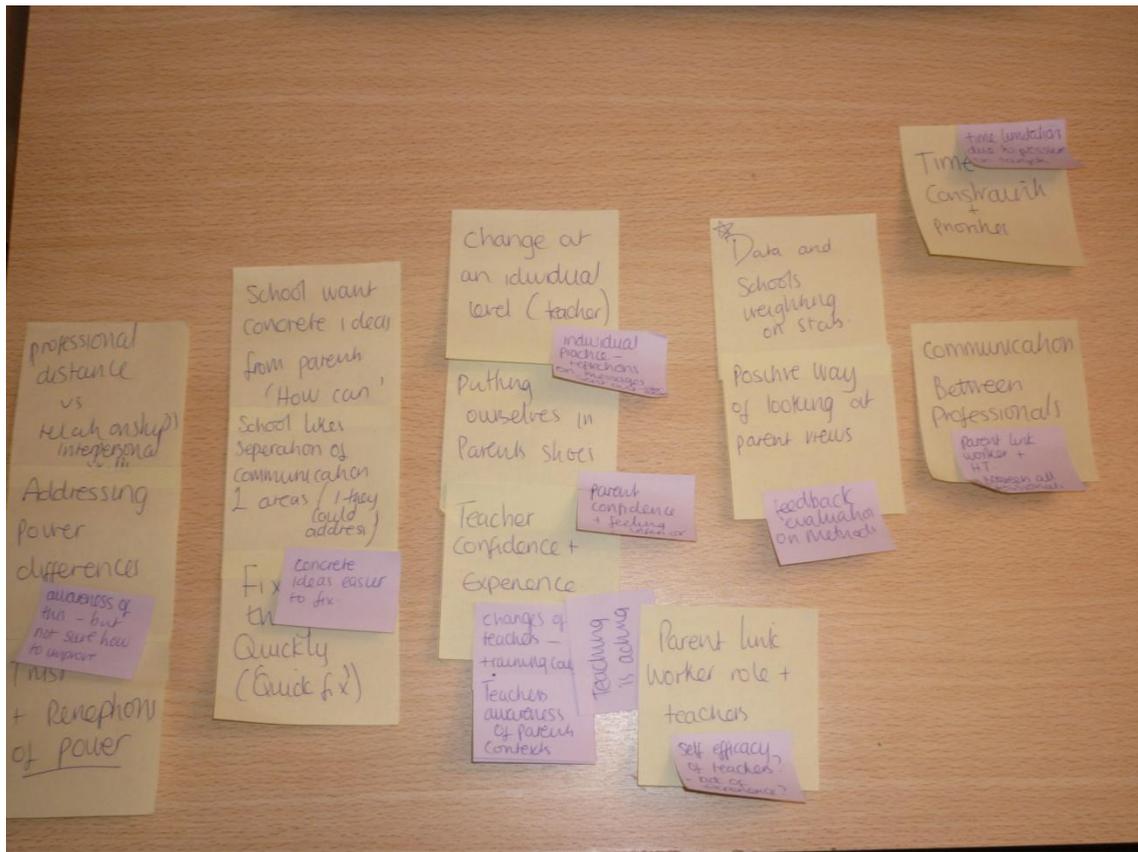
The next step will involve working with management in the school to look at the data and identify if there are any whole school matters to consider and work on.

Please feel free to write on these diagrams with any views or further points to add. Pens and 'post it' notes have also been provided below.

If you would like to discuss this with me further please let me know either in school time or alternatively I can be contact at the EP service on [telephone number].

Many thanks, Anna Lascelles (Trainee Educational Psychologist)

Appendix 5: Visual mapping analysis technique



Appendix 6: Outcome from poster 1 – concepts and responses

Concepts What does the school do to support parent involvement? (What works?)	Stickers Yellow: Agree with concept Red: Disagree with concept	Concepts What are the current areas for development for the school to support parent involvement? (What could be improved?)	Stickers Yellow: Agree with concept Red: Disagree with concept
Parent consultation meetings (December)	6 Yellow 2 Red	Procedural communication	15 Yellow
Care, dedication and support to children	10 Yellow	Interpersonal communication	17 Yellow
Parent link worker role	15 Yellow	Relationships	17 Yellow 1 Red
Courses	6 Yellow 1 Red	Involving parents from other cultures and backgrounds	12 Yellow
Rewards systems at school	10 Yellow		
Some parents involved in making decisions	10 Yellow 1 Red		

Appendix 7: Outcome from poster 2 –Teachers comments on ‘post-it’ notes

‘Post-it’ note	Comments
1	Providing more structured opportunities at the end of the day to approach teachers.
2	Suggesting alternative ways of communicating such as a text message system.
3	Providing a soft opening to provide more opportunities for parents to talk to staff.
4	Having more interpreters throughout the year.
5	Running a parent–teacher group.
6	Questionnaire to find out what course parents would like
7	Parent text messaging service

Appendix 8: Questions and proposed next steps and actions

	Questions
a.	How can we change?
b.	What concrete examples do parents have that school can change? What do they want?
c.	Why do some parents not attend events at school?
d.	How can we address any power differences between home and school?
e.	What are staff and parents perceptions of their roles? In what way are these influenced by previous experiences?
f.	What is engagement? Are there different levels of engagement?
g.	How can we put ourselves in parent's positions?
h.	Are teachers relying on parent link workers to communicate with parents too often?
i.	How can we make our involvement procedures and information gathering more interactive and democratic?

	Next steps and actions
a.	Parent link workers to collect feedback from parents with half-term feedback to head teachers to contribute to development of monthly dates for the diary sheet
b.	Feedback findings in more detail to teachers in a staff meeting
g.	Continue with dates for the diary sheet in response to parents' feedback in the research
d.	To define the different levels of engagement as a whole school in order to measure impact of involvement strategies and resources
e.	Parent suggestion box to be trialled - possible use of blog on the internet
f.	Comparative study at partner school- to be led by parent link workers
g.	To find out staff perceptions and parent perception about roles
h.	Training and development opportunities- using case studies to encouraging reflective practice
i.	School will aim to provide up to date lists of parents' surnames - want parents to be given same respect as teachers. Some letters to be more personalised with names used
j.	To gain teachers' views of how they might use additional time to work with parents.

Appendix 9: Information sheet – start of action research process

How can action research help parents and school to work together?

I am interested in promoting the engagement of parents with school by undertaking a process called 'Action Research'. Action research is a method that allows individuals who take part in the research to play an active role in contributing to the research over a period of time. The purpose of this research is to look at what helps or hinders home-school relationships and what the role of action research can be supporting this. As a Trainee Educational Psychologist I will be interested to explore how an Educational Psychologist can help support home school relationships. I am particularly interested to see how action research can be used to develop better relationships and communication between home and school.

In order to better understand what helps and hinders home-school communication I will be interviewing parents and teachers in small groups and also collecting views using a questionnaire. All the information will be gathered, analysed, fed back to participants and together we will develop further questions and actions as we work together. I may also require you to complete a questionnaire to gain further views.

To allow the findings to be analysed conversations and discussions will need to be recorded. The notes and descriptions will be kept anonymous and in a safe location and then destroyed when the research is complete in July 2012.

I hope you feel quite at ease during any interviews you agree to take part in. This research is voluntary and you will have the right to withdraw from this process or decline to answer questions at any time without giving a reason.

The final information and development of the findings will be used to contribute to my doctoral research project. This requires me to write a 5000 word research report. All the information will be kept completely anonymous.

If you have any further question please do not hesitate to contact me either at school or in the on [telephone number]. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Anna Lascelles

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Appendix 10: Consent form**How can action research help parents and school to work together?****CONSENT FORM****Researcher: Anna Lascelles (Trainee Educational Psychologist)****Please initial box**

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. I agree to take part in the above study. | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Please tick box

- | | Yes | No |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 4. I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being audio recorded | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being video recorded | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

 Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Appendix 11: Information slips – parents taking part in poster 1 validation activity

How can action research help school and parents work together?

(What does school do well to involve parents in school?)

(What are the current areas of development for the involvement of parents at school?)

I want to find out how parent involvement in school could be improved at School as part of my doctoral research project. I carried out a parent focus group earlier in the year and we came up with some ideas to feedback to the school. Before this is fed back to members of staff I am hoping to gain the views of more parents to make sure that I am representing as many people as possible.

The findings from the poster you looked at and from your input today will be displayed in the staffroom in school so that teachers can learn more about parent views of the school. The teachers will have a chance to contribute to this information too. Finally I will take this to a meeting with the management of the school to discuss which ideas School could develop further. I am hoping that School will be able to feedback the outcome of any decisions at a later date.

You have agreed to take part in the research, by placing coloured stickers on ideas that you agree or disagree. You may have chosen to add more to the poster. Therefore you have consented to be part of the research project. I will be using this information to write up my project at university and all information will be kept anonymous. If you wish to withdraw your contribution or ask any questions, please feel free to contact me on [telephone number] or email me [email address]

Many thanks for your support,

Anna Lascelles (Trainee Educational Psychologist)

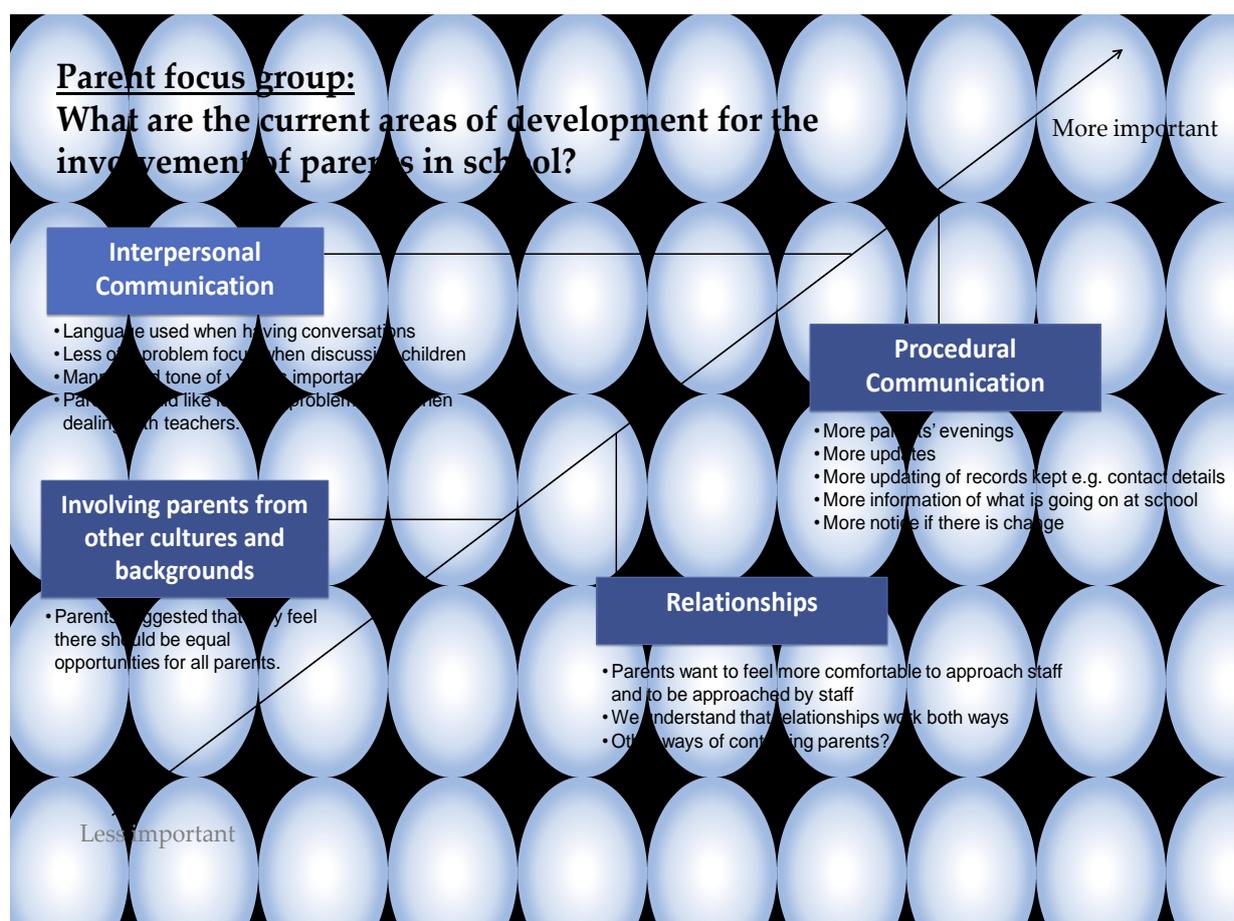
Appendix 12: Parent feedback letter from school

Dear parents,

We have been working on a research project with our trainee educational psychologist to explore parent views about home school engagement and parent involvement in their children's education. We carried out this activity because we are committed to listening to your views and working towards making changes. The aim of the project was to make additional time to think about we work with parents and how we can improve this. You may have noticed some changes recently (our 'dates for the diary' parent communication sheet and after school club).

A small group of parents took part in a group activity and following this we shared these ideas in a parent consultation event for parents to vote on the ideas they felt were the most important.

The parents had many positive things to say about school. The parents identified key areas for our school's development to help us improve:



All but one parent agreed with the areas for development. Following this, the posters were placed on the staff room so that the teachers could see your views and respond to them. They also had a chance to add 'post it' notes with suggestions about how the school could adapt to work towards some of these ideas.

The head teachers, your parent link worker and the trainee educational psychologist recently had a meeting as part of the research process to discuss these posters and to take time to think as a school about how we could respond to some of your concerns and areas for development.

The meeting was really helpful and interesting and your views helped us to develop the following plan of action:



Your feedback is important so please let us know your thoughts or ideas. You can contact parent link workers (parent link workers' names) or to (head teacher's name). We will continue to review these actions and develop them.

Thank you for your input and support,

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