

**‘You want the best for your kids’: Improving Educational Outcomes for Children living  
in Poverty through Parental Engagement**

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## **Abstract**

*Background:* Existing evidence suggests a relationship between family social contexts, family relationships and interactions, children's social and cognitive development and educational outcomes. Interventions that support families in relation to parenting and supporting children's development can have positive effects on both parents' skills and the educational progress of their children.

*Purpose:* This article reports on a study conducted in an area with high levels of social and economic deprivation in Scotland, which aimed to investigate the nature and effectiveness of the services in place to support poor families. The project focused on capturing the experiences of parents and what they perceived as effective support from the nursery and school staff in terms of getting them more involved in their children's learning.

*Sample:* There was a particular focus on the 4 to 7 years age group, thus covering the crucial transition from pre-school (or non-school) provision to primary school. A sample of three Early Education & Childcare Centres (EECCs) and three schools were selected. The schools and EECCs were all from areas of high social deprivation and had a high proportion of children on free school meals.

*Design and methods:* The study was qualitative in design and included in-depth semi-structured interviews with 19 service managers and practitioners, 6 focus groups with parents and 6 activity groups with children. Data were analysed using both pre-determined and emerging codes.

*Results:* While all parents recognised the value of education for their children's social mobility and opportunities and were keen to engage in activities, they remained aware of the limited resources they could draw upon, mainly in terms of their restricted academic competencies, specialist knowledge and qualifications. The desire to help their children overcome their families' economic circumstances was also hampered by the absence of strong social and kinship networks that they could draw upon.

*Conclusions:* We draw on concepts of social and cultural capital to examine parents' positioning in relation to their children's education. The conclusion highlights parents' strategic orientation to school/nurseries, often seen as a resource of cultural capital, and calls for a more positive discourse of parental engagement in relation to disadvantaged groups.

**Keywords** Parental engagement, home-school links, family poverty, social and cultural capital, hard to reach parents

## **Introduction**

### ***The discourse of parental engagement***

While politicians have had a long standing concern for families, recent years have seen a considerable focus in the UK on parenting issues as a key area for policy interventions. Starting with the New Labour government in the 1990s, and continuing with the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, the focus on parents' role in children's development and the idea that families need 'support' to be successful at parenting are underlined by assumptions of deficiency among socially disadvantaged families. This 'deficit view', according to some authors, "pathologises" the working classes and places responsibility for educational disadvantage on individuals (Ball, 2008; Reay, 2009). Claims of unhealthy values and lifestyles among the poorest which lock families in permanent disadvantage over generations have been proven unfounded, as research has highlighted the role of multiple structural factors as opposed to cultural or attitudinal factors (Shildrick *et al.*, 2012). Regardless of the evidence, the focus on the conduct of parents is currently taken forward by the Conservative-LibDem coalition government, with a clear emphasis on moral regulation and on tackling the perceived malaise in parenting, often blamed for a range of social ills, from children's low achievement to lack of community involvement and crime. The current New Approach to Child Poverty (2011) clearly frames the interventions planned through a close focus on parents' actions:

Addressing the root causes of poverty and not just the symptoms means recognising the importance of the context in which a child is raised, alongside factors including education and income. That is why we are committed to supporting strong families. We also know that effective parenting is critical to enabling children to flourish. As part of this Government's drive to make our society more family-friendly, this strategy also sets out how we will enhance relationship and parenting support. (DWP, 2011: 8)

In this policy context, parental involvement has become a 'catch-all' term (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003), encapsulating a wide range of activities in which parents are expected engage. Epstein (2011) suggests that the term should be replaced with 'school, family and community partnership', as it emphasizes a more shared responsibility for children's learning. Goodall and Motgomery (2013) propose the term 'parental engagement', as 'involvement' may suggest the taking part in an activity, without the sense of commitment and ownership. Parental engagement is thus a multi-faceted concept, and although it tends to imply an undifferential parental voice, in practice, two distinct strands can be identified (Hanafin and

Lynch, 2002), mapped on the policy discourse outlined above. One of these is clearly directed at working-class parents, comprising interventions such as Sure Start, home-school community links and early school-leaving interventions, based on a cultural deficit model, which explains educational failure as a result of parenting styles and family circumstances, despite evidence showing that parenting is not always the source of a child's difficulties (Scott *et al.*, 2006). This discourse of 'hard to reach families' often implies a sense of inadequacy, with little opportunities for genuine parental participation and dialogue. By contrast, the other strand aims to involve parents in initiatives such as parents' councils and fundraising, activities with high visibility, easier to measure, but without proven impact on children's learning (Mackenzie, 2010); evidence also suggests that in relation to these, white middle-class mothers are most involved and most visible. A small group of 'elite participationists' (Vincent and Martin, 2002), who often do not connect with the wider parent body, make parental engagement 'less of a protective barrier than a lever to maximise the potential of the already disadvantaged' (Halgarten, 2000:18).

It is thus clear that area-based and targeted approaches to parental engagement and discourses around some parents (usually the middle classes) positioned as 'competent' and others (usually the working classes) positioned as 'incompetent' and 'in need of help' reinforce the existing educational inequalities around class, gender and ethnicity (Crozier and Reay, 2005; Gorard and Beng, 2013). Gewirtz (2001) has shown how policies aimed at tackling social disadvantage are attempts to impose middle class values and approaches, such as active consumerism in education, parental obligations in relation to home-based learning and the fostering of social connections and engagement in activities. For parents in more disadvantaged areas, the complex structural factors which push them into disadvantage in the first place and the messages based on middle-class values and aspirations create considerable difficulties in meeting the demands of schools and asserting a voice for their children, while also protecting their families' private space (McCarthy and Kirkpatrick, 2005).

### ***Parental engagement and early years***

Much of the literature emphasises the key role of parents' engagement in their children's learning and development in the early years. Parental engagement has been identified as key factors in children's achievement and their attainment of educational outcomes (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). Research has highlighted how early engagement of parents has benefits for children's long-term positive engagement in learning

and the importance of parents' attitudes and behaviours (Sacker *et al.*, 2002) in relation to children's attendance and better behaviour (Harris and Goodall, 2008), higher maths and reading results (Sylva *et al.*, 2008) and children's overall satisfaction with school.

Research on the impact of parental engagement on children's achievement and development remains, however, complex, due to the many factors which influence children's educational outcomes and well-being. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study (Sylva *et al.*, 2007, 2008) highlighted the importance of both the home learning environment and the mother's academic qualifications in influencing children's social and academic outcomes. The home learning environment is seen as supportive where parents take part in learning activities with their children, such as reading together, playing with letters and numbers, taking children to the library, painting and drawing, teaching the children nursery rhymes and songs, and arranging for children to play with friends at home. The study showed that children with 'poor' home learning environments were disadvantaged on cognitive scores on entry to pre-school at age 3 and remained disadvantaged at later stages of schooling. Feinstein's study (2003), which included thousands of British children who were tested at four ages (22, 42, 60 and 120 months old), provided clear evidence that by the age of 22 months, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds were already behind their peers in terms of language, social and emotional development. Social class at birth remains, thus, a reliable indicator of the educational input that children will receive throughout their childhood. This achievement gap is a major factor in perpetuating the social divide and the patterns of social mobility across society. MacQueen *et al.* (2007) indicate in a review that evidence on 'what works' with young children is limited, though the 'caregiver environment' is important in predicting difficulties at school entry and so is a major theme for interventions:

evidence suggests that 'pick up' mechanisms through health visiting practice, pre-school provision and at entry to primary school provide structural opportunities to address disadvantage and difficulty through universal and targeted means without stigmatising children (p. 24).

Studies suggest that pre-school settings have an important role in promoting positive home learning environments, with the potential for raising achievement and improving social and behavioural development later on at school. As family economic status remains a strong predictor of children's school outcomes from an early age, with strong and long-lasting effects on children's later achievement, it would be tempting to conclude that parents in disadvantaged areas simply need to be shown what the middle classes do and convinced of

the value of adopting middle class approaches. An in-depth analysis, however, suggests though that the nature of parents' barriers to engagement is more complex, and although disadvantaged parents might have the will and understanding of the need to do so, they lack the confidence, the capacity and the resources that the middle class parents have (Peters *et al.*, 2007).

### ***Capitals, social positioning and poor parents' barriers to engagement***

A growing body of literature on home-school relations shows that the parents who find it most difficult to be involved in their children's education are white working class and ethnic minority parents (Crozier and Reay, 2005; Kim, 2009; Dotson-Blake, 2010). Factors linked to poverty, such as crowded housing, unemployment, limited access to transport and cultural resources, illness and isolation, make parenting far harder and more stressful and affect considerably the parent-child interactions (Ghate and Hazel, 2002). Drawing on theories of civic engagement and political participation, theories of social and cultural capitals have been used to examine the processes of social integration and how tight kinship and bridging social networks have led to positive outcomes for children (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000; Coleman, 1997). Parental engagement, as shown above, is clearly classed and gendered, and parents differ greatly in terms of their access to forms of material, social and cultural capital. Central to the role of capital in children's opportunities for educational success are issues of power and also the exchange value that their families' capitals possess. In relation to education, cultural capital (Reay, 2005) is particularly valuable, as parents' ways of thinking about education, values and attitudes, as well as their own academic qualifications and experiences, will be given a certain recognition by schools. This will also influence the degree to which parents feel comfortable with the schools' interventions and confident to challenge or influence provision (Peters *et al.*, 2007).

The growing interest in promoting closer links with the children's families and increased home-school links, driven by the emphasis on family policies discussed above, has seen an increase in 'family learning', which involves planned activities through which children and parents learn together. Such initiatives include literacy and health-promotion initiatives, parenting activities such as cooking classes, sports events for families, activities parents do at home based on school materials etc. The purpose of these is to develop a culture of schools as spaces for family learning (Mackenzie, 2010), with a key aim to support children and families at risk. There is evidence that these initiatives can work well, provided that the interventions

are tailored to the families' needs (Scott *et al.*, 2006). However, these initiatives show a clear 'curricularization' of family interactions, and put even more pressure on poorer parents to comply to the school-defined priorities for children's learning and middle class values, placing middle-class children at clear advantage.

Bourdieu (1989) has emphasised the role of agency within social structures and how this is manifested differently in different fields; in the field of education, parents as agents are positioned in relation to how valued is the capital they have access to by those in positions of power. This means that perceptions of difference across social groupings ('affluent, middle class' versus 'poor, working class') position children and their parents in contrasting places, with the 'field' of their interaction with services as being one of a constant struggle for recognition and influence. Ghate and Hazel (2002) showed that poorer parents often perceive services as patronising and as trying to control their personal lives. This struggle poses further challenges for parents in terms of recognition, identity and belonging, which is often transferred to their children, and gives rise to differences in the way in which middle class and working class children value school. Social class is thus a key determinant of how the school structures and parents' agency collide, as questions such as 'What kind of parent am I?' (identity) and 'What do I want for my children's education?' (agency) are challenged by their experiences of engaging with formal services: 'How am I valued and seen by the system?' (structure) and 'How powerful am I in influencing structures?' (agency).

While the review of evidence highlights the important role of parental engagement on children's educational achievement and development, we still need to know more about the ways in which parental engagement can be facilitated across social groups and in a manner that does not alienate parents whose values are not in obvious alignment with the school values. We do not know enough yet about the best approaches to designing interventions that work with different groups of parents and in a variety of settings. Creating such knowledge requires, in our view, a more in-depth approach to exploring parents' views of engagement. This paper seeks to explore these issues. It looks at the forms of capital that parents in one disadvantaged area in Scotland drew upon in order to negotiate their engagement with their children's education and their views of the approaches to engagement that were advocated by the education settings.

## **Focus of the study**

The purpose of the study on which this paper is based was to review provision in relation to home-school links in one Scottish local authority, with a specific focus on initiatives aimed at disadvantaged families, and to identify opportunities for further interventions. The study aimed to consult with a wide range of participants, from service providers to parents and children, in order to establish the range of views and opinions on what can be done to improve service provision. It also aimed to examine the factors that contribute to successful outcomes in such initiatives. While findings from the larger study were discussed more extensively in a report which recommended further policy and practice initiatives in the local authority (Sime *et al.*, 2009), the focus on this paper is on parents' expressed views and experiences in relation to their opportunities for parental engagement.

## ***Context of the area selected for the research***

Scotland is a small country, with a population of over 5 million, divided into 32 local authorities. At local authority level, Work and Child Tax credit data from the Department of Work and Pensions is used to indicate levels of poverty. According to this data, at the time of the study, around 11,000 families in the local authority were in receipt of child and working tax credits, which was around 19% of the population in the authority. Around 55% of the children were considered 'poor', with about 1,850 children living in households with someone in work, but a household income below 60% of the national median income, and about 4,800 children living in households with no one in work.

The *Scottish Indicators of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)* is a tool for identifying area concentrations of multiple deprivation, which relies on data from 7 domains: income, employment, education, health, access to services, crime and housing. Based on this, Scotland is divided into 6505 data zones, each with a population of under 1000. SIMD data were used to identify 13 data zones for the research. The key indicator chosen to illustrate levels of deprivation in the area was the percentage of the total population who were income deprived. The data zones in which the research was conducted were in the top 20% most deprived in the whole country.

## ***Data collection and analysis***

To map out service provision, key informants were identified first, in order to include service managers and practitioners from education, social work, health and psychological services. In

total, 9 service managers and 4 practitioners involved in delivering services in the 13 data zones were interviewed in face-to-face sessions. Next, 3 primary schools and 3 associated Early Education & Childcare Centres (EECCs) were identified. Data were collected through multiple visits to each setting and included: observations of activities involving children and their parents; interviews with the head/head teacher of each of the EECC/school; one focus group with practitioners in each EECCs/school recruited (20 practitioners in total); one focus group with parents in each EECC/school recruited (25 parents in total); and one activity group with selected children in each EECC/school (26 children in total).

Parents were given information on the rationale for the research, through an accessible information sheet and were asked to sign a consent sheet in advance, if interested in taking part. The information sheet also highlighted the funder of the research (Save the Children, Scotland) and the fact that the research was carried out by university researchers independent of the local services parents were involved with and had approval of the researchers' University Ethics Committee. We also emphasised the participants' right to refuse to answer any of the questions during the focus groups or withdraw participation at any time. During the focus groups with parents, we were aware of the potentially sensitive nature of the topic and did not ask questions that could have made parents feel uncomfortable. Given the local nature of the study, we were also careful not to discuss findings from one setting with participants from other settings, nor did we discuss the comments of parents with staff. Gift vouchers were given to participating parents as a 'thank you' token at the end and all families received a set of children's books. During the field work and in reporting the findings, care was taken to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of all respondents. When reporting the findings, we have anonymised the responses and removed references to places, organisations and names codes to protect confidentiality of all informants.

During the parents' focus groups, themes for discussion included: perceptions of home-school link initiative(s) that parent was involved in, expectations and benefits of engagement for them and the child, participation in decision-making processes at EECC/school level, issues concerning transition, and suggestions for future activities that would benefit parents in the area. All parents were known to staff to be living on a low income or qualified for free school meals. Out of the 25 taking part, 22 were women; the majority were working in part-time jobs or not working, and had families with multiple challenges, including unemployment, illness, absent partner, addiction, disability and health problems.

We used an inductive analysis approach to analyse the data. Interviews were recorded,

transcribed verbatim and analysed using a grid analysis approach, and thematic coding and retrieving methods (Huberman and Miles, 1994). Following an initial reading of the transcripts, an overview thematic grid was produced to map out the descriptive summaries of the issues emerging. Relevant sections of the data from transcripts were then assigned appropriate thematic codes and refined sub-categories emerged and were allocated to text in the transcripts. This enabled us to identify a range of common key themes and patterns and consistencies among themes. In the second stage, the categories were organised through diagrams of codes, to allow for combinations into broader thematic units by combining two or more similar categories through a process of reduction and generalisation. An NVivo 7 package was used to facilitate the process of organising and classifying the data, ensuring that the analysis was both systematic and embedded directly in the observations made and the participants' views. Interview transcripts were coded separately by two researchers and an agreement level of 90%+ was considered as acceptable.

## **Findings**

As mentioned above, the project aimed to assess the value of the initiatives in place in one local authority in relation to home-school partnerships, as perceived by parents in some of the most deprived areas. The findings presented here rely mainly on the data elicited from the focus groups with parents and are presented under four themes, namely parents' attitudes to engagement, barriers and enablers to parents' engagement, parents' views of effective initiatives and the role of wider family and community in supporting parental engagement. We have included views from parents from both the early years and the school settings, as research shows a shift in the quality and quantity of parental engagement after transition (Boethel, 2004).

### ***Parents' attitudes to engagement in deprived areas***

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study (Sylva *et al.*, 2007) highlighted the importance of both the home learning environment and the mother's level of qualification as the strongest predictors of children's school success. As none of the parents involved in our study had high qualifications, it was important for us to assess their attitudes to engagement and the value they placed on their children's education. Parents we spoke to indicated that, despite their own low levels of education, they were looking for the best opportunities for their children. They valued and saw education as key to enabling their children to move beyond their present circumstances and many were aware of the importance

of their engagement for children's positive attitude to learning:

You need to get involved, that's why you are a parent, you can't just sit and let the teachers do all the work. That's the only way for the kids to do better, seeing that you value their education. (Mother, Primary school)

They [children] see you turn up and they take pride in that, it motivates them to do better, especially if they see that you learn as well. (Father, Primary school)

Overall, parents seemed to have high expectations of their children and showed instrumental attitudes towards education, which was often seen as a 'way out' of their families' current situation:

You want the best for your kids, I want better for ma [my] kids, better than I had for masel [myself]. I'm doon [down] here all the time. I think am a bit too pushy sometimes with the kids and am always doon here [at school]. (Mother, Primary school)

One of the service managers explained how EECCs and schools were aware of the parents' often negative educational experiences and how issues of class would sometimes get in the way of parents' confidence in getting involved:

Often, parents' own experience of education has been poor. They may feel bad because they are not middle class and the teachers are middle class, although many teachers are able to overcome that, through, for example, weekly meetings and making themselves available for parents. A mum said once to a deputy teacher: 'You are actually quite human'. It's hard in a school to make them belong. (Education service manager)

As a key site for the transmission of values towards education through the habitus (Bourdieu, 1986), family life is clearly the backdrop for children in terms of their attitudes to education and time they give to learning activities. There were clear limitations identified by parents in terms of cultural, social and economic resources they had access to for translating their generally positive views on the importance of education into practice. Consistent among parents interviewed was a view that, with limited educational qualifications or resources outwith the local area, their ability to support their children's learning was limited. In this sense, one mother shared her anxiety at not being able to do more:

My son won't tell me what they learn at school, so you can't help much at home, and there is no one in my family who has done well at school, so I worry I'm not helping him enough. That's why speaking to the teacher or seeing what's going on at school is good, you can help them more at home, but I'm not always confident to ask. (Mother, Primary school)

The evidence presented here is consistent with previous research (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010;

Koshy *et al.*, 2013) which has reported poor parents' high educational aspirations for their children, but also a sense of inadequacy and low confidence in terms of knowledge and skills to help them learn. These barriers to parents' engagement, as well as some of the enablers they talked about, will be discussed next.

### ***Barriers and enablers for parents- generating cultural capital***

Living in severe deprivation meant that, for many of the parents, the pursuit of educational activities was hindered by other pressures. Finding ways to respond to the day to day needs of their children, feeding, clothing, supporting their children's development, were a constant worry and challenge. Parents talked about how they dealt with some of these challenges such as shopping in budget stores and trying to find worthwhile activities that required little or no financial outlay:

Where I live, it's basically the garbage dump for all the people that they [the Council] don't want to put in decent houses. I try to do like loads of different things with them [the children], but don't have much time and don't get out much. We've got Play Dough and paints and different things if we can't get out. (Mother, Primary school)

My kids know that we can't afford many things out, 'cause feeding them is my main priority. If it's a good day, you probably just let them out to play with their toys or something like that or take them to the park...Sunday morning, we'll go to the pictures for the 11 o'clock showing, 'cause it's a pound. It's older films, like Space Chimps and stuff... But we've not been to that for ages. (Mother, Early years).

In line with the findings presented in the section above, Reay's study (2005) also showed how many of the mothers affected by poverty lacked financial resources, confidence and educational knowledge to fully participate in decisions about their children's education. Parents' own experiences of schooling and cultural capital condition their engagement in children's learning. Some of the parents in our study also indicated that they needed support, due to their own lack of experience or poor educational attainment:

See 'cause I've got the four weans and am young, I've not quite developed yet and am finding it hard wi' a' the weans [Scottish for 'children']. (Mother, Early years group)

I cannae [can't] read and write, I don't know ma A,B, Cs, so I can't help my boy with reading and writing (Mother, Early years)

See, trying to get the weans to do homework it's really hard, so I would like to know how I could help them with their homework at that time. (Mother, Primary school)

Parents felt valued whenever they were consulted over issues to do with their children, not

told what to do, and given credit for small successes, like improved behaviour or reading skills. Some commented that knowing that they had made a difference in their children's education at an early age had encouraged them to take a greater interest in their children's learning and development. This also made them realise that they could work closely with education staff:

See, when they [the staff] show you what to do, and you do it, and then they see a difference in the child, they tell you, well done, and you feel proud of yourself, you feel, I can do this. (Mother, Primary school)

Positive relationships with the school staff are important resources of cultural capital, as they facilitate parents' access to knowledge about the demands on children, as well as ways of empowering parents to support their children. Parents valued good relationships with the staff and some spoke of how these have enabled them to tackle serious and personal issues, such as their own literacy issues, addiction or domestic violence. In one school, parents said they were more comfortable getting involved, as the staff were aware of their literacy concerns and were supporting the parents as much as the children:

The school helps us – it interacts with us as parents. The teachers do the reading with the parents and the children. I'm learning as ma' kids are learning. And if I cannae deal with it, I come to the school and I say, can you help me? Even if it's not stuff to do with the learning. (Mother, Primary school)

There is a clear implication in the statements above that supporting parents to get involved in their children's education requires more innovative approaches and the direct involvement of parents in shaping the nature of provision. Parents indicated that more direct help with supporting their children's learning would be beneficial and they valued activities which helped them become familiar with the school curriculum and clarified how exactly they could help their children. This created an open and interactive environment, where parents' previous negative experiences of school were challenged. Although class differences were not explicitly mentioned, as parents rarely spoke about their social class identities, they knew that their education had limited exchange value in the school and that they had to reposition themselves as 'learners'. One parent describes the 'curriculum evening' at the school:

Everybody went in and all the teachers got a shot of speaking about the stuff children learning. Loads of English and Math and stuff but aye, loads of physical stuff as well. And then after that you get a chance to try things, you were learning yourself'. (Mother, Early years)

Parents saw their participation in school activities as the only way of increasing their

knowledge about children's learning, which could be seen as a strategic and pragmatic approach to consolidate their social position and gave them an 'insider' knowledge on how the teaching is done. They indicated that they would welcome more information and greater knowledge on how to engage their children in meaningful learning experiences:

I don't know what they are learning every day. ...I would like a wee [little] book with the curriculum and that so I would know what was being taught, but I'm not sure that they [the nursery] would do that? I know they've got a curriculum, but I'd like to see how they do it, how they teach it, so I can do that at home. (Mother, Early years)

### ***What parents see as effective initiatives***

One of the schools provided an effective example of how the school worked with a group of parents who needed parenting support, by facilitating a parenting programme. Some parents had approached the head teacher, asking for a 'course'. They were described as:

.... a group of parents very lacking in self-esteem, very much blaming themselves for things their children were doing, very critical of themselves, and worrying they had damaged their children for evermore and not sure how they would cope, not sure how to turn themselves around and help their children. (Headteacher, Primary School)

Through the programme, delivered by social workers and a learning assistant known to the parents, parents got ideas of what they could do differently in terms of managing their children's behaviour and supporting their learning. The initiative was seen as a great success by both parents and service providers, mainly due to the perceived ownership of the programme by the parents, made possible by the supportive ethos of the school:

The thing was, I hated social work and I thought they were out to get me and take away my kids. But doing this programme and speaking with the other mothers, I realised that they were only there to help. It can only get better, it cannae get worse. (Mother, Primary school group)

Strong group relationships developed, providing a safe environment where they could disclose difficult issues. They found that they were more relaxed about listening to advice and accepting offers of support and guidance:

You had learned to hide things, but we can now tell each other. It's gein [given] me confidence. A [I] never thought for a minute that A [I] would be standing up in front of people and pointing things out on a board and starting a discussion.(Mother, Primary School)

And if one of us have problems, we gather around to help. X (names other mother) needs more strength in other departments, for example being firmer with her children. But she has learned. (Mother, Primary school)

The example above is typical of comments parents made of the initiatives that EECCs and schools had in place. Overall, parents valued initiatives which enabled them to become more confident in their parenting skills and involved in their children's education, but without an overpowering involvement of services and crossing of home-school boundaries. Mayall (1994) has discussed the coercive framework of the school (and other services), that is sharply contrasted with the more negotiated power relationships in the home. In the case of families from a poorer economic and educational background, the involvement of services can often be perceived as an attempt to interfere and judge adults' parenting as inadequate. This can, in turn, mobilise parents into patterns of resistance and rejection of any service-related influences.

### ***The role of wider family and community in supporting parental engagement in deprived areas***

The important role that the wider community networks play in children's learning and educational aspirations and as a source of capital for children has been highlighted extensively (Coleman and Hoffer, 1987; Putnam, 2000; Reay, 2004). There is clear evidence that the quality of the community in which one lives and strong community ties affect children's school performance and opportunities in later life. Ainsworth (2002) showed that a high proportion of neighbourhood effects, such as employment, mobility in the area, and levels of crime, affected the neighborhood social capital, with 'collective socialisation' having the strongest influence on people's educational outcomes and well-being. In our study, parents spoke at length about the impact of community characteristics on their opportunities to engage children in educational activities:

This is the worst area, you've got nothing here, everythin' is vandalized, and up where the swings are, it's a bog. (Father, Early years)

I can't let my kids out, it's not safe, there are guys with knives on them and stuff. (Mother, Primary school)

For one family, being victims of crime and violence meant having to move house at short notice, though without the possibility of leaving the area permanently:

These guys were up the back of my house with swords and knives and they're shouting, 'We're gonnae [going to] break your winndaes [windows] in the night'. So we barricaded ourselves into one room. And I went doon [down] to the council the next morning and they wouldn't move me, told me I had to give up my tenancy, which I did, withoot even thinking...I want my kids safe, but can't afford [living]

anywhere else and they just see violence here. (Mother, Primary school group)

Other parents talked about their attempts to leave the area, mainly because of concerns for their safety due to domestic abuse and local crime, but also because of their children's exposure to violence and bad role models. Parents were aware of how damaging these were for children, but they explained that lack of income and networks outwith the local area stopped them from moving on:

It's not the best place in the world to grow up, but I don't have a job yet and my mum is here and she can help with the kids. Where else would I go? It's tough on my own and not knowing anyone. (Mother, Early years)

The role of extended family was mentioned by some parents, mainly in terms of support with childcare and in case of an 'emergency'. Many had relatives locally, but their involvement with the children was mainly in terms of organized visits or supervision when parents were at work; parents were more likely to see their children's education mainly or wholly as their own responsibility and did not mention extended family as a source of cultural capital for their children's education:

There is no one else to ask. My mother and brothers live here, but I wouldn't ask them. (Mother, Primary School)

In the absence of local, accessible educational or leisure activities and with the limited involvement of extended family, parents often relied on other parents for support with their children's learning or behavior. These networks were often facilitated by the school and created strong supportive communities, encouraging help from all those involved in initiatives:

One of the mums would say, I've learned this and I've tried that, but sometimes there were still problems with her kids and we would say well, if that doesn't work, then try this. Because it doesn't work all the time and you need help from others who've been there already. (Mother, Early years)

## **Discussion**

The evidence presented earlier indicates clear benefits for children's educational outcomes when parents support children's learning and foster positive attitudes to achievement. For young children, parents' engagement in activities is also key to their well-being and to their learning foundations when they enter formal education. In relation to families suffering from poverty and multiple disadvantage, success is possible 'against the odds' (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010) and parents often have high aspirations for their children.

The data in this study revealed that children and parents were both receptors of social and cultural capitals through their engagement with the school structures, but felt less able to be

active generators of such capital through their social positioning and networks they had available. They often saw children as generators of cultural capital for the family, through the knowledge they brought from school. Parents were committed to their children's education, understood the importance of qualifications for children's social mobility and were anxious for their children to do well. However, while parents may recognize the exchange value that education would have, they often saw themselves as limited by their positioning and cultural capital in terms of what they could contribute to enhance children's options for a 'better future'. Children were also placed in culturally disparate spaces at home and at school, with more 'middle class' attitudes and aspirations presented at school, and 'working class' ones promoted at home. In many ways, such contrasting values could render some children as vulnerable to academic failure, if parents see their abilities of supporting children's learning as mainly limited.

While all parents talked positively about the long-term value of education for their children, for better social mobility and integration, they were aware of the limited volume of capital they could draw upon, mainly because of their low qualifications, poor employment and reduced social networks outwith their local area. Without a doubt, parents were aware of the importance of securing knowledge about how the education system is structured, what the teachers' expectations and the social and cultural activities were that the children should engage with after school hours. Nevertheless, parents ultimately showed limited confidence that their engagement in school-based activities will enable them or their children to challenge their social milieu and overcome their marginalisation. Notably, most mothers talked about the absence of any other social networks that they could access outwith their area, and often said they lacked the knowledge, skills and energy to invest in extending their social and cultural capitals outwith the local community.

In this context, the schools and local services have a difficult challenge of not only supporting children's learning, but also in terms of creating opportunities for parents to reframe the potential of their engagement in children's formal education. A range of factors emerged as key in ensuring successful provision and support for parental engagement. When these were in place, parents seemed more likely to engage and accept the school's influence on their approaches to parenting. These included strong leadership and commitment from the EECC/school manager to genuine parental engagement, flexible provision and opportunities for engagement, open channels of communication and a positive school ethos which treated parents with respect and believed in their ability to support children's learning.

Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) propose the rational choice approach to explain how parents' choices are based on strategies in relation to expectations of the future. Parents as key agents in their children's future weigh up expected benefits against the expected costs of their decisions. With reference to educational decisions, parents will take into account considerations such as the maintenance of status, the likeliness of success, and the relation of costs and outcomes as key factors which determine the decision. While middle class parents will make considerable investments in their children's future, such as paying for private education or additional after-school activities (Reay, 2005), parents with little resources might be more careful about their aspirations. Investing time and resources in children's education is likely to be too costly and too risky, with high uncertainty in terms of returns, with no guarantees whether the child will be successful. In working-class families, this uncertainty is also reinforced, as there are likely to be no prior experiences of high achievement within the family.

This clearly positions children from a working class background at a disadvantage with their peers. While they may receive positive messages in terms of high aspirations and achievement from the school staff, their social class will mark their 'difference' through embodied aspects such as language, clothing, diet, values and cultural preferences. Limited by the paucity of local after-school activities, lack of transport to activities in 'better' areas and increased pressures burdening their parents, working class children may end up spending most of their free time entertaining themselves indoors or hanging about on the local streets and in parks. It seems that, in this context, the only way to reconcile the two spaces of home and school is by finding successful approaches to enabling parents to believe in their ability to support children's academic success and engage with educational establishments, without perceiving these as a threat to their social and cultural values, and by enhancing their ability to develop stronger and more positive home learning environments (see also Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). This would also mean that activities for parents should respect cultural difference and facilitate the processes of cultural and social capital accumulation by parents and children in a genuinely inclusive and participatory way, without judging parents' decisions and values. The parents in this study seemed to value highly the support they received through pre-school and school-based provision, as long as they were afforded the decisions over the type and extent of their engagement.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has considered how parents in one deprived area in Scotland engaged with their

children's formal education through parental engagement in nurseries, schools and home. Drawing on concepts of social and cultural capital, the paper has highlighted parents' strategic orientation to school/nurseries, by selecting the opportunities in which they wanted to get involved and negotiating the terms of engagement in a manner that enabled them to access the available resources and improve their own cultural capital, while also securing boundaries around their home environment. While all parents recognized the long term value of education for their children's social mobility and opportunities and were in favour of putting effort into supporting their children, they remained aware of the limited capitals they could draw upon, mainly in terms of limited academic competencies, specialist knowledge and qualifications. Living on a low income often meant that although parents wanted 'a better life' for their children, they remained realistic that their children might follow them into poverty. The desire to help their children overcome their economic circumstances was also hampered by the absence of strong social and kinship networks that families could draw upon outwith their area.

The effect of place was especially important, as parents were aware of the marginalization of their area, through the poverty of resources and limited social capital, and in this context, the formal education establishments were a key source of building their children's and their own cultural capital. This means that with respect to educational and social policy, questions remain about the extent to which local areas lock families in cycles of disadvantage, with limited possibilities for bridging outwith their social class. In the current economic decline, increased unemployment and welfare benefit reforms mean that more families are in poverty and dependent on provision through increasingly limited statutory services which remain, for many families, the only mediators of social mobility (Batty and Cole, 2010; Hastings *et al.*, 2012).

The implications from the evidence presented here for educational and family policy are twofold: schools need to address the achievement gap among children from deprived backgrounds in order to tackle social disadvantage and increase social mobility. Parents' engagement remains key to this process, given the benefits of their involvement for children's education and long-term achievement. However, unless policies recognize the power relationships and structural inequalities which restrict parents' ability to get involved and lock them in cycles of multiple disadvantage, we suggest that the excluded poor will continue to be seen as unwilling and unable to support their children's learning. We argue that the evidence from parents' perspectives, presented in this study, suggests that a more positive

discourse on parenting choices and engagement, which acknowledges families' challenging circumstances, and a more constructive approach to parental engagement is needed, to ensure that parents affected by disadvantage feel valued and enabled to take an active role in their children's education.

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