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## **“Terms of engagement” not “hard to reach parents”**

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This article presents findings of qualitative research commissioned by the Achievement for All project in a UK local authority. The research investigated how schools should engage parents, including those considered to be “hard to reach”. A focus group methodology was adapted to enable parents to provide answers to the research questions. The majority of parents contributing to the three focus groups were considered to be “hard to reach” by the schools that their children attended. The analysis employed an inductive thematic approach as a further means of listening to them. Main findings are presented as “a taxonomy for terms of engagement.” Implications for educational psychologists are raised.

**Keywords:** parents and engagement; parents; hard to reach

### **Introduction and background to the research**

The Achievement for All (AfA) pilot involved 10 local authorities (LAs) selected by the Department for Children, Families and Schools (DCFS, 2009)(now Department for Education [DfE]) and took place between September 2009 and July 2011. It was conceptualised as a means to support schools and LAs to provide better opportunities for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) to fulfil their potential through the following main strands:

- Strand 1: Assessment, tracking and intervention.
- Strand 2: Structured conversations and parental engagement.
- Strand 3: Provision for developing wider outcomes such as attendance, behaviour and positive relationships.

This article focuses on qualitative research carried out in an LA as part of Strand 2 towards parental engagement. The key tool that was employed for engagement of parents within the AfA pilot was the structured conversation. It incorporated approaches of active listening, solution orientated psychology and problem solving within a clear four stage framework (explore, focus, plan, review), as a means to understand the parents’ hopes and concerns for their child and to engage them in a collaborative relationship that would support their child’s greater progress and achievement. The need for this emerged from both findings of Harris and Goodall (2007) and Lamb (2009):

What was apparent was that few of the parents the enquiry met seemed to have been encouraged to have a discussion about the outcomes they expected or aspired to for

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their child or how best these outcomes might be achieved. (In report of the Chair of the Inquiry, Brian Lamb to the Secretary of State, 2009, p. 20)

Training was provided for schools which emphasised the building of parental engagement and confidence with up to three structured conversations a year. The author was involved as one of a team of senior educational psychologists training AfA lead teachers of the 39 participating schools in the authority. The initial outcomes for engaging parents in the structured conversation ranked among the highest in the UK. Ninety-two per cent of parents approached for the programme initially participated in a structured conversation. However, the question of how the remaining 8% of parents should be engaged remained.

Discussions that subsequently took place within the LA risked labelling these 8% as “hard to reach” in a potentially discriminating, amorphous and unhelpful way. The author considered there was a need to reframe “hard to reach” as “how to reach” within the initiative and for a repositioning from individualising to a systemic epistemology, shifting from a deficit view of parents’ difficulties towards parents and professionals shaping change together (Dickerson, 2010). To investigate this further a literature review was undertaken.

### **Literature review**

A search of literature published over the last 10 years comprised:

- Department for Children, Families and Schools (DCFS), Audit Commission and National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) websites.
- An EBSCO host database search (key words: parents and engagement, parents and hard to reach).

There were nine publications which were considered in detail; of these eight were selected on the basis of relevance to the parents and carers included in the programme.

Findings, principles, practices related to parental engagement and “barriers to engagement” were derived from the main articles and thematically grouped. The comprehensive literature review of Harris and Goodall (2007) informing AfA concluded that, “relatively little is known about the most effective ways of securing parental involvement, particularly in ‘hard to reach groups’” (p. 3). This was not borne out in the literature yielded by the search which was predominantly published later and conducted in health, mental health and social care settings. The following includes and builds on key findings from Harris and Goodall’s review (2007) within the following seven main themes.

### ***Parental engagement promotes achievement***

Harris and Goodall (2007) concluded that whilst the research is unequivocal that parental involvement makes a significant difference to educational achievement, it says relatively little about ways in which parental engagement can be extended, enhanced and facilitated to maximise educational achievement in schools. Their findings from case studies of 30 schools predominantly identified a dynamic interaction between the achievement of children and young persons and engagement with their parents and indicated:

- Parents have the greatest influence on the achievement of young people.
- It is the support of parents in learning within the home environment that makes the maximum difference to achievement. Where activities involving parents with or within the school are not directly connected to learning they have little impact on pupil achievement.
- The higher the level of attainment, the more parents get involved.
- There is a consistent relationship between increasing parental engagement (particularly of “hard to reach” parents) and improved attendance, behaviour and student achievement.

### ***The nature of individualisation and bespoke measures for engagement***

Harris and Goodall (2007) further maintained that schools that offer “bespoke forms of support” to parents who appear difficult to engage are more likely to engage them in their children’s learning. The nature of individualisation and bespoke measures for engagement has been specified further by the literature as follows.

Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, and Vesneski’s review (2009) prioritised “early outreach and responsiveness to parents” (p. 111) and identified needs and priorities and “practical help” (p. 111) as two out of six important overlapping engagement strategies. They claimed that engagement must also include attention to the “perceived acceptability and validity of available treatment options” (2009, p. 120) for children by parents. This may also need “to be tailored to fit the realities and needs of involved families” (2009, p. 120).

Hogue, Johnson-Leckrone, and Liddle (1999) reviewed common barriers to participation of “high-risk” families in prevention services and highlighted empirically based advances in strategies for recruiting families. These included affiliation to, and support of, a known organization; maximum flexibility tailored to fit the unique profile of needs presented by each family; communicating how the intervention can meet the needs of each family at the outset; a strength building approach, which acknowledged the parent as the true authority on raising the child; individual contact with families; persistent, accommodating engagement efforts including working evenings and home visits. They considered that it is realistic to allocate as much time to recruiting high-risk families as to the research or an intervention itself, in view of enhanced requirements for engaging these parents.

The findings of Kirkpatrick, Barlow, Stewart Brown, and Davis (2007), reported later, suggest the advantage of having a service provided at home. The Hedron Report, arising from a consultation of LAs commissioned by the DCFS (2008) to facilitate engagement of parents around schools’ commissioning, noted that parents were engaged on their “own ground” (for example, the playground, local churches).

### ***The two way partnership and close relationship needed for engagement of “vulnerable parents”***

Harris and Goodall (2007) consider that “schools that successfully engage the parent in learning consistently reinforce the fact that ‘parents matter’. They develop a two way relationship with parents based on ‘mutual trust, respect and a commitment to improving learning outcomes’” (2007, p. 5). Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, and Vesneski (2009) additionally emphasise the need for supportive, respectful, culturally relevant, and available relationships with parents.

Kirkpatrick et al. (2007) explored the perceptions of a sample of women that they defined as “vulnerable” on the basis of a selection of criteria including; below 17 years of age, housing, financial and parenting difficulties, social isolation, history of mental health difficulties, child protection, drug or alcohol problems, and domestic violence. The women gave their views about the value of the intensive home visiting delivered by health visitors during their pregnancy and the first year of their child’s life. The health visitors employed the Hilton Davis approach (Davis, Day, & Bidmead, 2002) towards family partnership and empowerment. Their qualitative analysis of 20 in-depth interviews indicated that despite initial concerns and negative preconceptions about health and social service professionals, the women “greatly valued the relationships that were established and considered their confidence, mental health, parenting and relationships had benefited and attitudes towards professionals had changed” (2002, p. 32). The nature of these relationships comprised a non-directive and partnership approach, giving them confidence and self-belief to manage their own difficulties, and approachable and friendly home visitors who were interested in them as people and willing to offer long-term support through difficult times. This helped change the women’s views and promoted successful engagement with other service providers. The authors considered that findings demonstrated the potential of intensive home visiting delivered in partnership with mothers with helping vulnerable and “hard to reach” families. They highlighted “the importance of establishing a trusting relationship between helper and provider and the need for home visitors to have the necessary skills and qualities to establish such relationships” (2002, p. 32).

### ***Expertise and requirements of staff for engagement***

Requirements and expertise of staff for parents’ engagement have also been fully specified by Hogue et al. (1999), Kirkpatrick et al. (2007) and Kemp et al. (2009).

Hogue et al. (1999) identify the need for highly and appropriately trained staff that are capable of making “clinical judgments” and changing tack; they often make the difference between success and failure in the face of difficulties. Kirkpatrick et al. (2007) acknowledge the importance of provision, expertise and interpersonal qualities such as; information and advice, particularly on “aspects of behaviour management; intensive case tracking; flexible scheduling; sensitivity to the needs of individual families; involvement with other members of the family and help with relationship problems and needs such as regular training and support for assessment staff” (p. 349); this was also recognised by Hogue et al. (1999).

The expertise of professionals to support families with complexity and service systems is further recognised by Kemp et al. (2009) who identified, “knowledge, skills and efficacy in engaging, understanding, and navigating complex issues and systems (education and empowerment)” (p. 111), as fundamental needs for supporting parent engagement in services. The DCFS/Hedron Report (2008) recognised the need for professionally facilitated and carefully planned fora to enable parents to express their views freely and feel they are being listened to.

### ***The requirements of strategy and organisational culture for engagement***

The reports of Kemp et al. (2009) and the DCFS/Hedron Report (2008) provide impressive frameworks for service and LA strategies for parental engagement and recognise potential constraints of organisational and cultural barriers.

### ***Communication effectiveness and issues***

The importance of effective communication for engagement of parents was emphasised by the Parents as Partners for Early Learning (PPEL) project (Audit Commission, 2007), “Most practice emphasised through the audit process can be characterised as communication with parents which in some cases is targeted at specific groups or disadvantaged communities” (p. 4). Kirkpatrick et al. (2007) claim that, “... where there is dissatisfaction [by parents] this often focuses on difficulties in establishing meaningful communication” (p. 43). The Audit Commission report also specifies communication strategies of Children Information Centres whilst the DCFS/Hedron Report (2008) cautions that distributing material should be seen as “a communication rather than engagement technique” (p. 16).

### ***Terminology and definition towards parental engagement***

There is recognition that although “parental engagement” is viewed positively, interpretations of the term vary. The findings of Harris and Goodall (2007) indicated that parents define it as offering support to students; teachers view it as a means to improved behaviour and students view it as primarily about moral support and interest in their progress. Harris and Goodall also considered engagement to be “heavily linked to socio-economic status as well as parental experience of education” (2007, p. 5) and that parents of certain ethnic and social groups are less likely to engage with the school.

The Audit Commission (2007) recognised the need for a broader definition of parents, the importance of engaging both mothers and fathers and the need for consistent definitions of the terms, “parenting”, “communication”, “parental engagement” and “parental involvement”. At the heart of the PPEL project is a three layer taxonomy which describes the meaning of the terms *Communication*, *Engagement* and *Involvement* and their relationship to enable effective parental involvement in their children’s learning.

### ***Barriers to engaging with parents***

The above themes were refined through further consideration against the following “barriers to engagement”.

#### ***Parental experience of education***

Harris and Goodall (2007) identified this to be the greatest barrier, reinforcing findings in the literature that parents can see schools as places where they experienced only failure, as places of conflict or as representatives of a system which they may fight and must aid their children in fighting.

#### ***Parental lack of skills including confident understanding of school structures, comfort levels with formal aspects of meetings and language and literacy***

These were also considered to be significant barriers. The PPEL audit grouped barriers of skills, knowledge and understanding in areas of child development; the importance of parental involvement for learning; and parental knowledge and skills.

### *Attitudinal barriers of professionals and schools*

These have consistently been identified in research and literature. The results of Crozier's (1999) in-depth interviews with parents indicated (a) many working class parents have perceptions of teachers as superior and distant, (b) these perceptions are reinforced by some teachers' stances, (c) teachers engage with parents only on their own terms, (d) this does not encourage parents to be proactive in partnership, rather it encourages parental fatalism in regard to children's schooling.

Crozier and Davies (2007) later concluded that rather than parents being "hard to reach", it is frequently schools themselves that inhibit accessibility for certain parents. Their research of home-school relations involving Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage parents indicated "a one size fits all" approach in schools with "little or no recognition" of the particular needs and perspectives of these families. It was "very apparent" that these parents were not "difficult", "obstructive" or "indifferent", the kind of behaviour "hard to reach" implies. Many of the schools were not sufficiently welcoming or helped them overcome their apprehensions about their lack of educational knowledge, levels of English or how they would be received as "Asian" and "Muslim" people. The schools also failed to address racist abuse towards their children. In these ways many of the schools in the study represented, "spaces of exclusion; unwelcome spaces where few Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents have a voice" (p. 311).

Whilst the earlier literature appears to identify key engagement practices for parents, significantly absent in the research were the direct views of parents about how professionals should be engaging with them and there was variation in definition and terminology of "parental engagement". This signposted a starting point for the research which was to ask parents themselves and then develop an approach to defining engagement with them. The literature will be returned to later and discussed in context of the research findings.

### **Rationale for research and research questions**

The previous section offers a summary of key findings obtained from a search of contemporary literature. With respect to the AfA programme in the LA, the researchers were left with significant gaps in their understanding of the wider views and feelings of parents about how best to engage with them; how they experienced structured conversations and their impact; and how they might begin to engage with the 8% of parents "not yet reached" by AfA.

This posed the following research questions:

- (1) How can schools engage with all parents?
- (2) How are parents experiencing structured conversations?
- (3) What is the impact of the structured conversations?



### ***Purpose of research and strategy***

It was the intention that parents' responses to research questions would be obtained through conversations which would illuminate the measures that they had found to be effective in engaging them and helping their child and how parents who had not yet been reached by the AfA programme could be engaged. This in turn could contribute to findings of the AfA pilot nationally, as well as practices in the LA. The research was carried out by the author and two AfA advisors with interest in and experience of engaging parents.

### **Research methodology**

The focus group approach was selected as it was highly compatible with the intentions of the research to explore parents' views and feelings about how schools could engage with them and as it could be adapted sensitively to support parents who may be vulnerable and had not yet been engaged by the project.

Table 1. The methodology and methods used in the study presented chronologically.

The methodology and methods used in the study
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The objectives and purpose of the study were clarified between the researchers and research questions agreed.</li> <li>2. Questions for the focus group that could provide answers to the research questions were brainstormed by the researchers.</li> <li>3. The author thematically analysed the results of the brainstorm. Focus group questions and a questioning route were drafted and finalised by the research group.</li> <li>4. It was agreed that four focus groups would be held in each geographical quadrant of the LA (one focus group could not be arranged).</li> <li>5. To investigate the research questions it was agreed that the criteria for selection of schools and parents was where engagement with parents and structured conversation were going well and not so well.</li> <li>6. A letter was drafted for schools to share with parents who agreed to take part, following an ethical procedure.</li> <li>7. The schools were selected and recruited by the AfA advisors. They were provided with copies of the letter and the selection criteria for parents.</li> <li>8. Comfortable accommodation and refreshments were provided by the schools and dates and times for the focus groups were agreed.</li> <li>9. A maximum of six parents for each focus group was recruited.</li> <li>10. Enhanced measures to recruit parents who had been previously difficult to engage were undertaken by the schools and an AfA advisor.</li> <li>11. Additional ethical measures were devised for the focus groups in view of the potential vulnerability of the parents including welcome, introductions, agreeing expectations as 'ground rules' with parents at the beginning, how recording would take place and the conduct of the researchers in their roles of moderator, assistant moderator and scribe.</li> <li>12. Questions were presented in turn and parents' responses recorded and summarised at the end of each question. Their additional views were invited at the end of each question and the focus group session.</li> <li>13. First stage analysis took place after a short break and debriefing at the end of each focus group enabling immediacy with recall of meaning and context of what parents said and triangulation from the perspectives of the three researchers.</li> <li>14. First stage analysis was recorded and transcribed for each focus group question.</li> <li>15. Second stage analysis took place guided by "Phases 1–5" provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) as outlined on pp. 18–19.</li> </ol>



The design and planning of the focus group followed the steps outlined by Krueger and Casey (2001). Table 1 overviews the methodology and methods used in chronological order.

### ***The focus group questions***

Questions for the focus group, linked to research questions, were first brainstormed, and then thematically arranged and finalised, as:

- (1) Have you had structured conversations/meetings about your child? Tell us about the structured conversations/meetings you have had.
- (2) Have you noticed any changes with your child since the conversations?
- (3) Have things changed for you at home/as a family?
- (4) Some parents find coming into/working with schools very difficult. Do you know/can you tell us about anyone like that?
- (5) How can schools best engage parents like that? How can your school best engage with you?
- (6) Review purpose of the group and summarise. Have we missed anything? Is there anything else we should have discussed about structured conversations and engaging parents?

### ***The focus group participants***

Three focus groups were held in separate geographical areas of the LA and involved parents with children in primary, secondary and one special school.

A maximum of six parents (mothers, fathers and carers) who were involved in the programme were invited for each focus group. It was intended that they would include parents with a mixture of experiences of the structured conversation, that is, where schools considered the conversation had gone well or not so well and that the sample of schools would comprise two schools where the AfA advisors considered engagement with parents was going well and two, not so well.

### ***Recruitment of the parents for the research***

The participating schools were provided with details of the selection criteria for parents and a letter was sent or shared with parents who had agreed to take part. The letter thanked the parents and invited them to a discussion involving a small group of parents in their child's school. They were informed that the discussion was to help evaluate and improve the programme and that the facilitators worked on the programme. Parents were assured of personal confidentiality and the anonymity of information that would be shared out of the group.

According to Hogue et al. (1999), it is realistic to allocate as much time to the recruitment of "high risk families" as to the research. The researchers were additionally aware of potential sensitivities and difficulties with recruitment of parents who may have been difficult to engage by the schools and were not aware of how many parents had been asked or how many had declined. The head teachers and special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) in two of the schools took additional measures to recruit parents such as transporting a father with visual

impairment and his guide dog to the venue. One of the AfA advisors had previously supported and worked with mothers taking part in a focus group held in an infants' school. This appeared to have contributed to these parents feeling sufficiently confident to accept the invitation and take part in the research. In the author's view, these relationships and enhanced measures may have enabled the successful and representative recruitment and contribution of parents who were previously considered to be difficult to engage.

Overall, 14 parents of children representing the range of year groups targeted by the AfA programme (Year 1, Year 5, Year 7 and Year 10), took part in the focus groups. The children comprised nine boys and two girls on the special needs register and one girl educated in special school. Table 2 shows the distribution of parents according to the ages and gender of their children.

Table 2. The distribution of parents according to the ages and gender of their children.

	Year 1	Year 5	Year 7	Year 10	Total
Mothers	5 (B)	2 (B) 1 (G)	1 (B) 1 (G)	1(B) 1(G)	12
Fathers	1 (B)			1(B)	2
Total	6	3	2	3	14

Note: B denotes "boy" and G "girl".

The parents that contributed represented varying levels and types of engagement with the schools. Most were considered to be difficult to engage. They included three parents who had had conflictual relationships either with schools, other parents or the LA; an isolated parent with children in special school and Year 7 of a mainstream secondary; a parent speaking English as a second language; one parent who had recently moved to the LA; three mothers that schools had perceived to be withdrawn and appearing to avoid contact. Two sets of parents participated in one of the focus groups. There were a further four parents who expressed a wish for more contact with their children's school that were perceived by the schools to be difficult to engage.

**Ethics**

Additional ethical measures were undertaken in view of the potential vulnerability of parents contributing in the focus group and the information and feelings that they might share. The researchers considered that providing parents with "ground rules" at the outset could limit their contribution. In view of this, they were invited to offer "expectations that we should keep to in the group". These included the right for everyone to be listened to without interruption; silencing or switching mobile phones off; confidentiality; acknowledging and being aware of the potential sensitivity of what would be discussed and not feeling under pressure to share highly personal information.

**Focus group process**

The focus groups took place in three primary schools that provided comfortable accommodation and refreshments. One and a half hours maximum was planned for

each focus group, at the beginning or end of day, as these times were considered convenient for parents (to drop their child off or to pick them up from school).

An individual welcome and refreshments were provided at the beginning. The group started when all had arrived and were settled. First name introductions were made by all and parents were asked to say what year their child was in and whether they were a girl or boy. After agreeing expectations for the group, the questions were introduced in order. The parents' responses were scribed, displayed and summarised and they were invited to add thoughts, views and comments after each question had been discussed and at the end of the session.

The facilitators took the roles of moderator, assistant moderator and scribe, drawing upon the guidance of Krueger and Casey (2001). As it was considered that tape recording could concern the parents, the assistant moderator took notes outside the focus group circle. To enable the parents to feel comfortable with this, she led with welcomes, providing refreshments and the discussion about shared expectations. She then withdrew outside the group circle to make more detailed records of the responses of individual parents under question headings and occasionally contributed prompts to facilitate. After the end of each focus group, the facilitators took a short break and debriefed.

## **The analysis**

### ***First stage analysis***

Following the break, the facilitators completed an initial analysis of parents' responses for each question, which was recorded. The immediacy of the focus group enabled recall of context and meaning of the parents' contribution and triangulation from the perspectives of the three facilitators.

Following completion of all of the focus groups the facilitators met to review the research and trial an inductive approach to coding and thematic analysis. It was intended that the approach would be driven by what parents had told the facilitators, not any prior theoretical interest in the area or topic. The initial analysis and recording had comprised surface and explicit meanings. The researchers trialled a "latent and interpretative" analytical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84) in preparation for the second level of analysis. They jointly considered a sample of the data with a view to identifying underlying conceptualisations and assumptions that potentially shaped or informed it. It was agreed that an AFA advisor and the author would examine parents' responses separately, noting initial ideas and possible latent themes, then meet to undertake thematic analysis jointly.

### ***Second stage analysis***

The second stage analysis of data took place across focus groups guided by "Phases 1–5" provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis. As the researchers were already familiar with the data and had transcribed it (Phase 1), they generated initial codes relating to features of parents' responses to focus group questions across the three groups and collated data relevant to each code (Phase 2). Ninety-two codes were derived and transcribed altogether.

The researchers then undertook individual searches for trends and latent themes; they cut out each code manually and grouped them into potential themes (Phase 3).

They met again to develop and refine themes (Phase 4). There was a high level of researcher agreement and six overarching areas for themes were identified. The thematic analysis was finally considered in response to the main research questions as outlined in Phase 5.

It was considered that this inductive thematic approach could provide a further methodological means for parents to provide answers to the research questions. The researchers finalised their report of the research for the LA and made recommendations arising from findings of the research (Phase 6).

## **The findings**

Table 3 presents findings for each research question. The themes derived from parents' focus group responses addressed research questions in five overarching areas. Themes are presented for three overarching areas related to parental engagement and rank ordered according to number of codes. Illustrative views from parents are included.

### ***Research question 1: How can we engage with all parents?***

*Overarching area 1: Relationships, communication and partnership to enable the engagement of parents*

This major area comprised 31 codes equally distributed between the following three themes.

*1. Key qualities and requirements for a significant person whom parents can engage with in school. Parents feeling judged and put down by teachers and school staff.*

Parents made reference to the positive qualities of key individuals who assisted their engagement and, on occasions, championed their wishes and took forward their concerns for their children. This included a new head described as open, friendly and non-condescending who knew the children's names and a SENCO referred to as, "A normal person, a teacher before [she was a SENCO] who is on the same wavelength. They try to make things easy and smooth."

This contrasted with the experiences of individual parents in two focus groups. One described an incident of another parent being publicly humiliated by a teacher discussing their child's difficulties in front of other parents. She stated, "Parents hate the way teachers talk to them" and emphasised the importance of, "How teachers speak to parents not what they say". Unapproachable and condescending verbal and non-verbal communication was also identified by parents in another focus group.

*2. Requirements, conditions and strengths of schools for communication, conducive to the development of constructive relationships with parents.*

Parents' responses in this area indicated interacting benefits of quality and quantity (for example, immediacy, frequency and amount) for the development of their communication and relationships with schools. "More and better communication"; the importance of seeing someone when they needed to; problems being acted on straight away; feeling they could go in any time and things made smooth and easy for them were emphasised. It appeared that constructive relationships were estab-

lished with schools operating in these conditions and when parents felt that the school was approachable, open and responsive to them.

*3. The nature of relationships and experiences between parents and schools enabling equality, partnership and empowerment.*

The importance of equality and partnership with schools as a basis for parental empowerment and shared ways of working for their children was indicated by parents' responses. In the words of one parent, schools should, "Treat parents as equals ... parents and teachers want the same thing."

Where partnership was established, there were examples of parents in the AfA project negotiating with schools, leading to outcomes that made a difference to their child's progress and attitude.

*Overarching area 2: Needs, fears and barriers*

This is a controversial area of the analysis in that it includes some hypothesising regarding "hidden messages" in parents' responses relating to the needs, fears and barriers of schools and parents, in their two way relationship, affecting engagement. There were 18 initial codes for this area allocated to four themes. Themes 1–3 comprised five or six codes; theme 4 had two allocated codes.

*1. Practical barriers for parental engagement.*

Parents' responses in this area mostly included factors and logistics relating to time, work, public transport/cost, child care and children at different schools. There were barriers for working parents with time and availability and parents considered that flexibility was needed with this by schools. One parent experienced pressure with dropping off her three children in separate schools. Transport was a significant barrier for a visually impaired father, as using public transport to attend an open evening could take a whole evening.

*2. Parents' isolation, loneliness and frustration and the need for wider empathy.*

Parents expressed a need for empathy from other parents and for them to be aware of other parents' children's needs. Parents in one group voiced feelings of loneliness, isolation and frustration. The options for one mother with a child in special school were considerably reduced as the school did not provide activities or groups for her child out of school hours. Mother and daughter were also isolated within the community and family as the father and his relatives did not accept their child owing to her disability.

*3. Perceived fears and barriers between schools and parents.*

One parent perceived that a Head in a "non-AfA" school would feel "threatened" by structured conversations as, "They would not want to have things said against them." She considered parents felt "shut out". Another group showed a preference for a suggestions' box and texting. One parent used to hide at the bottom of the playground at the beginning of each school year as she was worried about hearing negative messages about her son from the school.

Parents appeared to select covert and indirect means of expressing their views. Their responses, taken together, created a concern that there may be a barrier that parents and schools hide behind and parents voicing their views may be regarded as confrontational. This raised questions as to whether issues and difficulties were going underground.

#### *4. Home/school boundaries, intrusiveness/defensiveness?*

The response from parents in two focus groups to questions about whether things had changed at home and for the family appeared to be defensive initially, with some parents at first saying there had been no changes. Two parents who had past involvement with social care expressed sensitivities about questions concerning their child's behaviour at home, following difficulties in school.

The researcher raised the following questions. Are clear boundaries between home and school required in joint working? Do questions and approaches made by school risk feelings in parents of intrusion and being judged? Is a relationship based on trust over time needed first by parents? What would happen if schools developed a relationship based on trust with parents, then needed to take child protection measures?

#### *Overarching area 3: Parents' suggestions for engaging all parents*

Parents' direct suggestions and experiences for engagement comprised eight codes which broke down equally into two main areas; having fun with other parents and their children, and activities and workshops in school.

A need for fun and variety with activities and meetings with children and parents, including refreshments and coffee mornings, was expressed. One parent suggested opening the school kitchen for the day to make pizzas with their children.

Activities that were interesting but not too difficult for the child to do with their parent were suggested. A secondary school mother had chosen photography, suggested by the school, in place of literacy. This had led to her child taking photography as a subject option. A primary school mother considered that parents felt self-conscious when their children found an activity difficult in a group situation.

Other parents considered parent workshops after school and working alongside their child, learning with them to be engaging. Parents from one school valued daily reading and writing with their children at the beginning of the day but recognised the need for flexibility of start time and constraints for working parents with this.

#### ***Research questions 2 and 3: How are parents experiencing structured conversations? What is the impact of the structured conversations?***

Parents reported powerful academic, psychological, social and behavioural outcomes of the AfA project for their children. They were particularly impressed by the creative approaches that schools had used regarding interventions for their child, as well as individualised support and tailored resources to support their child's learning. An example of this was a school arranging for a football player to read with a Year 5 boy providing a "cool to read" role model.

A particular outcome that was mentioned frequently by parents was around their child's social and emotional progress. Parents variously observed their children becoming calmer, independent, coping better, being less frustrated and developing improved relationships with peers.

Positive differences were observed at home, including children being more intrinsically motivated to do homework and choosing to do it because they had developed confidence and a belief in themselves. Parents observed that their children were now achieving as opposed to working towards their targets. As a result more time was available for others in the family as their children were better equipped to cope.

### ***Issues, strengths and differences raised by parents regarding secondary schools***

Issues, strengths and differences raised by parents regarding secondary schools was a powerful, unsolicited area of findings, not anticipated by the research, comprising 15 of the 92 codes. Parents considered communication, accessibility and feedback from schools became more of a challenge following secondary school transition. Some expressed frustration that teachers did not always know their child. It was considered that children could easily be "hidden" or "buried" in big secondary school classes, especially if they are quiet and well-behaved. There was a shared view that it was most important to get support for their children. At the same time, some parents expressed hopes and aspirations for their child's progress to be taken forward by schools.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

In summary, a major finding of this research to enable the engagement of parents was the development of constructive relationships, communication and partnership with schools. Conducive to this were key qualities of significant people in school whom parents could engage with and interacting benefits of quality and quantity of contact. Needs, fears and barriers affecting engagement between parents and schools were presented in psychological, as well as, practical areas. Some parents experienced isolation, loneliness and frustration. There were perceived barriers between schools and parents that both appeared to hide behind. Parents' direct suggestions for engagement equally emphasised having fun with other parents and their children and activities and workshops in school where they learned together. Engagement with parents appeared to have positive academic and psychological outcomes in the progress of children.

The findings of this research, based on the expressed views of parents, support a number of findings in the literature. Importantly, parents need to be listened to and their hopes and aspirations for their child should be taken forward by schools (Lamb, 2009). Engagement with parents had positive outcomes in the progress of children (Harris & Goodall, 2007). Although parents are referred to as being "hard to reach", it is possible that schools themselves inhibited accessibility for certain parents (Crozier & Davies, 2007). There were a number of barriers which were both practical and attitudinal affecting parents' engagement with schools (Crozier, 1999; Harris & Goodall, 2007).



Table 3. A taxonomy for terms of engagement.

Overarching category	Codes	Terms of engagement	Literature themes and references
1. Relationships, communication and partnership to enable the engagement of parents	<p>1. Key qualities and requirements for a significant person whom parents can engage with in school. Parents feeling judged and put down by teachers and school staff</p> <p>2. Requirements, conditions and strengths of schools for communication, conducive to the development of constructive relationships with parents</p> <p>3. The nature of relationships and experiences between parents and schools enabling equality, partnerships and empowerment</p>	<p>1. A relationship with a key person in school who can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- champion parents' wishes</li><li>- take forward their concerns</li><li>- make things smooth and easy</li><li>- is open and friendly</li><li>- is on the same wave length</li><li>- is sensitive, approachable and non-condescending in communication</li></ul> <p>2. More and better communication such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- seeing someone when parents need to</li><li>- problems to be acted on straight away</li><li>- being able to go into school any time</li></ul> <p>3. Schools being:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- approachable, open and responsive</li><li>- treating parents as equals</li><li>- schools and parents want the same things for their children</li></ul>	<p>The two way partnership and close relationship needed for engagement (of vulnerable parents)</p> <p>(Harris &amp; Goodall, 2007; Kemp et al., 2009; Kirkpatrick et al., 2007; Crozier, 1999)</p> <p>Expertise and requirements of staff for engagement</p> <p>(Hogue et al., 1999; Kirkpatrick et al., 2007; DCSF, 2008; Kemp et al., 2009).</p> <p>Communication effectiveness and issues (DCSF, 2008)</p>

(Continued)

Table 3. (*Continued*).

Overarching category	Codes	Terms of engagement	Literature themes and references
2. Needs, fears and barriers	1. Practical barriers for parental engagement	1. Flexibility needed by schools with: - time to meet parents - consideration of costs, public transport and child care	The nature of individualisation and bespoke measures for engagement  (Harris & Goodall, 2007; Kemp et al., 2009; Hogue et al., 1999; Kirkpatrick et al., 2007; DCSF, 2008)
	2. Parents' isolation, loneliness and frustration and the need for wider empathy 3. Perceived fears and barriers between schools and parents 4. Home/school boundaries, intrusiveness/ defensiveness?	2. Parents wish for empathy from other parents and for them to be aware of their child's needs. Some parents feel lonely, isolated and frustrated 3. Parents and schools may be hiding behind barriers with issues and difficulties and selecting covert means of communication 4. Pre-requisites including a relationship of trust over time; clear boundaries and a non-judgmental approach may be needed for home school working	
3. Parents' suggestions for engaging all parents	1. Having fun with other parents and their children	1. Activities that are interesting but not too difficult for their children to do with them in school	Parental engagement promotes achievement  (Harris & Goodall, 2007)
	2. Activities and workshops in school 3. Working alongside their child and learning with them	2. Parents feel self-conscious when their children find an activity difficult in a group situation 3. Flexibility needed with times for activities and workshops especially with working parents.	

The research findings also confirmed the need for:

- “Bespoke forms of support” to parents who appear difficult to engage, to engage them in their children’s learning (Harris & Goodall, 2007).
- Flexibility tailored to fit the unique profile of needs presented by each family, in order to engage them (Hogue et al., 1999).
- A two way partnership and close, available, trusting and respectful relationships between parents and schools (Harris & Goodall, 2007; Kemp et al., 2009; Kirkpatrick et al., 2007).

The “terms of engagement” offered by parents, findings of this research and the literature suggest that parental engagement with schools is a complex multi-layered process relating to the organisational culture of the school, relationships, psychological facilitators and barriers, practical considerations, communication and support, development and training of staff.

The messages and rich description provided by parents contributing to the focus groups specify what may be required in school contexts to engage them. Table 3 offers these findings within “A taxonomy for terms of engagement” through presentation alongside overarching categories and codes and main themes and references in the literature.

### **Implications for educational psychologists**

This qualitative research investigated how schools should engage with parents, especially those considered to be “hard to reach”, through asking parents themselves. The majority of parents contributing to the research had previously been considered “hard to reach” by the schools that their children attended. The research was commissioned by the AfA project in a LA and addressed gaps in published research conducted in educational, health, mental health and social care settings.

Findings have been offered as “a taxonomy for terms of engagement” which potentially provides an evidence based platform to be interrogated by further psychological research and which can inform guidance and conversations about engagement of parents by schools.

The first impact evaluation (Melhuish, Belsky, & Leyland, 2008) of the National Evaluation of Sure Start showed difficulty reaching children and families that most required their services in the early stages. It was reported that the most disadvantaged three-year old children and their families (defined as teen parents, lone parent and workless families) were doing less well in Sure Start areas while “somewhat less disadvantaged children and families benefited” (2008, p. 6). The authors identified “a need for greater effort to be made to reach the most vulnerable households”. This concern has been echoed recently by the Allen Report (2011) underlining the importance of early intervention to break “the inter-generational cycle of dysfunction and underachievement” and low aspirations of parents affecting children in some UK communities. In the author’s view “terms of engagement” with parents is at the interface of children receiving additional support and measures to assist their development and progress. The statutory requirement for children to receive an education in school provides further opportunities for access and engagement of parents where other services may not have succeeded.

The “terms of engagement” offered by the findings of this research require key psychological approaches for schools working with parents, especially those whom they have not reached. Educational psychologists are well placed to develop these practices with schools in the interests of vulnerable children.

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