

# **Investigation of the Influence of Social Media as a Communication Medium on Parent- Practitioner Partnerships Within the Early Years: Parent and Practitioner Perspectives**

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## **Introduction**

Literature argues that enhanced parental involvement in children's educational trajectories positively impacts children's outcomes (reflected in Cronin et al, 2018; Blanden, 2006; Sylva et al, 2004; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Fan and Chen, 2001) though direction on how to foster effective links is varied. Introduction of a statutory partnership working agreement (DfE, 2021a) resulted in entrenched expectations that parents move out of deficit models of involvement (Steedman, 1990 cited by Cottle & Alexander, 2014) toward active, agentic stakeholders that co-construct educational decisions (Flett, 2007). An analysis of literature suggests there is insufficient evidence on the most appropriate methods that cultivate strong and effective partnerships to support the parents- as-partners rhetoric. Addressing this gap, the qualitative research investigated the impact of adopting a social media (SM) platform as a communicative and reciprocal tool in a Northeast Early Childhood Education and Care setting in England for parents and practitioners.

To set parameters for the study, the term 'social media' was defined as "Internet connections and activities based around the collective actions of communities of users rather than individuals" paralleled with "interactive and participatory ethos" (Selwyn 2011, p.14), and popular examples included Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and educationally focused models such as Tapestry and Seesaw. Drawing on their socially constructed relationship, behaviors and lived experiences, participant responses during semi structured interviews were thematically analysed to identify common barriers, attitudes and benefits of SM for communication. The findings informed the conclusion that SM poses a significant opportunity to enhance communication and partnership working, contingent on a series of criteria. The recommendation that emerges is that SM usage policies, and a wider repertoire of communication tools, are co-constructed.

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## **Literature Overview**

### Parental Involvement

Parental involvement and positive home learning environments (HLE) are cited as primary factors in improving pupil progress, elevating outcomes including attendance, academic achievement, student wellbeing and increased social mobility (Cronin et al, 2018; Blanden, 2006; Sylva et al, 2004; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Fan and Chen, 2001). Feinstein and Symons (1999) argue that the form and frequency of involvement provides the principal influence on educational attainment, rather than schooling discretely. A larger body of research also links social class and socioeconomic status with achieving effective levels of parental engagement (Jeon et al, 2020; Li et al, 2019; Thrupp, 2001; Plowden, 1967).

Moreover, socioeconomic status is strongly associated with concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2011; Bodovski and Farkas, 2008) which, in turn, positively correlates with increased educational attainment. This suggests that parental involvement levels of lower socioeconomic status households could be targeted to close disparities in educational attainment between the most advantaged and disadvantaged children (Field, 2010). Research also suggests social-class dispositions impact social cognition, with working class parents prioritising communion over agency (Chen, Li and Wei, 2019; Grossman and Varnum, 2010), indicating potential disjoints between prioritising needs of others versus needs of the individual.

### 'Parent's as Partners': Rhetoric Versus Reality

Whilst literature advocates for increased partnership working (for example, Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Williams, Williams and Ullman, 2002; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Fan and Chen, 2001; The Education and Employment Committee, 2000; Hara and Burke, 1998), a multitude of causal influences inhibit parental engagement, with strongest influencers including deprivation, linguistic and cultural differences between parents and practitioners and opposing role expectations of parents and practitioners (Willis, 2013 cited by Willis & Exley, 2018; Wheeler, Goodwin and Connor, 2009; Desforges & Aboucharm 2003). The root cause of many influences emanate from communication between parents and practitioners (Wheeler, Goodwin and Connor, 2009), suggesting need for tailored communication policies, receptive to the gender, social class and ethnicity of the cohort (Crozier and Reay, 2005, cited by Cottle and Alexander, 2014).

Flett (2007) recognised three models of parent support: deficit, involvement and empowerment, the latter being most desirable. Hsiao, Higgins and Diamond (2018) argue empowering models of parental engagement that maximize the efficacy of partnership working should be two-way and reflexive to the diverse needs of each unique setting. If effectively adopted and reflected in practice, this may address further sociological constraints inhibiting engagement, including perceived power dynamics between parents and practitioners (Crozier, 2006).

### Where does social media fit in?

Parallel to the evolutionary parent-practitioner partnership discourse, is the growth of digital technologies with increased information sharing, real-time communications and wider availability of technology, with 93% of the United Kingdom's (UK) population having internet access (ONS, 2019). The timeliness and convenience of utilizing SM for freely-initiated communication are cited as primary benefits of the approach, alongside improved co-operation through reciprocal dialogue and accessibility to progression information including parenting support (Willis and Exley, 2018; Lewin and Luckin, 2010; Calam et al, 2008). Nevertheless, the perceived trustworthiness of SM content concerned Tseng et al (2019) due to the ability to post content without prior vetting.

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Practitioners should therefore act in the interest of beneficence and non-maleficence by intentionally posting content to counter falsehoods such as unsubstantiated myths, many of which became prevalent during the pandemic (Yang et al, 2020). This approach lends itself to an empowerment model of parental engagement (Flett, 2007) by making available accurate and relevant information that parents can choose to read, engage with, and act upon, ultimately benefitting the child through improved parent-practitioner partnerships and enhanced HLE's (DfE, 2021a; Cronin et al, 2018; Sylva et al, 2004; Siraj-Blatchford, 2002). This can also minimize risks of alienating parents who experience engagement inhibitors (Goodall, 2016; Crozier, 2006; Sheppard, 2002).

## Accessibility of digital technologies

Rapid societal changes as a result of the pandemic, including the exponential surge in SM usage, sudden reliance on remote communication, uncertainties around reinstating remote learning have succeeded in increasing the availability of digital technology for much of the population (ONS, 2019; DfE, 2021; DfE, 2020). Yet Vibert (2020) still estimates 1.14 million households continue to experience digital deprivation. Furthermore, the ability to engage in online communication is contingent on adequate digital literacy and availability of devices (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017), issues most prominent in households experiencing material deprivation, previously identified as a common barrier to parent-practitioner partnerships (Goodall, 2016; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

## The Practitioner Perspective

Crozier (2006, p. 315) identifies parents' 'fatalistic view of schooling' as a major inhibitor of parental engagement, stating a shift in thinking requiring non-judgemental, collaborative working to establish new positive perceptions of school for parents (McLeod and Anderson, 2020). Willis and Exley (2021) note an emerging shift in practitioner willingness to adapt since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, suggesting that practitioners have become more open to informal communication and matching parental needs. Consequently, home-school alignment has improved because parents are gaining knowledge of children's learning via online communication mediums, explicitly referencing the benefit of bi-directional dialogue through SM.

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## **Methodology**

The project yielded epistemological consideration to move beyond deficit models of parental engagement (Greenfield, 2001; Crozier, 2006), to explore socially constructed relationships, behaviours and realities within an interpretivist paradigm (Cottrell, 2014). This was a prelude to inductive reasoning that drew on contextual information relevant to the participants (Gadamer, 1990 cited by Cottrell, 2014), resultant in expert opinion positionality that situates participants as experts in their own lives (Johnson and Christensen, 2008). As a result, phenomenology was best aligned with the project's exploration into the heterogeneous lived experiences of parents and practitioners, focused on their understanding of how SM may influence engagement levels. This was owing to the belief that 'behaviour is a reflection of our previous experiences' (Leavy, 2014, p.88).

The role of the researcher was considered in relation to Foucault's assertion that both participants and researcher hold relational and modifiable power (Brooks, Riele and Maguire, 2014). The researcher identified as both an insider who can interpret the data from an ontologically relational standpoint (Thayer-Bacon, 2016; Clough and Nutbrown, 2012; Wildman, 2006), and as a Deputy Manager with the potential capacity to influence responses (Miller and Bell, 2002). Mindful of conducting ethical research, procedural and situational (Society for Academic Emergency Medicine, 2010), ethical clearance from the University of Sunderland was obtained, upholding ethical principles outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2019).

Qualitative data collection (Neuman, 2014) began with parents and their voices were used to shape inductive semi-structured interview questions for practitioners (Wooffitt and Widdicombe, 2006). Online surveys were chosen due to Covid-19 restrictions; however a critical aspect of the study was the exploration of accessibility to SM for parents which required consideration of potential barriers including digital literacy skills and digital inequalities. Parents were therefore also invited to arrange telephone interviews to minimise the risk of excluding participant voices. Data saturation (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006) was achieved by drawing on sixteen parent responses using non-purposive sampling techniques and five practitioner participants that were purposively selected. This provided the study with an appropriate range of experiences and backgrounds to address issues raised by the parent voice (Emmel, 2013). Results were thematically analysed via a six-stage process to illuminate recurring issues (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

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## Findings, Discussion and Recommendations

A series of overarching themes emerged, specifically related to time, convenience and appropriateness of SM; accessibility and preference; impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on communication; and engaging communication to cultivate parent-practitioner relationships. Practitioners strongly advocated for a multi-pronged approach to communication: a sentiment reinforced by parents and triangulated with the literature (Interview Participant (IP) 1; IP5; Survey Participant (SP) 13; SP11; Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Feinstein and Symons 1999). The findings also attest to the need for caution when introducing SM as a communication tool to ensure parents' concerns regarding content and appropriateness are considered, highlighting the need for robust co-constructed parameters of SM usage.

### Appropriateness of Social Media

Concern was raised foremost by parent participants regarding privacy and potentially inappropriate SM content. Specifically, parents did not want practitioners to relay child-specific information such as behavioural or developmental concerns via SM. Practitioners also addressed the topic of content but from a proactive perspective, identifying content they did deem appropriate- namely setting-specific information including events, reminders, activities, or ideas to support child development at home, disseminating useful information. A beneficent role, akin to that suggested by Tseng et al (2019), was assumed, signifying a move toward empowerment models of engagement (Flett, 2007). This shift could be linked to neoliberalism though the relationship extends beyond the scope of this research.

Both parents and practitioners reported SM usage benefits of involving parents' in their child's day through photographs, videos, and text. One parent (SP1) noted they felt more confident leaving their child when they would receive photographs evidencing that the child was safe and happy, therefore increasing parental confidence. This suggests by listening to the needs of parents or acknowledging their experiences, relationships between home and school may improve partnership working, advancing outcomes for children (Benchekroun, 2019; DCSF, 2009).

The multiple perspectives, concerns and reported benefits associated with adopting SM as a communication medium emphasised an all-party collaboration on the formation of a detailed and robust SM policy, specific to the demographic and cultural needs of parents (Crozier and Reay, 2005 cited by Cottle and Alexander, 2014) which would require regular review as cohorts change. This would facilitate attempts to tailor communication to the individual needs of parents, as recommended by Hsiao, Higgins and Diamond (2018). Communication methods such as email and face-to-face must remain widely used, with SM becoming "another tool in the arsenal" (IP1) for improving parental engagement that can facilitate a multipronged approach (IP1; IP5; SP13; SP11; Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Feinstein and Symons 1999). The research underlined practitioners' commitment to adapt and meet the needs of parents while remaining impartial and non-judgmental, as IP5 articulated,

*"I think it's so important that we don't value any one type of communication over another. Who are we to say which is a better way for a parent to engage- they're all valuable. As long as there is high-quality, effective communication, then I'm happy with whatever the parent needs"*

This evidences their promotion of an empowerment model of partnership working (Flett, 2007) and commitment to ensuring a widespread communicative reach, maximising parental involvement (McLeod and Anderson, 2020).

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## Time and Convenience

The participants cited convenience and time-efficiency as two key benefits to SM communication (IP1; SP7; SP10), suggesting that the ability for parents and practitioners to converse by leaving and returning messages at suitable times (SP12) was particularly attractive. The theme of time featured more prominently in the participants' responses than in the body of literature (reflected in Willis, 2013 cited by Willis & Exley, 2018; Wheeler, Goodwin and Connor, 2009; Desforges & Aboucharm 2003), suggesting a further gap in literature exists. Notably, much of the available literature predates the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in uncertainty over whether this finding is solely attributable to the pandemic. Resultantly, follow-up interviews to establish why time features more heavily would be beneficial, whether that be due to social or cultural expectations prevalent in the locality (as with Willis, 2013 cited by Willis & Exley, 2018; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003), increased workload due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Lough, 2020; Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2020) or other, yet undisclosed, explanations, suggesting merit in the longevity for this research topic.

## Accessibility and Preference

While accessibility to digital communication mediums, due to material deprivation, was prevalent within the literature (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017; Goodall, 2016; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003), parental preference for SM communication was largely absent. A strong parental voice and rationale emerged related to a personal preference for not engaging in SM communication with a setting, rather than an inability due to material deprivations. It must be acknowledged that despite the researcher's best effort to reach participants through non- web-based means, it is unclear whether this was successfully achieved and may potentially impact upon the findings.

Some parents cited a preference to retain SM for private, informal communication with friends, rather than 'blurring professional boundaries' (SP1) when using these platforms to communicate with practitioners. It could therefore be argued that educationally driven platforms such as Seesaw or Tapestry (as described by Willis and Exley, 2018), which retain bi-directional and freely-initiated communication, alleviate these parental concerns (SP1; SP3) suggesting they are the most accepted platforms for online communication as they retain a professional identity. To comprehensively evaluate the implications of successfully adopting either of these platforms in this setting, further research would be required to establish whether a prevalence of accessibility or engagement issues was present for the wider parent body.

## The Impact of Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic featured unanimously in the raw data when discussing existing levels of parental involvement. Parents noted that communication and the opportunity for involvement had reduced significantly (SP1; SP6; SP16), with a third of parents reporting dissatisfaction for their current levels of engagement. Practitioners equally cited Covid-19 as the primary inhibitor of communication. IP5 noted that many snippets of information were lost because they were not deemed important enough to warrant a phone call or email yet, due to Covid, could not be shared face-to-face either. Goodall et al (2010) suggests that best practice ought to include sharing information rich in detail including visuals, a sentiment echoed by IP4:

*"You can tell parents all day long what their child has been up to, if they enjoyed an activity or what they thought of a new food they tried. But when they get to see the photos, they can see the absolute delight in their child's eyes when they finally manage to climb the obstacle course for the first time or when they're having a snuggly story-time with staff- that's totally different. As a parent, that's what I want to see. So, you don't feel like you're missing out on any of it"*

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Little consensus existed across, or within the cohorts, on optimum strategies to address the issues raised, reinforcing Hsiao, Higgins and Diamond (2018) contention that strategies must be tailored to the individual needs of parents. IP5 supported this by arguing the imperative nature of offering a repertoire of communication mediums enabling parents to freely select those aligned with their needs. The participant responses conclude that Covid-19 impacted their experiences of communication and projected an acceptance for multi-modal communication mediums. However, drawing conclusive recommendations for addressing optimum communication strategies remains, as yet, unsubstantiated.

Problematically, the Covid-19 pandemic did impact data collection, necessitating virtual collection methods, exposing potential for inadvertent exclusion of potential participants through inaccessibility of digital technologies. Countermeasures were employed but their efficacy could not be guaranteed. There subsequently remains the possibility that crucial perspectives concerning accessibility are absent in the raw data, leaving the researcher dependent upon existing literature (such as Ignatow and Robinson, 2017; Goodall, 2016; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003) to draw conclusions and make recommendations. Complicating this further is the lack of research undertaken thus far in a post-pandemic landscape, posing the need for new research into the impact of Covid-19 upon communication and expectations of communication to update current thinking.

## Communication to Cultivate Relationships

The research identified a tentative correlation between reported parental social class and the confidence to approach practitioners, ability to advocate for their own communication requirements, or the perceived time constraints of the other party. Working class participant responses emphasised significantly greater concerns for time limitations and unapproachability of others when compared with middle class counterparts, exacerbating the problematic power imbalance cited by Crozier (2006) and MacLure and Walker (2000), with communication efficacy further supported by Bodovski and Farkas (2008). This corresponds to additional literature (Chen, Li and Wei, 2019; Grossman and Varnum, 2010) which argues disposition impacts social cognition: reflected in working class participants prioritisation of communion over agency, which may limit self-advocacy of communication requirements. Alternatively, it may be the professional who associates socioeconomic status of the parent with dehumanised traits, rendering them passive and without autonomy (Diniz et al, 2020).

Though this link was preliminary, its potential to uncover an innovative route to addressing attainment gaps between advantage differences for children (Field, 2010) through increased parental involvement warrants further investigation. This could yield a link with increased achievement (Avnet et al, 2019; Fan and Chen, 2001).

Emerging strongly from the practitioner voice, supported by parent participants and reinforced in literature (DfE, 2021a; Cronin et al, 2018; Blanden, 2006; Sylva et al, 2004; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Fan and Chen, 2001), was the imperativeness of cultivating enduring relationships between the home, setting and the community. This finding is indicative of the importance of ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) around the child in addressing outcomes for children. IP1 reflected on the settings use of SM to engage parents, both associated with the setting and within the wider community, through the sharing of advice and ideas for activities to try at home, envisaging positive influence on HLE's. She also noted that this helps to build relationships with prospective clients as well as existing ones, meaning that practitioners frequently built

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tentative relationships with parents before the first meeting: initiated through SM and reinforced through face-to-face or telephone communication. The participants proposal was supported by SP12 who noted her contact with the setting was initially through Facebook, which she found comforting as she achieved a 'feel' for the setting by looking at posted pictures and by accessing setting information such as opening times. SP11 also noted that frequent SM updates engendered the ability to see photos of their child enjoying their day which increased their confidence in leaving their child in the new setting.

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## **Conclusion**

The research and literature combined suggest, as a medium, SM has the potential to positively improve the parent-practitioner partnership through enhanced communication and increased involvement, which is contingent on a collaboration of criteria to ensure this mode of communication meets the needs, preferences and expectations of all parties.

SM is not a universal solution to communication that can be unanimously relied upon due to issues of accessibility, preference and perceived appropriateness. However, it may prove to be an invaluable addition to existing suites of communication mediums employed by settings aiming to enhance partnership working. Through synthesising the responses of both participant cohorts and critical literature, the need for practitioners to be educated on, and committed to, an empowerment model of partnership working (Flett, 2007) emerges. Communicative preferences of parents must be valued and promotion of parental confidence and educational efficacy may also be beneficial in improving engagement (McLeod and Anderson, 2020). Importantly, this research supports Crozier and Reay's (2005, cited by Cottle and Alexander, 2014) contention that effective communication must recognise the idiosyncratic needs of parents, noting the influence of social class on communication (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003) in order to address the attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children (Field, 2010). Further research to explore potential links between parental social class and perceived approachability of practitioners would add to the body of knowledge.

As a practitioner and researcher, the project has afforded insights into real issues that impact upon not only the daily lived experiences of families but also offers some practical strategies that can be called upon to make continuous improvements in practice with the ever-present ambition to advance outcomes for children.

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