

The positioning of parental engagement within England's current educational policy landscape

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Abstract

Parental engagement with children's learning is strongly linked with improved outcomes for children and has thus become a major focus of educational policy around the world. Yet to date, there has been little scrutiny of how parental engagement is positioned within policy documents, nor how this relates to parental engagement practices. This paper analyses the positioning of parental engagement in England's current national educational policy landscape. Through applying Taylor's et al.'s (1997) policy analysis framework, we identify seemingly inconsistent conceptualisations of parental engagement appearing across different policy documents. This may explain the apparent mismatch between the types of parental engagement supported by research and those being implemented in schools. The analysis also highlights a lack of focus on equity in relation to parental engagement policy statements. We recommend that the Department for Education work with other stakeholders—including parents, teachers, teacher educators, school leaders and researchers—to produce a clearly articulated vision for parental engagement, which could be used to ensure a coherent approach across policies. Furthermore, we suggest an explicit focus on engaging *all* parents. Without this, the potential of parental engagement for improving children's outcomes and narrowing attainment gaps is unlikely to be realised.

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KEYWORDS

educational policy analysis, parental engagement, parental involvement, policy implementation

Key insights**What is the main issue that the paper addresses?**

Parental engagement receives attention from policymakers around the world because it can improve pupil outcomes. However, there is a significant gap in our understanding of how parental engagement is represented in national policy and how its positioning might affect parental engagement practices for school-age children.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

We identify four key issues, including inconsistent conceptualisations of parental engagement across different policies and a one-size-fits-all approach that ignores equity issues. We make four recommendations, including calling for an explicit focus on engaging *all* parents and for quality teacher training that prepares teachers to facilitate effective parental engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers, educators and policymakers are continuously searching for ways to raise attainment, increase attendance and generally improve children's education. New curriculums, new technologies and new teaching methods come and go. One constant is the essential role of parents. Effective parental engagement can lead to an average of 4 months' additional progress over a school year (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). High-quality systematic reviews and meta-analyses consistently link strong parental engagement with improvements in pupils' attendance, behaviour and multiple measures of academic achievement (Barbour et al., 2018; Gorard et al., 2012; Jeynes, 2012, 2022; Wilder, 2014). It has even been argued that—for primary pupils—parental engagement has a bigger impact on pupil outcomes than school quality (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003) or socioeconomic status (Jasso, 2007). Such findings have attracted the attention of many governments and parental engagement has become increasingly enshrined in educational policies around the world (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014). As such, examining the positioning of parental engagement within national education policy is vital.

Within educational research, parental engagement is recognised as an umbrella term. Epstein's (1987, 1995, 2001) influential work in the United States has identified the following types of parental engagement: parenting, communicating with school, volunteering in school, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community. More recently, Wilder's (2014) meta-synthesis found that published studies have defined parental engagement in relation to parent–child communication about school, assisting with homework, having high aspirations, attending school events, reading to children, supervising, communicating with schools and parenting style. However, not all forms of parental engagement are equally effective in terms of improving pupils' outcomes. Researchers have drawn an important distinction between 'parental engagement with learning' and 'parental involvement

with schools' (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Jeynes, 2018). Previous research suggests that parental engagement with learning in the home drives bigger improvements than parental involvement in school-based activities (Axford et al., 2019; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Lehrl et al., 2020; Okpala et al., 2001; Sammons et al., 2015). Approaches that engage parents directly with their children's learning on a one-to-one basis are particularly promising (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021; Erion, 2006).

It is therefore important to consider the positioning of parental engagement within government policy and the types of parental engagement that may subsequently be enacted. This is a topic that has received very little research attention, nationally and internationally. We are aware of one study each from Australia (Saltmarsh, 2014), the United States (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016) and New Zealand (Smith, 2022) and two from Canada (Antony-Newman, 2019, 2024) that examine the relationship between policy and parental engagement for school-age children. Both Smith (2022) and Antony-Newman (2024) identified a policy implementation gap, partly explained by a lack of clarity around which types of parental engagement their national policies intended to promote. Meanwhile, Epstein and Sheldon (2016) concluded that strong, supportive school leadership and the provision of active guidance from district leaders increased the likelihood that effective parental engagement practices were enacted. We are not aware of any existing analysis of the national policy landscape for parental engagement in England.

The impetus for this paper arose from a discussion between the first two authors whilst undertaking UKRI-funded Policy Fellowships with the UK Department for Education during early 2024. An analysis of the positioning of parental engagement within England's educational policy landscape was felt to be particularly timely because parents' role in education and their relationship with schools is under increased scrutiny following the extended periods of home learning during COVID-19 (Jones & Palikara, 2023a). For many parents, the stresses of the pandemic, the demands of the curriculum and a lack of space and resources made enacting home-learning policies difficult (Oppermann et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021), particularly for low-income families (Hoskins & Wainwright, 2023). Hence, the pandemic also resulted in a re-widening of the attainment gap between pupils from low-income families and their more affluent peers (Education Endowment Foundation, 2022; Lally & Bermingham, 2020; Twist et al., 2022). Parental engagement has the potential to help narrow this gap because the effects are largest for low-attaining pupils (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). Finally, we are at a crucial point in the UK political cycle, with a new government taking office. This is therefore an ideal time to reflect on the current policy landscape and to consider possible directions for the future.

Our aim in this work is to identify how parental engagement is currently positioned in England's educational policy landscape and to reflect on whether it could be better positioned to improve pupil outcomes. While parental engagement is recognised as crucial for educational success, there is a significant gap in understanding and implementation within England's educational policy. By analysing the current policy landscape, this study seeks to highlight areas for improvement and to provide recommendations for more effectively integrating parental engagement strategies to enhance children's educational outcomes.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

We define policy analysis as the study of what governments do, why and with what effects (Taylor et al., 1997). There are many possible approaches to policy analysis, but most focus on analysing a specific policy or a specific policy problem. The government's approach to parental engagement in England is dispersed across multiple policies, so answering our research questions required a flexible analytical framework that could be applied to a whole

policy landscape. We have therefore chosen to use Taylor et al.'s (1997) policy analysis framework, applying the lenses of 'context', 'text' and 'consequences' to structure our analysis. The 'context' lens is used first to situate England's parental engagement policies within their historical and political contexts. Through this lens, we develop a model that enables relational thinking across different policies. Next, the 'text' lens is used to examine the wording of relevant policies. This lens enables detailed examination of the terminology that is used and reveals omissions and inconsistencies within the texts. Finally, the 'consequences' lens is used to analyse the relationship between parental engagement policies and practices. The use of critical policy analysis frameworks like this one has continued to grow over the last 30 years, as researchers increasingly look to uncover differences between policy rhetoric and policy realities (Diem et al., 2014). Hence, Taylor et al.'s (1997) framework continues to be widely used because it enables structured analysis at different levels, whilst still providing scope to consider the 'messiness' of real-world policymaking (e.g., Gustafsson, 2022; Knight et al., 2023).

ANALYSIS

Context

The focus of this paper is primarily on describing and explaining the current positioning of parental engagement within England's educational policy landscape. However, policymaking is incremental, so it is important to provide brief historical context (Lindblom, 1959). The potential for parental engagement to boost pupil outcomes has long been recognised in educational policy in England (Plowden, 1967). In the intervening years, its importance has been re-emphasised through successive policy papers, including 'Every parent matters' (Department for Education and Skills, 2007), which contributed to the mobilisation of middle-class parents through the promotion of parent voice and parent choice (Gibson & Simon, 2010). Parental engagement has also been a continuous part of school accountability arrangements since the introduction of the first Ofsted Inspection Framework in 1992 (Elliot, 2012). However, the focus has traditionally been on parents' entitlement to information and school-centric parental involvement (e.g., Williams et al., 2002), rather than on family-centric learning interactions between parents and children.

To establish the boundaries of our current policy analysis, we began by compiling a list of relevant policies. To be within scope, the policies had to be current (not withdrawn or superseded) and applicable to mainstream state schools in England and/or the families that attend them. We chose to focus on parental engagement in relation to school-age children because much more has been written about the role of parents in relation to early years contexts (e.g., Devlieghere et al., 2020; Garvis et al., 2022; HM Government, 2018; Simpson et al., 2021). Similarly, we do not look specifically at SEND policies because the role of parents in relation to these has been widely discussed (e.g., Children and Families Act, 2014; Department for Education, 2015a; Fleming et al., 2023; Hellowell, 2017; Spear et al., 2021).

The policies included in our analysis are:

- Ofsted Inspection Framework (OIF) (Ofsted, 2019a)
- Headteachers' Standards (Department for Education, 2020)
- Teachers' Standards (Department for Education, 2011)
- Initial Teacher Training Core Content (ITT) (Department for Education, 2019a)
- Early Career Framework (ECF) (Department for Education, 2019b)

Public policies are best understood in relation to one another because interactions between policies may boost, negate, distort or mask the effects of one another (Taylor et al., 1997). We therefore set out to map these policies in relation to the end goal of parental engagement with children's learning. Goodall's (2015) model was chosen as a starting point because it provides an effective visual way of differentiating between teachers' interactions with parents and parents' engagement with children's learning. Taking Goodall's (2015) model as a base, we added our own original annotations in order to identify the different routes through which the current national policies in England could influence parental engagement (see Figure 1). The resulting model describes the current policy landscape and highlights three broad routes through which national policies could increase parental engagement: (1) by influencing the actions of school leaders; (2) by targeting the knowledge, skills and attitudes of teachers; and (3) by directly targeting parents' engagement with learning outside school.

This new model raises the question of why most policies seeking to boost parental engagement with children's learning do this indirectly, via schools, rather than directly through policies aimed at parents. The home-learning environment has received political attention in the context of early years education (e.g., HM Government, 2018), but we have not identified any national policies that relate parental engagement directly with learning for school-age children. This pattern is likely to be due to the increased political sensitivity of being seen to intervene in parenting directly (e.g., BBC, 2012). The home is often considered private (Conroy, 2010), so direct attempts to influence parent–child interactions may be construed as government overreach (Schachter, 2016). It may also be cheaper for governments to expect schools to take on additional responsibilities within the existing schools' budget, rather than attempting to influence parents via other routes. Together, these considerations may begin to explain why education policy, and schools specifically, are often portrayed as the panacea to all of society's problems (Cummings et al., 2011). However, there may also be a moral argument for continuing to situate responsibility for raising parental engagement with educational professionals, to avoid a situation in which families who face structural barriers are blamed for any 'underachievement' (Goodall, 2021).

Education and parenting both take place in the context of broader social and economic policies. For example, there is a contradiction in centring parental engagement in policies directed at schools whilst implementing economic austerity policies, cutting services which support learning at home (e.g., Sure Start Centres; Torjesen, 2016). To the best of our knowledge, the model in Figure 1 is the first to map parental engagement policies in England. We

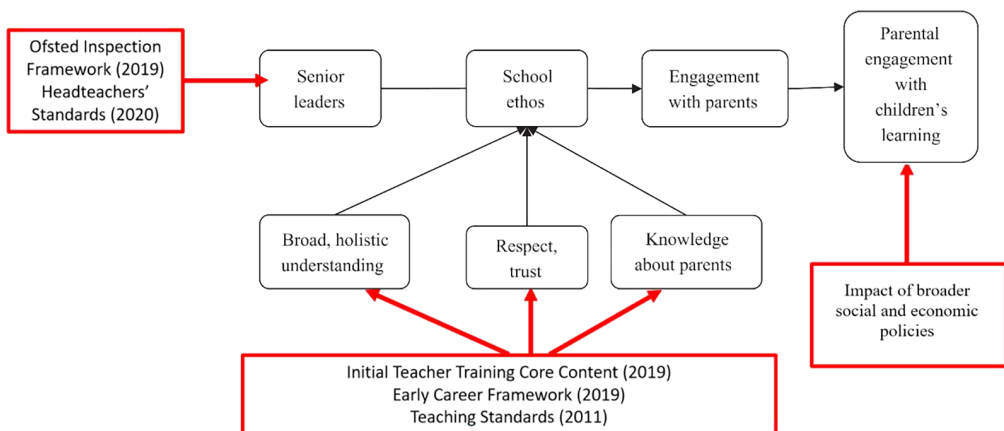


FIGURE 1 A model of the routes through which national policies could increase parental engagement. The underlying model of parental engagement has been reproduced from Goodall (2015), whilst the policy annotations—shown in red—are our own original additions.

have found it to be a useful tool to start thinking about policy interactions across the parental engagement landscape. Other possible interactions, and the overall coherence between policies, will be considered further in the ‘consequences’ section, following our analysis of the policy texts.

Texts

This section begins by analysing the relevant parental engagement policy statements contained within each of the policies individually (see [Table 1](#)). The OIF requires that ‘leaders engage effectively with learners and others in their community, including—where relevant—parents, carers, employers and local services’ (Ofsted, [2019a](#): 13). The OIF is highly influential, with evidence that headteachers alter school priorities in response to the phrasing of policy statements within the framework (Courtney, [2013](#)). However, the parental engagement statement is vague and provides no guidance to schools in relation to what constitutes effective parental engagement. Policy texts are not always clear or complete because the politics of getting through an acceptable document can become more important than the substance (Taylor et al., [1997](#)). This can result in ambiguous statements, requiring analysts to look elsewhere to identify the original policy intention. The research summary that accompanies the OIF suggests that the aim is to encourage ‘involvement of parents in their children’s learning’ through ‘providing practical advice on how parents can support learning at home’ (Ofsted, [2019b](#): 38). This suggests alignment with the evidence-based family-centric models of parental engagement, but this appears to have been ‘watered down’ in the OIF.

It is also striking that engagement with parents and employers is given equal emphasis in the OIF policy statement. This is consistent with the economic discourse reflected in the policy language (Ball, [1993](#)). For example, terms like ‘quality’, ‘efficient’ and ‘effective’ are used throughout the OIF but they derive from corporate management discourse (Taylor et al., [1997](#)). There is also evidence of competing and evolving discourses related to the role of parents. Parents are often presented as partners in schooling (e.g., Gerdes et al., [2020](#)). However, Ofsted have also positioned parents as a ‘voice of concern’ (Ofsted, [2009](#): 19) and invited them to provide ongoing feedback about schools through the ‘ParentView’ online portal (Ofsted, [2024](#)). This arguably changes the relationship between schools and parents,

TABLE 1 An overview of the parental engagement statements from each policy document.

Ofsted Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2019a)	‘leaders engage effectively with learners and others in their community, including—where relevant—parents, carers, employers and local services’ ‘leaders actively seek and listen to the views and experiences of learners, staff and parents, taking prompt but proportionate action to address any concerns’
Headteachers’ Standards (DfE, 2020)	‘headteachers forge constructive relationships beyond the school, working in partnership with parents, carers and the local community’
Teachers’ Standards (DfE, 2011)	‘communicate effectively with parents with regard to pupils’ achievements and well-being’
Initial Teacher Training Core Content (DfE, 2019a)	‘learn that building effective relationships with parents, carers and families can improve pupils’ motivation, behaviour and academic success’ ‘learn how to seek opportunities to engage parents and carers in the education of their children (e.g. proactively highlighting successes)’
Early Career Framework (DfE, 2019b)	‘learn how to build trusting relationships, by liaising with parents, carers and colleagues to better understand pupils’ individual circumstances and how they can be supported to meet high academic and behavioural expectations’ ‘learn how to build effective working relationships, by communicating with parents and carers proactively and making effective use of parents’ evenings to engage parents and carers in their children’s schooling’

recasting parents as 'educational policemen' (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999: 261). The OIF also refers to parents making 'informed choices' between schools (Ofsted, 2019a: 4), which ties into the idea of parents as consumers (Meier & Lemmer, 2018). The policy language surrounding parental engagement therefore ties into wider political discourses around the marketisation of education, accountability and the standards agenda.

The Teachers' Standards (Department for Education, 2011) is a statutory policy which lays out the standards that all teachers in England must meet. The statement referring to parents requires teachers to 'communicate effectively with parents with regard to pupils' achievements and well-being' as part of their wider professional responsibilities. This statement could imply that teachers' parental engagement responsibilities are limited to providing parents with information about their children. This downplays the potential of parental engagement to have a large, positive impact on pupils' outcomes. Again, the word 'effective' is used without clarity about which activities are likely to be effective or how effectiveness should be judged. There is no written expectation that teachers build relationships with parents, identify barriers to parental engagement or support parents to engage with learning.

Meanwhile, parental engagement has been added to the new Headteachers' Standards (Department for Education, 2020), having been absent from the previous version (Department for Education, 2015b). The tone is noticeably different from the Teachers' Standards, with explicit references to 'relationships' and 'partnership' with parents. However, the text falls short of committing to engaging with *all* parents. This contrasts with policy statements in the Headteachers' Standards relating to pupils, which repeatedly use the word *all* to emphasise commitment to equality and the need to identify and remove barriers for pupils. Yet ensuring that parental engagement strategies support all parents—through the identification and removal of barriers for families—is essential. Without this, there is a risk that schools' efforts to increase parental engagement could widen attainment gaps (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021).

The ITT core content and the ECF are considered together because both policies consist of the same set of outcome statements, with minor adjustments to clarify that ITT applies to trainee teachers whilst the ECF applies to teachers for 2 years after they qualify. These statements are more explicit than the other policy documents, clearly recognising the importance of new teachers developing parental engagement knowledge and skills. However, it is striking that none of the ITT or ECF statements relate to teachers' attitudes towards parental engagement, despite evidence that teachers frequently view parents through a deficit lens (Jones & Palikara, 2023b; Matthiesen, 2017) and tend to blame parents when they do not visibly engage with school (Campbell, 2011; Pushor & Amendt, 2018). The ITT and ECF define the 'minimum entitlement' to training, so some providers may choose to go beyond the stated requirements.

Public policies are often 'intertextual' and should therefore be read in combination with one another (Taylor et al., 1997: 46). However, looking across the different policies does not provide a consistent conceptualisation of parental engagement. In some documents it appears to be limited to information exchange (Department for Education, 2011), whilst others talk of partnership and relationships (Department for Education, 2020). Moreover, none of the documents appear to conceptualise parental engagement in relation to parents' engagement with their children's learning at home, despite Ofsted's own research summary recognising that this type of engagement has the strongest link with pupils' outcomes (Ofsted, 2019b).

How do we explain these inconsistencies? It is common to see 'the government' referred to as a single body, but 'the state is not a unitary entity to which can be ascribed purposeful action' (Taylor et al., 1997: 29). Within the Department for Education, policies develop through interplay between ministers, special advisors and civil servants, with reference to numerous external stakeholders including children, parents, teachers, school leaders, teaching

unions, think tanks, businesses, educational researchers and more. The Department for Education is currently structured around three pillars: ‘families’, ‘schools’ and ‘skills’. The ‘families’ pillar predominantly deals with issues related to early years, SEND and social care, so it is unclear where responsibility for parental engagement for school-age children lies. Furthermore, Ofsted is officially independent of the Department for Education and reports directly to parliament. Finally, national policy changes usually also require consultation and negotiation with ‘Number 10’ and the treasury. When viewed in this way, the complexity of policymaking and the potential for fragmentation becomes more apparent.

Consequences

This is not a policy evaluation, so we do not seek to generate new empirical data or to pinpoint direct consequences of the parental engagement policy statements. Instead, we use Taylor et al.’s (1997) ‘consequences’ lens to analyse evidence related to schools’ parental engagement practices in England and to consider the extent to which these may reflect the policy landscape.

One-size-fits-all

The consequences of any national policy are mediated by different people in different locations (Taylor et al., 1997). These educational policies were written to apply to all state schools (>25,000), which can obscure important differences between schools (e.g., primary vs. secondary, large vs. small, affluent vs. disadvantaged intake, rural vs. urban, etc.). School leaders therefore have an important role to play in contextualising national policies and shaping them to local needs (Miller, 2016). However, in the case of parental engagement, the national presentation of parents as a homogenous group appears to have trickled down into one-size-fits-all parental engagement policies at school level (Axford et al., 2019; Crozier & Davies, 2007).

In keeping with the wording of the national policy statements, schools in England often refer to ‘parental engagement’, but they rarely have a plan for engaging with *all* parents. This approach ignores structural barriers that disproportionately affect low socioeconomic and/or ethnic minority parents (Campbell, 2011; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Harris & Goodall, 2008). Policy references to ‘parental engagement for achievement’ need to be accompanied by consideration of ‘parental engagement for equity’ if efforts are to narrow attainment gaps (Antony-Newman, 2019: 147). For example, one-size-fits-all, school-based opportunities are likely to be disproportionately taken up by parents who face no material barriers to attending, already feel comfortable in school and are confident in their ability to support their children’s education. Hence, careful consideration of barriers faced by parents is required at all levels.

Discrepancy between research and practice

There is also growing evidence of a discrepancy between parental engagement research and the types of parental engagement enacted by teachers in English schools (Axford et al., 2019; Harris & Goodall, 2007). Teachers appear to be misdirecting their parental engagement efforts towards school-based events that are unlikely to be effective, rather than recognising the potential for schools to support parent–child learning interactions beyond the school gates (Jones & Palikara, 2023b). For example, some educators believe that offering a variety of school-based events, attended by a subset of parents, constitutes

strong parental engagement (Jones et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the research evidence suggests that facilitating age-appropriate parent–child activities at home is likely to be more effective (Education Endowment Foundation, 2018). The ambiguity of the policy statements likely contributes to the mismatch between research and practice in this area.

Lack of training

Lack of training may also be a factor, with less than 10% of teachers in England having received any parental engagement training (Education Endowment Foundation, 2018). Whilst the current ITT and ECF policies contain significantly more parental engagement content than previous teacher training arrangements, the impact of this has not yet been evaluated. Furthermore, the ECF relies on mentoring and guidance from experienced colleagues, but recent research suggests that even experienced teachers can lack the required knowledge, skills and attitudes in relation to parental engagement (Jones et al., 2025).

DISCUSSION

Our analysis has examined the positioning of parental engagement within the educational policy landscape in England. We found that parental engagement features in multiple high-profile and influential national policies, including the OIF (Ofsted, 2019a), the Teaching Standards (Department for Education, 2011), the Headteachers' Standards (Department for Education, 2020) and teacher training arrangements (Department for Education, 2019a, 2019b). However, the conceptualisation of parental engagement across these policies was inconsistent and the policy wording was often ambiguous, failing to guide schools towards the most effective types of parental engagement. This is consistent with the findings of Smith (2022: 16), whose work in the context of New Zealand concluded that 'the purpose and goals of parental engagement and how they are to be achieved are difficult to identify, detracting from the ability of schools to understand and interpret their responsibilities'. In England, the policy approach to parental engagement is similarly fragmented, resulting in a disconnect between research and practice.

By contrast, the Scottish Government have adopted a more direct approach to parental engagement, identifying it as a key lever in their National Improvement Plan (Scottish Government, 2023) and publishing a toolkit which collates their parental engagement policies and provides evidence-based guidance to practitioners (Education Scotland, 2021). Unlike in England, the Scottish policy approach also includes a clear focus on parental engagement with learning at home (Education Scotland, 2021; Scottish Government, 2023). Moreover, Education Scotland (2021: 38) explicitly commits to 'work with the research community to identify and share new and emerging research relating to parents and families'. This contrasts with England, where parental engagement is absent from the Department for Education's (2024) 'Areas of Research Interest', despite the strong relationship between parental engagement and current national challenges such as attendance and socioeconomic attainment gaps.

Having a clearly articulated and evidence-based vision for parental engagement could act as a 'touchstone' for ensuring consistency across policies, despite the fragmented policymaking landscape described earlier. The model in Figure 1 clearly demonstrates why consistency is important. Without it, positive changes in one area could be negated by other policies. For example, even if the OIF were to explicitly encourage schools to facilitate parental engagement with learning at home, the effect would likely be mediated by teachers' parental engagement knowledge, skills and attitudes, as well as by policies that affect

families directly. However, we do *not* advocate a prescriptive policy approach that mandates specific parental engagement activities. This has been found to be ineffective in the past. For example, for over 10 years, all maintained schools in England were required by law to develop signed home–school agreements outlining the responsibilities of the school and parents (School Standards and Framework Act, 1998). These were later found to have minimal impact on the day-to-day relationship between parents and schools (Ofsted, 2011) and this requirement was removed (Deregulation Act, 2015). Similarly, from 2004 schools in England were encouraged to establish parent forums, but a review of parental engagement best practice found that only a minority of schools had established a parent forum, and that their impact was limited due to small and self-selecting membership (Ofsted, 2011).

Like Smith (2022) and Antony-Newman (2024), our analysis also highlighted a policy implementation gap which may be related to a historical lack of teacher training in this area (Education Endowment Foundation, 2018). Recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses suggest that training can have a significant positive effect on teachers' parental engagement knowledge, skills and attitudes (Mancenido & Pello, 2020; Smith & Sheridan, 2019). Pinpointing the specific gaps in teachers' current parental engagement preparation and identifying which types of training are likely to be most effective go beyond the scope of this policy analysis and will be addressed in forthcoming empirical papers.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

No policy analysis is exhaustive and all policy frameworks inevitably guide researchers to focus more on some aspects of educational policy and less on others. For example, Taylor et al.'s (1997) framework enabled us to develop new insights through close analysis of the policy contexts, texts and consequences, but it places less emphasis on policy implementation. Thus, future research could more closely examine the role of teachers, school leaders and teacher educators in translating parental engagement policies into school-level parental engagement practices. This would also spotlight possible implementation barriers, such as the potential relationship with teacher workload.

Our analysis was also specifically focused on the identified policy documents. Further research could begin to widen this scope to include policymakers' discourse and non-legislative options within the parental engagement landscape. For example, discussion and consultation are important policy tools, which are often overlooked in favour of legislative approaches (Ciolan, 2022). This analysis did not seek to generate new empirical data, but it is clear that policy discussions in this area could be strengthened by having a deeper understanding of parents' and educators' aspirations for—and understanding of—effective parental engagement for school-age children.

Finally, this paper focuses on national policies in England, but parental engagement is a topic of global interest. As more international analyses of parental engagement policy begin to emerge, international comparative analysis could generate new cross-cultural insights. Future research should aim to compare parental engagement policies across different countries to identify best practices and innovative approaches that could be adapted to various educational contexts.

Examining the implementation barriers within schools is crucial. Future studies should investigate how different stakeholders, such as teachers and school leaders, interpret and enact parental engagement policies. Understanding the challenges they face, including potential conflicts with teacher workload, can provide valuable insights into how policies can be adjusted to be more practical and effective at the school level. Meanwhile, exploring policymakers' discourse and the use of non-legislative options within the parental engagement landscape can provide a more holistic understanding of the issue.

Future research should delve into how policymakers communicate and consult on parental engagement, considering the impact of these discussions on policy formulation and implementation.

CONCLUSION

Both Ofsted and the Department for Education have consistently recognised that parental engagement could be a key strategy for school improvement, raising attainment and closing achievement gaps (Department for Education, 2019a; Department for Education and Skills, 2007; Ofsted, 2009, 2011, 2015, 2019b). However, our analysis shows that this is not reflected in the current positioning of parental engagement within England's educational policy landscape. We identified the following key issues: inconsistent conceptualisations of parental engagement across different policies, the potential for conflict between the effects of different policies, a one-size-fits-all approach to parents which ignores equity issues and a policy implementation gap likely related to a lack of parental engagement training for teachers. These issues may prevent the potential positive impacts of parental engagement from being maximised.

The following refinements could increase the impact of parental engagement policy in England: (1) clearly articulating an evidence-based definition that focuses on parents' engagement with their children's learning rather than parental involvement in school; (2) adopting an explicit focus on engaging *all* parents so that parental engagement efforts contribute to narrowing rather than widening attainment gaps; (3) ensuring alignment between policies to create conditions that support families to engage with learning at home and in the community; (4) ensuring quality teacher training equips new and experienced teachers with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to facilitate parental engagement with learning.

The aim of this analysis was to describe and explain the current positioning of parental engagement within England's educational policy landscape. Through applying Taylor et al.'s (1997) framework, we have produced a new model that extends the work of Goodall (2015), and generated recommendations that are likely to be of interest to teachers, teacher educators, school leaders, researchers and policymakers alike. In addition to strengthening the existing evidence base, we hope this first analysis of parental engagement within the context of England's national policies will be a starting point for wider conversations about how parental engagement could be better harnessed to secure improved and more equitable outcomes for children. As these conversations progress, ongoing research and policy refinement will be essential to ensure that the potential benefits of parental engagement are fully realised. By addressing the identified gaps and inconsistencies, England can move towards a more coherent and impactful approach to parental engagement, ultimately supporting the goal of providing all children with the best possible educational outcomes.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or

in the decision to publish the results. The views expressed in this paper are ours and do not reflect those of the funders, our host organisations or employers.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this paper as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was not required.

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