Defining Parental Engagement in ITE: from relationships to partnerships

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ACADEMIC ABSTRACT

This paper presents a unique view of the perceived value of parental engagement with children's learning within Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Wales, the first such investigation of its kind. This paper arises from a research project sponsored by Welsh Government and undertaken by teams from Swansea and Bangor Universities. The paper reports the views of ITE providers, student teachers, mentors, parents and external stakeholders, regarding their experiences during the pandemic lockdown. The research found that while parental engagement was valued by all stakeholders, there was a lack of consistency about how this was defined and enacted. The paper proposes a disjuncture between espoused theory and theory in action, in relation to parental engagement in children's learning, and ends with recommendations for policy, practice and further research.

PRACTICAL ABSTRACT

This paper gives an overview of a project which investigated the place and understanding of parental engagement in learning, in the way teachers are

trained in Wales. The project found that while parental engagement was valued by all stakeholders, there was a lack of consistency about how this was defined and put into practice. The article suggests this may relate to the difference between theory which people say they believe (espoused theory) and the things people actually do (theory in action).

This paper presents a unique view of the perceived value of parental engagement with children's learning within Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Wales, the first such investigation of its kind. This paper arises from a research project sponsored by Welsh Government and undertaken by teams from Swansea and Bangor Universities. The paper reports the views of ITE providers, student teachers, mentors, parents and external stakeholders, regarding their experiences during the pandemic lockdown. The paper concludes with recommendations for both practice and areas for further research. The paper advances the field by bringing the voices of student teachers, ITE providers and parents together, to provide a unique understanding of the situation in Wales, an understanding which will be applicable more widely to other systems.

The paper begins with an examination of parental engagement in learning and its place (or lack thereof) in ITE. We move on to discuss the collaborative project, its aims, methods and findings. We then discuss these findings in view of the literature more generally. Finally, we offer suggestions for policy, practice and further research.

Background/context

1.1. Parental engagement in learning

The value of parental engagement with learning is well known in the literature (Jeynes 2005, Jeynes 2008, Fan and Williams 2010, Jeynes 2011). Parental support for learning can raise rates of homework return, reduce absenteeism, support engagement in school work and ultimately help raise achievement. (See Boonk, Gijselaers et al. 2018 for a comprehensive overview of the literature)

However, the literature also makes it clear that the value of parental engagement with learning is often not understood or supported in schools (Lewis and Forman 2002, Addi-Raccah and Ainhoren 2009) for a variety of reasons (Author 2021). This situation persists in spite of the initiatives of various governments to highlight the importance of support for parental engagement (No Child Left Behind in the US, the Parental Involvement Act in Scotland (Scottish Government 2018), and the Welsh Toolkit for Community and Family Engagement (Welsh Government 2015)). It would seem that practice in this area has not kept pace with the research (Patte 2011), with teachers seeing parental engagement as being about interactions between school staff and parents (Harris and Author 2008), fearing parental intervention in education (Patrice, Lydia et al. 2017), and often working in institutions which do not prioritise effective parental engagement with learning (Addi-Raccah and Ainhoren 2009).

1.2. Definitions matter

One of the issues contributing to the lack of support for parental engagement in learning is a misunderstanding of what the term means and what the practice entails. A distinction has been made between parental involvement in schooling, which entails parents relating first and foremost with school staff, often conceived of as 'helping' the teacher (Berkowitz, Astor et al. 2017, Daniels 2020), and parental engagement with learning, which is best understood as interactions between family members and children (Borgonovi and Montt 2012, Author and Montgomery 2014). While the first, parental involvement, is useful and can be a stepping stone to greater engagement, it is the second, parental interactions with children, which has the greatest positive impacts on achievement and outcomes (Jeynes 2005, Jeynes 2008, Fan and Williams 2010, Jeynes 2012). It is important, then, that this distinction is made clear for student teachers, as an element of their training, and that this understanding is shared between school staff, providers of ITE and parents (de Oliveira Lima 2019).

Author and Montgomery (2014) posit a continuum from parental involvement in learning (which is school led and school focused(Crozier 1999, Souto-Manning and Swick 2006, Gasper 2013), through to authentic partnership between families and school staff. This partnership is based on shared understandings and respect for the appropriate agency of the other (Autor ad Montgomery, 2014; Author, 2017). In commissioning this research, Welsh Government was explicit about the importance of this

continuum as a basis for analysis of the findings (and as the basis for an interactive tool to be developed for use in schools (Author, In Press).

2. ITE and parental engagement

Together, studies concerning teacher preparation for working with parents and those concerning teacher views of parent engagement demonstrate that teachers need to be supported to develop an understanding of the professional role they can play in ensuring that equitable opportunities exist for all parents (Yap and Enoki, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Smit et al., 2008; Díez et al., 2011; Lau et al., 2012). (Mandarakas 2014)

It could be argued that one reason school practice around parental engagement in learning has not moved forward is that teachers either do not understand its importance or are unclear about how to best support it. This is understandable as the literature also shows that teacher training, again in several countries, does not cover parental engagement in any depth, or highlight its value (Baum and Swick 2008, Patte 2011, Robinson 2019). Research in the field would suggest that few teachers are adequately trained in relation to the nature and value of parental engagement, or how to support that engagement (Baum and Swick 2008, de Bruïne, Willemse et al. 2014, Willemse, Erica de et al. 2017, Thompson, Willemse et al. 2018, Willemse, Thompson et al. 2018). Parental engagement, where it is a part of teacher training, tends to be taught as optional courses or stand-alone modules rather than being a concept that is integrated into ITE as a whole (Saltmarsh, Barr and Chapman, 2015).

Flynn (2007) argues that when (and if) parents are mentioned in ITE training, then this is primarily related to reporting, communication, often unidirectional (school to home). When the engagement of parents in learning is mentioned at all, it is often in relation to 'difficult conversations' or in relation to challenges to be overcome (Baum and Swick 2008). This, then, immediately sets up barriers to working with parents as partners (Patrice, Lydia et al. 2017); and potentially frames parents as a group to be held at arm's length.

Preservice teachers have been found to imbibe these understandings of working with parents. Baum and McMurray-Schwarz (2004) found that those preparing to be teachers concentrated on avoiding conflicts with families, and on how they would react to 'judgemental and 'critical' parents (p. 58) (See also Baum and Swick 2008). Students also considered how

they would deal with parents causing harm to the children in their care. Tellingly, students felt that they would need to educate children 'in spite' (p. 58) of their parents.

This approach to working with parents impedes student teachers' understanding of parental engagement beyond 'a laundry list of things good parents do' (Barton, Drake et al. 2004, 2). Unfortunately, this list is founded in perceptions of white, middle class parenting, which generally accords with the backgrounds of the teachers themselves, and often leads to negative perceptions of other groups of parents and ways of parenting (Vincent, Ball et al. 2010, Martina and Sabine 2012, La Placa and Corlyon 2016, Author 2019). Even when teachers have had access to some training about working with parents, they often still report feeling unprepared for that task, and unable to adequately engage with families (Robinson 2019).

The unpreparedness of student teachers to support parental engagement in learning seems to be mirrored in the general teaching force (McConchie 2004, Macgregor 2005, Author and Vorhaus 2011); recent work has found that fewer than 10% of teachers had undertaken continuing professional development relating to parental engagement (Van Poortvliet, Axford et al. 2018). Serving teachers have reported feeling less than confident in supporting parents (Mandarakas 2014) . This lack of preparation in the profession as a whole has a direct impact on the training of future teachers; as we shall see below, providers often expect that students will come to understand the importance and practicalities of supporting parental engagement while on placement; however, if their mentors on these place-ments have not had appropriate training, they will be unable to provide this support.

2.1. Deficit discourse in ITE

One of the issues which must be addressed throughout ITE is that of ste-reotypes of different groups and the deficit discourses which go hand in hand with those conceptions (Assaf and Dooley 2010). Teachers being trained in Wales and in the West in general experience deficit discourses about families from minority cultures in many aspects of everyday life, from casual conversations through to policy discourses (Crozier and Davies 2007). Within such conceptions, families are seen as being in need of help from school staff (Valencia 2010, Valencia 2012, Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander et al. 2013); families are seen as incapable of supporting learning

on their own (Ladson–Billings 2013, Gorski 2016, Saltmarsh and McPherson 2019). These discourses and understandings of families offer simplistic explanations ('parents don't care' for example) to the results of complex societal issues of inequity (Gillborn, Demack et al. 2017). Deficit views of parents and family groups arise not (generally) out of malice but rather out of a lack of knowledge and experience; when teachers and families do not share a background or culture, this can create a gulf which is filled not by understanding but by stereotype and assumption (Assaf and Dooley 2010). Gapser (2013) points out that teachers often understand parents as the first teachers of children, who know their children well, but know less about learning than teachers, which leads to 'contradictory viewpoints' (p. 194) on how parents can support learning.

These deficit understandings of families may offer an explanation for the gap between school staff and parents, depicted in the comments from pre-service teachers in the literature above, suggesting not only that parents are lacking but also that school staff are those who are best placed to overcome that lack (Gorski 2016).

3. Parental engagement in Lockdown

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced a sea change in our understanding of the value of the home learning environment. According to Levinthal de Oliveira Lima and Kuusisto (2020) schooling, which is traditionally seen as a duty for schools, and well-being and development, traditionally seen as a duty for parents, have started to merge into each other. In Wales, research has found that parental engagement has in learning has increased during the period of the pandemic, and that staff may have a better understanding of the value of that engagement (Chapman, Evans et al. 2022). The importance of parental support for learning was highlighted by school staff, again in research from Wales (Waters-Davies, Davies et al. 2022). This development means that the perceived roles of teachers and parents have also moved closer to each other.

Parents moved from, in many cases, a peripheral role in their children's school based learning, that is, as a support to the work of teachers (Daniels 2020), to central stage, and often struggled with the change of role; teaching staff also struggled to support parents, in part due to lack of understanding of the role parents could in fact play in learning (Garbe, Ogurlu et al. 2020). While many parents felt able to support learning in the

home, nearly half of parents reported in some surveys that they did not feel up to the task (Cullinane and Montacute 2020).

Despite perhaps not feeling prepared to take on this role in supporting learning, Parentkind found that 53% of their respondents as parents, felt they were very engaged with their children's learning and a further 35% felt quite engaged; this represents an overwhelming majority of parents who felt engaged with the learning of their children during lockdown. And it is interesting to note that Eivers et al. found in a different study that parents with the lowest household incomes spent more time helping their children with homework than other families (Eivers, Worth et al. 2020), which mitigates against the deficit view of this group of parents mentioned above.

There is emerging evidence that there may be some benefits to this period of lockdown, particularly in building better relationships between parents and school staff (Kim and Asbury 2020). It is interesting to note that 72% of teachers in this wide ranging survey said that they spent up to five hours a week communicating with parents (Sharp, Nelson et al. 2020) in support of children's learning. A survey of 208 teachers in Wales noted that teachers felt some children were very well supported in lockdown. These teachers identified potential benefits to pupil wellbeing; '*Spending time with family, baking, walking etc has been hugely beneficial to their wellbeing*' (headteacher). Teachers also felt that some parents became more aware of their children's learning needs, and of what was being taught. (Marchant, Todd et al. 2020, italics in source).

3.1. Parental engagement in Wales during lockdown

It is worth noting that in contrast to the report from Parentkind above, the Sutton Trust's survey in Wales found that only 40% of parents felt confident in supporting their children's learning during lockdown (2020). This may be related to a Parentkind finding specific to Wales that showed that only 28% of parents who responded to their survey felt satisfied with the frequency of contacts from schools, and only 26% were satisfied with the provision of learning resources to support learning (Parentkind 2020). However, parents still reported increases in engagement with learning, with 53% of respondents reporting that they were more engaged than before the lockdown started.

Taking all of these factors into account, this Welsh Government funded project set out to investigate the place of parental engagement in children's

learning in initial teacher education in Wales during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Collaborative research project

4.1. Methods

This paper presents a set of situated, rich reflections on the experiences of those involved in initial teacher education in Wales during the lockdowns resulting from COVID-19, showing the situation from the point of view of those involved (Golafshani 2003). Notwithstanding the contested place of the concepts of 'reliability' and 'validity' in relation to qualitative research (which makes up the bulk of this paper) (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Golafshani 2003), this paper does make claims to being trustworthy. Cohen and Crabtree (2008) suggest that there are seven aspects to the claim of trustworthiness; this paper fulfils these by being ethically conducted, examining an issue of national and international importance, being couched in language which is appropriate for both an academic and lay audience, and the methods used were appropriate as will be detailed below. The work was undertaken in a reflective, reflexive manner and issues of bias were considered in the research and reporting. Research questions were designed in conjunction with stakeholders.

Reflection has been defined as active and careful consideration of beliefs or understandings, their groundings and implications (Dewey 1997). This is intimately linked the reflexivity, which is 'an ongoing process that involves reflection to continuously construct (and shift) our understanding and social realities (Barrett, Kajamaa et al. 2020, 107); in this sense, reflexivity is the action of constant reflection on outcomes placed in their proper context (ibid.).

To this end, the team met throughout the research process, and considered the research tools in relation to emergent findings. While the team was open to changes to those tools, none were deemed to be necessary.

This paper reports on data from two main sources: semi structured interviews and focus groups (with ITE providers, student teachers, stakeholders and parents) and surveys (for parents and student teachers). Data from different respondents was also triangulated to reach the conclusions presented (Robson 1993, Cohen, Manion et al. 2013). These instruments were chosen to facilitate the capture of both wide ranging data from a

fairly parge respondent group (surveys), which was both qualitative and quantitative in nature, and in depth, qualitative data from targeted respondents groups (interviews and focus groups).

4.1.1. Sample selection and acquisition

As this project investigated the impact of COVID-19 on initial teacher education, broadly considered, one of the first steps undertaken was to introduce the project to partnership schools (involved in ITE) with the two University collaborators. These discussions led to the honing of the research questions and areas of exploration. Interview schedules were co-designed by the project team, based on the extant literature and further discussions with partner schools.

The sample of respondents for interviews were selected both purposively (to ensure a broad base) and also through snowballing, as different strategies were appropriate for different respondent groups (Devers and Frankel 2000, Etikan, Musa et al. 2016). Interviews with ITE providers were conducted through a purposive sampling framework, as this was a much smaller and well defined group. All ITE providers in Wales were contacted not only during meetings but also by email, to arrange interviews with appropriate members of the ITE team (Saldana 2011).

The surveys were distributed widely throughout Wales, both through general social media (twitter) but also through work with specific groups such as the Children's Rights in Early Years Network (CREY), networks accessed by ITE providers, and ParentKindUK. The surveys were available in English and Welsh.

All interviews were conducted online, due to the exigencies of the COVID 19 continuing lockdown; respondents for the parental, stakeholder and student teacher interviews were sourced from a convenience sample of respondents, using pre-existing contacts from the research team (Cohen, Manion et al. 2013). Potential respondents were approached either directly by the research team or through contacts made by the team. As the interviews were conducted through Zoom, transcripts were readily available; these were checked alongside the interview recordings before being analysed. Zoom has been shown to be a useful tool for qualitative research (Archibald, Ambagtsheer et al. 2019); it should be noted that due to its use during the pandemic, all respondents were familiar with this software by the time of the interviews.

Interviews were supplemented by focus groups. These were undertaken for student teachers and parents. As Fox (2007) points out, focus groups

can present a viable alternative for interviews with groups who may not be able or willing to attend individual interviews, and online focus groups may be particularly appropriate for those who can or will not meet face to face (in this case due to the restrictions due to COVID 19).

A focus groups is generally understood to consist of a small group of people gathered together for a specific research purpose with an emphasis placed on the interaction among the members of the group (Coetzee and Kotze 2014).

For this project, we decided to use focus groups for parents and students for two main reasons. The first and most important was, as above, the value of the interaction between participants. Single interviews with providers were appropriate as the interviews were in part about the specifics of provisions in particular institutions. For parents and students, it was more appropriate to convene focus groups which allowed interaction between the members of the group.

Focus groups also provided a means of collection of rich data from multiple participant in one encounter; as this was a short term project, this effective use of time was of value.

Semi structured interviews were chosen as an appropriate method of collecting qualitative, lived data, to gather not only factual information (whether and how parental engagement featured in ITE programmes), but also how respondents understood the concept of parental engagement, and what value they ascribed to it, in relation to preparing teachers for the profession (Cohen, Manion et al. 2013). Focus groups were held for students, parents and some stakeholders (Dilshad and Latif 2013). Interviews and focus groups followed the same schedule of questions.

There were 111 responses to the parent survey; 29 responses to the student survey. Eight provider interviews were undertaken, two with stakeholders. Eleven students took part in focus groups and four parents.

4.2. Data analysis process

This project was exploratory in nature; the evaluation followed a structured process (Maxwell 2012) but did not set out to test a particular hypothesis. Rather, the research team took a broadly inductivist stance (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), identifying themes from the data which were considered both as individual parts and as a whole (Hammersley 2007).

From reading and re-reading the interview data and the responses to open text questions in the surveys, a coding framework was developed

(Lingard, Albert et al. 2008, Raduescu and Vessey 2011). This process utilised both imposed codes (a priori), taken from the literature in the field, and intial themes identified in the data . Overall, 497 items were given codes. Using the same framework for the interview and survey data allowed for triangulation between data sources (Maxwell 2012). Coding of the data followed a broadly grounded approach (Lingard, Albert et al. 2008, Glaser and Strauss 2009, Urquhart, Lehmann et al. 2010). The data were analysed first as separate parts (e.g., survey data, interview data) and then holistically, to come to the final conclusions.

As Mauthner and Doucet point out, in this sort of research, meanings are 'made, rather than found' (2003, 414). We acknowledge that this is not a neutral process, and that we did not (and could not) approach this project, and the analysis of the data therein, as object agents We acknowledge the position(s) we had in approaching this project (Barrett, Kajamaa et al. 2020).

While it is probably not possible to highlight all of the assumptions and values we bring to this project, it is important to foreground those which we deem most likely to influence the entire research project, especially the 'making of meaning' in the process of data analysis.

- We uphold the value of initial teacher education in its present form in Wales; this is not to say that the process is not problematic, but rather that we acknowledge the value therein
- We uphold the value of parental engagement in learning, as defined above
- We acknowledge the value of varied voices within the research project, and have attempted to give equal weight to all voices.

It is also important to note that the research was carried out either by those actively involved in the provision of ITE, or research around parental engagement. The standing of the principal investigator as an author of numerous pieces on parental engagement must also be considered, as it was commented upon by various research respondents.

In reporting all data sources, errors of grammar and/or syntax have been corrected. In no case was the sense of the communication changed (Oliver, Serovich et al. 2005).

4.3. Ethical issues and considerations

This project received ethical approval through Swansea University's College of Arts and Humanities ethical approval process. Consent was

gained from all respondents to the research, either through agreement to continue with an online survey, or through agreement to a consent form for the interview/focus group process. Respondents were assured of anonymity and are not named and not identified by name or gender, but rather by role. Therefore, 'Provider' relates to those involved in the provision of ITE in Wales; 'Student' refers to those who are student teachers, 'Mentor' to those who act as mentors in schools for students on placement, 'Parent' to those who were interviewed in view of their role as parents to school age children enrolled in schools in Wales. The term, 'Stakeholder' refers to respondents who are employed in some way which relates to ITE in Wales (to be more specific would open the possibility of identification).

5. Findings from report

In this section, we will report findings thematically; the origin of the data reported will be noted. This provides a more holistic overview of the project results than reporting group by group or instrument by instrument.

Overall, five themes emerged from the data. The first is the importance of parental engagement with learning, and within this, the importance of establishing good relationship with parents. The data also highlighted the presence of defict views of parents, especially as experienced by student teachers on placement, and the place of discussions of parental engagement in ITE in Wales. This is followed by the theme of parental engagement as being important for the well being of young people.

5.1.1. The importance of parental engagement with learning

All groups of respondents agreed on the importance of parental engagement, considering it to be, 'key to a child's education' (mentor), 'crucial/ (provider) and, tellingly, 'absolutely crucial for the school moving forward' (Stakeholder). While some students appeared to have a more nuanced understanding of parental engagement that focused on ways to involve parents in their child's learning, other student teachers were unsure how to respond to the question and were unfamiliar with the concept, suggesting that parental engagement had not been discussed in depth in their ITE content or on placement.

Most student teachers understood parental engagement as parents being involved with their children's learning in some way (see below) and all

students perceived it as important, in fact, crucial to children's development. However, when asked if the topic had been covered as part of their course, most student teachers reported that the topic had only been mentioned in one module of the ITE programme. There were also a range of views as to why parental engagement was important.

Most student teachers saw parental engagement as a way of supporting the work of the school, giving parents and insight into the work of the school or reinforcing and extending this work. This highlights a school focused view of parental engagement, which situates parents as 'helping' and supporting the work of the school, rather than being agentic towards supporting learning in their own right (Souto-Manning and Swick 2006, Gasper 2013)(Author and Montgomery 2014' Author, 2017). They also thought that parent's involvement would support children to have positive attitudes toward school and their work there.

Student teachers felt that the COVID-19 lockdown had increased the importance of parental engagement, and increased expectations that parents would be engaged in learning, taking on a 'more teacher like role' (student teacher).

Respondents identified two main areas of importance when discussing parental engagement in this study; building relationships between parents and the school and communication.

5.1.2. Understandings of Parental engagement in learning

Building positive relationships with parents was seen as a way of breaking negative cycles that may lead to parents disengaging with the school due to their own previous experiences of school. This concept was highlighted by a mentor, who reported that 'it's going to take years to come in because a parent … who had not so positive experience of being at school … it's intimidating'.

Building relationships between parents and the school was tied into the understanding that this relationship had changed over time and that parents were increasingly more involved in school activities and pupil learning. Another provider pointed out that it is 'really important' that parents understand 'that school has changed and it's for everybody now, and we can only do that by building relationships with parents' (provider). It was acknowledged that this approach also has a positive impact on children who are influenced by a more relaxed relationship between their parents and their teachers.

Respondents overwhelmingly identified parental engagement as building and securing positive relationships with parents. This was seen as a means of supporting the wellbeing and development of students

There was some evidence of an understanding of parental engagement as being about parents' relationships with children's learning. A student described experienced in a school sending home information about what had been covered and 'things that [parents] can carry on at home with home learning … giving them little activities to do at home that are fun …' (Student).

This clearly puts an emphasis on the home learning environment (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003), although it is still school directed and led; the school tells parents what do to rather than acting in partnership with families. The communication appears to be entirely one way (e.g., there is no feedback from parents about the process, no involvement from parents in setting up the learning)

A stakeholder echoed this in both the action and school led nature of the work, 'getting parents to help children at home' (Stakeholder) and another stakeholder mentioned 'giving parents the tools by which they can support their children better' (Stakeholder). In this discussion, the school initiates and dictates the action to be taken (Souto-Manning and Swick 2006, Gasper 2013) . However, this stakeholder did go further, emphasising the need to build relationships with parents, 'to such an extent that it does become a bit of a partnership between school and parents' (Stakeholder).

Another provider, however, was clear on the importance of discussing with students the importance of forming a partnership with parents, 'talking about the importance of not just engaging with parents, but actually having them as part of the partnership with a school, collaborative decision making' (Provider).

5.1.3. Relationships and communication with parents

Respondents were clear that staff relationships with parents were an important part of parental engagement. However, respondents saw 'parental engagement' as being about parents engaging with the school, rather than with learning, per se (Author and Montgomery 2014). This view of parental engagement, as being about how parents relate to the school, was the dominant understanding of parental engagement by all groups of respondents. All groups of respondents felt that the means to secure these relationships

with parents was through good communication. And for the most part, this communication was seen as one way (school to home) and school directed, 'Keeping parents in the loop' (student), 'Giving parents the tools by which they can support their children better' (Stakeholder), and keeping parents informed (mentor). The school directed nature of this relationship was highlighted by the concept of 'getting parents on board' (Stakeholder). Parents also echoed this, 'schools have aims and objectives toward child development and things, and it's engaging parents in that process' (parent).

Parents were mainly seen, particularly by student teachers, as being on the receiving end of communication from the school, through reporting mechanisms such as parents' evenings, and receiving letters sent by the school, describing communication as 'keeping them [parents] in the loop', 'keeping parents informed', 'sending letters home', that parents needed to be aware of how a child was behaving in school, and 'parents need to be more involved with the school'.

When asked how they would support parental engagement in learning in their future career as teachers, students responded with examples of ways to increase their communication with parents. This was to 'ensure parents are kept up to date with the work and progress' and praising parents who 'engage [with] their child's learning experience' to encourage other parents to do the same.

5.1.4. Deficit Views

There were indications of deficit views of parents in the project data. As noted above, deficit views or parents concentrate on what is (or is perceived to be) lacking in parental engagement with learning, rather than acknowledging the assists parents are able to bring to supporting their children. Respondents reported preparing students for 'tricky conversations' with parents and 'calming down aggressive parents'; however, respondents did not report discussing an asset-based approach with students. Locating parental engagement discussions within discourses such as ACES or 'tricky conversations' contextualises work with parents within a framework of problematic issues. Parental engagement was mentioned in relation to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). While these are legitimate issues, lack of contextual and consistent provision for parental engagement in ITE could create a framework for interaction between teachers and parents that is less than positive.

Students often reported that they were often told by teachers in their placements that parents 'don't care' (Students) and that teachers got into 'bad habits' (Student) by making assumptions that parents did not care about their children's education. These reports are particularly concerning in view of reports from providers that information about parental engagement would be provided for their students while on placement.

5.1.5. Wellbeing

The relationship between teachers and parents was not only for the academic benefit of the child, but also their well-being which respondents suggested had become increasingly important during the pandemic. Students and providers reported that some schools had begun to communicate with parents about positive matters, not just problematic issues.

Wellbeing was something that parents highlighted as an important issue, talking about mental health openly and not being anxious about children 'falling behind'. Some parents prioritised wellbeing and mental health over school based work while other parents mentioned routines and structures they put in place to support their child's learning, as well as creating specific spaces for learning to take place.

The theme of wellbeing is prominent throughout the data and fed into the way that parents engaged with their children's learning at home, incorporating 'life skills' such as cooking, physical activity and play which were not necessarily prioritised in online learning. Parents also reported encouraging curiosity and learning about things that were of interest to their children.

5.1.6. Parental engagement in ITE provision in Wales

'It should be at the start, with all the other key stuff' (Student)

As has been seen above, there are many different understandings of parental engagement across the provision and experience of ITE in Wales. One provider pointed out, 'It's about whether the student understands the concept of parental engagement – it's tricky – do we all understand the same thing when we speak about that?' (Provider)

One provider demonstrated an understanding of parental engagement that went beyond communication with parents and moved into joint decision making. However, not all students were so well supported, 'There's been no direct addressing of it [parental engagement]'(Student).

Interestingly, while all categories of respondent highlighted the importance of parental engagement, one provider gave a clear demonstration of the difference between espoused theory and theory in action (a concept to which we will return). Having said that the concept was 'crucial', this provider went on to point out, 'We don't have any specific elements of the programme that are dedicated to this' (Provider). Another provider, again having agreed about the importance of parental engagement reported that in their programme, coverage of the issue was 'mostly implicit' (Provider).

The reality then is that while providers, mentors, stakeholders and students all agree that parental engagement with learning is 'vital', 'crucial and 'really important', there is no coordinated provision around the topic, and indeed no agreed definition of parental engagement was shared by all parties. ITE providers recognised the importance of including parental engagement in their programmes however there was no strategic implementation of this. Instead, provision of parental engagement in children's learning was implicit and several providers expected this content to be covered in students' placements. Lack of consistency of the provision of parental engagement on ITE courses is reflected in the varied experiences of student experience with parental engagement on their placements. The findings indicate a clear divide between the espoused understanding of the importance of parental engagement with learning and action/practice related to this concept.

6. Discussion- Espoused theory vs theory in use

While all respondents agreed on the importance of parental engagement there was a lack of agreement as to what this term might mean, and the place it might hold for teaching staff in general, and in ITE itself. Respondents concentrated on what can be characterised as parental involvement with school or schooling, particularly school-come communication, with much less emphasis on parental engagement with learning.

Considering the importance of parental engagement in learning, as evidenced at the outset of this paper, supporting student teachers to work effectively with families should not be seen as an additional part of the ITE curriculum; rather, it should be embedded throughout, as an underpinning, foundational aspect of practice. It is clear from the foregoing that there is a gulf between beliefs about the importance of parental engagement with

learning (shared by all stakeholders) and the reality of its place within ITE provision.

Based on the earlier work of Argyris and Schon (1974), the concept of two different sorts of theory can be used to explain discrepancies between the values that people say guide their actions, and those which, in reality, actually do form the foundation for action.

Espoused theory relates to an individual's view of the world, their place within that world, and their relationships to others. This theory is often formal, and idealised (Jones 2009). Individuals may use the theories we espouse to explain our actions (Garcia 2011); espoused theory has explicative power, but often does not reflect actions in the real world.

Theory in use relates to people's fundamental beliefs, which in turn influence action (Ajzen 1991); what teachers do is clearly influenced by their beliefs (Fullan 2001, Guskey 2002). Savaya and Gardner (2012) have pointed out that people are often unaware of the values which actually underpin their actions (and this may be particularly the case when espoused and enacted theories are at variance). Understanding that there is a gulf between the two requires a learning process (Savaya and Gardner 2012), one which can at times be profoundly uncomfortable (Author 2019). An example of such a gulf between theories would be found, for example, in the existence of discriminatory practices within organisations which proclaim policies to the opposite effect.

As other researchers have pointed out, what is included in teacher training programmes shows what is held as important by those designing and delivering those programme (Patte 2011); this would argue, in the case in hand, that although the espoused theory holds the parental engagement in learning is important, it is not *important enough* to be included in the curriculum or experiences supplied to student teachers, that is, the values of parental engagement with learning have not become part of the theories in use which inform the content and conduct of initial teacher education.

Effective change will arise when there is a conjunction between the two types of theory (Garcia 2011), that is, when the value of parental engagement with learning has become embedded in the theory of use of ITE programmes, as well as the espoused theory.

6.1. Espoused theory to theory in use: Parental engagement in Welsh ITE

The diagram below presents a graphic representation of how theories both espoused and in use in Welsh ITE provision map against the continuum

from parental involvement in school/schooling to parental engagement with learning (Author and Montgomery 2014), illustrated by examples from the data.

Figure 1: Espoused and In Action theory
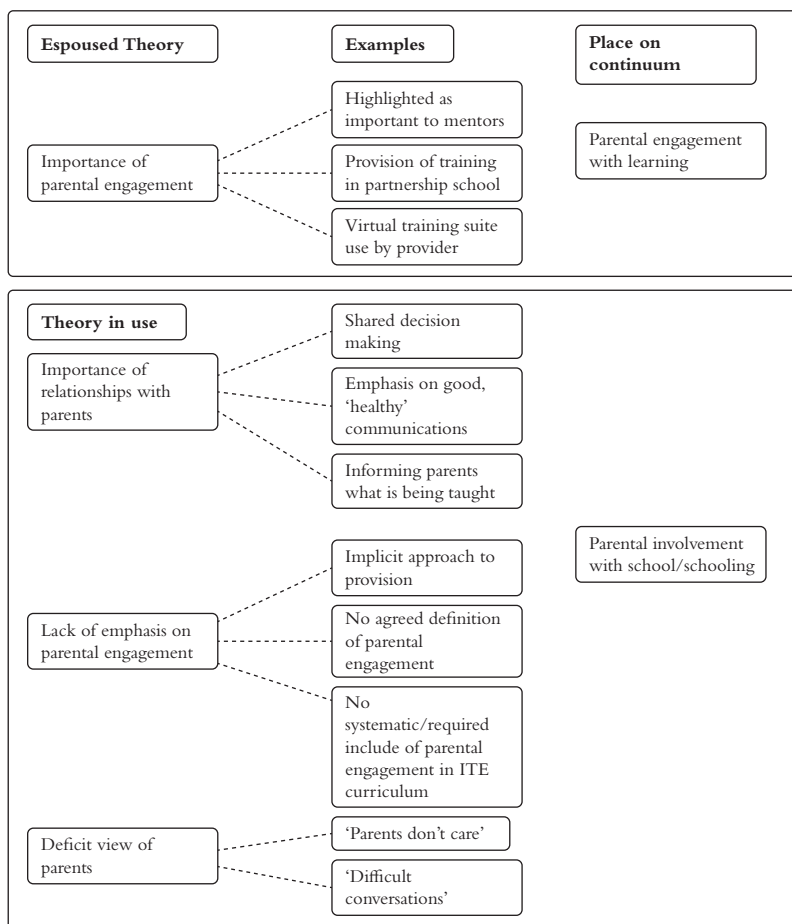
6.2. Implications for ITE

We have seen above the importance of not only parental engagement with learning but also of ensuring teachers are prepared to support this engagement, even though it takes place outside of school. This research project has shown that there is a lack of consistent practice in ITE in Wales around this topic. While this is in no way an isolated or unique situation, as other locales also struggle with this issue (Lewis and Forman 2002, Baum and McMurray-Schwarz 2004, Macgregor 2005, Baum and Swick 2008, de Bruïne, Willemse et al. 2014, Berkowitz, Astor et al. 2017, Willemse, Thompson et al. 2018, Author 2021), it is still of concern, particularly as school staff and families struggle to return to routines of in person schooling after the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. Therefore, based on the data from this project, we make the following recommendations:

- That providers of ITE in Wales come together to agree a consistent definition and understanding of the term, 'parental engagement in learning', based on the literature in the field.
- That along with this agreed definition, providers agree the place of parental engagement in the ITE curriculum, ensuring that it is covered as an explicit element of teacher training.
- That materials to support ITE provision in this area should be produced
- That teaching standards and the inspection regime based on those standards be amended to ensure proper value is given to support for parental engagement with learning. It is important to note here that we are not suggesting scrutiny or inspection of parents' engagement with learning but rather of school-based support for that learning.

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