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Why family engagement is crucial for schools and children

As educators, we know a child's home environment is a vital contributory factor towards their cognitive and social development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), highlighted how important the parent-teacher relationship was, and how this had a direct impact on the child at home and in school. Since then, much research and successful programmes recognise the approach schools take is pivotal in fostering relationships with families (Baker et al., 2016; DeSpain et al., 2018). How effectively and successfully this is facilitated within a school and delivered to families seemingly lies in the hands of senior management (Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Therefore, in order for schools to be successful in supporting the families they serve, a shift in the approach and methods used to improve family engagement is most certainly necessary.

Staff training on professionalism and adaptability amongst staff in schools with the families they serve is crucial (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). This should be monitored robustly; expectations are taught and demonstrated via leadership to all staff, especially those who are new to the profession. Teachers need to take time to acquire knowledge about the individual needs and home circumstances of the children they teach. Considering these factors will enable teachers to understand the child better and work closely with the family to facilitate their learning in a comprehensive way. Schools must work to ensure their staff understand the benefits of creating strong partnerships with the families they work with. The positive impact this would have on the children they teach goes beyond simply looking at the academic benefits. By delivering this policy effectively, schools will in fact not only raise attainment, but more importantly improve the overall well-being of its pupils (Auerbach, 2009).

The unprecedented global pandemic has impacted children and families in varying ways within the discourse of education. For example, research highlights that the impact of school

closures has led to heightened social inequality, therefore affecting disadvantaged families the greatest (EEF, 2021). The gap in children's learning due to school closures, has unfortunately resulted in becoming an additional obstacle for schools to address, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Conversely, COVID-19 has highlighted that a child's social class and home environment ultimately had a major impact on their progress and attainment during lockdown. However, studies conducted by (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Sheldon & Jung, 2015) found that one of the main factors contributing to raising attainment for children from disadvantaged backgrounds was in fact the culture of the school, and how staff interacted and engaged with parents, which led them to feel valued in their child's education.

Now more than ever the relationship between home and school is crucial in supporting children's social, emotional and academic development. Family engagement should truly be at the forefront of a school's development plan. Schools need to work creatively and collaboratively in finding new and innovative ways to engage their families. So that appropriate provision is made for all children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. If COVID-19 has taught schools anything it would be that family engagement is no longer a highly desirable factor but an absolute necessity.

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