Constructing home-school relationships in a 'most deprived' area: A Foucauldian discourse analysis of primary school communications and policies.

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Abstract

This case study, set within a 'most deprived' area, explores the construction of home-school relationships (HSR) within the communications and policies of seven primary schools. It sits within a poststructuralist paradigm, focusing on the way language constructs social realities, and aims to disrupt the hegemony of institutional discourses and give voice to nondominant parents within HSR. Employing a Foucauldian discourse analysis, it is argued that schools position parents in complex and contradictory ways, and use techniques of government to coerce parents into behaviours which align with schools' goals and correct them as individual subjects. Suggestions are made for how this shapes what is possible and impossible for HSR in this context. A commitment to reflexivity is maintained throughout the dissertation, acknowledging the role of the researcher at every stage of the research process.

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Contents

Introduction

This qualitative case study explores home-school relationships (HSR) across seven primary schools, situated in an area described by its local authority as the 'most deprived' area within a large town in England. Having worked as a teacher in this area and reflecting on the disconnect I felt between myself and families in my time there, I was interested in understanding more about how HSR are experienced by parents in this community. Whilst, as a teacher, I had approached HSR from a perspective of parental engagement (PE), my positionality developed as I began to experience the education system as a parent when my son started school. This fluidity in my positionality (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015) led me to question the framing of HSR within educational research and practice, and seek to disrupt the hegemony of institutional discourses as I saw it. Thus, I approach this research with a poststructuralist, critical lens which 'links language, subjectivity, social organisation, and power' (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 961). Employing the 'intellectual tools' (Rabinow, 2020, p. 6) of Foucault's governmentality and panopticism, I undertake a discourse analysis to explore how the home-school relationship is constructed within school communications and policies.

Background

HSR have been a feature of government policy in the UK for a significant time. Crozier (1998) contends that the earliest mention of parents in educational legislation dates back to the Education Act of 1944, which enforced parents' responsibility to ensure their children attend full-time education. In recent decades, there has been an increasing rhetoric of partnership in the literature around HSR, with Epstein's (1995) framework for partnership continuing to be cited as the most used by schools to develop their approach to HSR (Goodall, 2022). Yet within this framework and the wider field, there is a heavy focus on parental involvement (PI) and parental engagement (PE), whose definitions are cloudy and are often approached as synonymous with partnership and HSR, all with the sole aim of raising student academic achievement. Historically, nondominant families have been viewed with a deficit lens as lacking aspiration for the education of their children (Department for Education [DfE], 2010), and for a long time critical studies have attempted to redress the imbalance of power between schools and parents, particularly those within nondominant communities (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Fine, 1993; Lareau, 1987).

The timing of this study is particularly appropriate given the recent experiences of parents and schools amid the COVID-19 pandemic which necessitated a negotiation of HSR as students were remote learning from home (Levy, 2024; Monacute & Cullinane, 2021). However, the government's approach to HSR is inconsistent. Despite a recent white paper stating that 'we must do more to ensure all parents have a more significant voice in schools' (DfE, 2016, p. 17), the only obligation that teachers have to parents within the Teacher's Standards (DfE, 2011) is to 'work with parents in the best interests of their pupils' (p. 10) and 'communicate effectively with parents with regard to pupils' achievements and well-being' (p. 13). Furthermore, new rules and guidance published in 2024 (DfE, 2024a) is likely to impact HSR. Schools are now obligated to report absence rates to their local authority. Five days' unauthorised absence now results in a fixed penalty for parents of £80 per parent per child if paid within 14 days. Although this penalty is issued by the local authority, this is likely to cause tension between parents and schools and affect the dynamic of HSR as they exist the current climate.

Definitions of key terms

Deprivation

To describe the case site, I have chosen to use the term 'most deprived', as this is the term used to describe the area in local authority analyses.[1] Local authorities in England use the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) to analyse the relative deprivation in small areas of England (Department for Communities and Local Government [DCLG], 2015). Whilst I acknowledge the 'relationship between indexification and the governmentalisation of the state, [and the argument] that this fixes unequal conditions as a product of localities' (Kiely & Strong, 2023, p. 1771), I felt I needed to use some form of statistical analysis to justify why this particular site should be a focus for this research, as opposed to me as a lone researcher making my own judgements about an area based on my experiences working there and potential assumptions I made. The IMD is comprised of 39 indicators within the following categories: income deprivation, employment deprivation, education, skills and training deprivation, health deprivation and disability, crime, barriers to housing and services, living environment deprivation. Thus, although 'the construction of any deprivation index, it is clear, is fraught with difficulties, (Deas, 2003, p. 899), this makes an attempt to give a comprehensive view of the wide range of factors that impact the quality of people's lives within an area. The case study area, when assessed against all of these

[1] I have not cited the LA publications here to protect the identity of the case study area. I discuss this further in the Methodology: Ethics subsection.

factors combined, was found to be the 'most deprived' area when compared with all other areas within a large English town.

Nondominant

I use the term *nondominant* to describe the community living within the case site, and the parent communities of the schools in this study, whilst aiming to avoid any notion of deficit that historical terms may imply (for example the connotations of "less" connected to "*lower*-class" or *"marginalised"*). I do this to acknowledge the imbalance of power in our society (Gutiérrez et al., 2009) and the resulting 'marginalisation by dominant institutions, policies, and practices.' (Ishimaru, 2019, p. 381). Following Ishimaru (2019), I recognise that 'although their experiences are distinct, low-income communities, those from immigrant or refugee backgrounds and communities of colour do share experiences of being poorly served by dominant educational systems' (p. 381).

Research Aims

This study takes a critical stance to explore HSR as a social relationship, constructed 'as the result of social processes' (Lareau, 1987, p. 74) to address the gap in the field which negates to look at the home-school relationship in its own right as a social interaction. Within a poststructuralist paradigm, 'social reality is seen as shaped by interaction and characterised by multiple truths dependent on the perspectives of the researcher' (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2020, p. 14). Here, I aim to explore the truths of HSR as they might be experienced by parents within this case study community, to give voice to nondominant families who have historically held less power in relationships with institutions, as well as their dominant counterparts. Throughout this dissertation, I will maintain a commitment to reflexivity to understand and acknowledge how my own positionalities contribute to the research. Thus, I seek to understand more about how HSR are constructed by schools based within this nondominant community, and by doing so disrupt the hegemony of institutional discourses.

Literature Review

There is an extensive body of literature advocating the benefits of positive home-school relationships (HSR), with a perennial focus on parental involvement (PI) and parental engagement (PE) as crucial to raising student achievement. In this chapter, I will review current and seminal research in the field, concentrating (as an English speaker) mainly on studies undertaken in Anglophone contexts where the topic of HSR has garnered considerable attention, and with a particular focus on research involving nondominant families and communities to support the setting for this dissertation research within a 'most deprived' area of a town in England. First, I will review how HSR are defined within educational research. Second, I will present how research on HSR has been approached in the literature through a lens of partnership and the terms involvement and engagement. Third, I will examine the conditions necessary for positive HSR and consider the scholarly work and studies that problematise HSR. I will then proffer my conclusions, outlining the implications of the extant literature and any notable gaps, and how these helped to shape the framing of this project and develop the research questions.

What are home-school relationships?

HSR, sometimes termed 'family-school relationships' (Lareau, 1987, p. 73) or 'home-school links' (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002, p. 35), are understood here to mean the dynamics of interactions, both direct and indirect, between a child's school and their parents, guardians and the wider family in their home life. As such, they 'carry the imprint of the larger social context' (Lareau, 1987, p. 74), rendering them classed, gendered and raced (Crozier, 1999; Fine, 1993; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Reay, 2000; Vincent, 2017). Yet, it has been acknowledged that research and the wider discourse surrounding HSR can fail to recognise their complexity (Alexander, 2010; Lareau, 1987). Indeed, much of the literature synonymises HSR with PE or centres their cultivation as a means to increase engagement from parents, rather than viewing them as 'social relationships' (Lareau, 1987, p. 74), which highlights an opening in the field to further explore HSR in their own right.

Where scholars have addressed the home-school relationship in terms of connection and interaction, some have highlighted the need for teachers to intentionally develop meaningful relationships with families (Buchanan & Buchanan, 2017; Durand and Secakusuma, 2019). Buchanan & Buchanan (2017) present six strategies for teachers to foster relationships, including the importance of taking the lead by making personal contact, practicing reciprocal

communication, and '[honouring] the role that families play' (p. 242). However, their recommendations are, at times, vague and idealistic, and place the onus of HSR solely onto teachers who, it has been repeatedly asserted, are underprepared for the work of developing relationships with families (Barker & Harris, 2020; Buchanan & Buchanan, 2017; Epstein, 2018; Goodall, 2022; Roberts, 2017). Indeed, in many contexts, practitioners are employed to act as a dedicated point of contact and pastoral support for families (Ross et al., 2021; Tett & Macleod, 2020). However, this could distance teachers and families and bureaucratise the relationship. Others in the field emphasise the impact of wide-ranging factors on HSR, in particular the context of family life (Goodall, 2022; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Raey, 2000), leadership of the school (Auerbach, 2010; Flores & Kyere, 2021; Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022), and the educational policies imposed at any given time within the broader political context (Ball, 2017; Chiong, 2020; Gibson, 2013).

How have home-school relationships been approached in the literature?

Relationships as partnerships

Much research frames HSR as 'partnerships', whereby 'families and schools work together to support the learning and wellbeing of children and young people' (Barker & Harris, 2020, p. 4). The discourse around family-school partnerships suggests a focus of collaboration (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022), yet there is a growing emphasis on the complex process of partnerships as 'finding a common ground for involving parents, while maintaining a clear understanding of issues around roles and power, barriers and enablers of teacher-parent collaboration' (Kambouri et al., 2022, p. 640). Epstein's (1987; 1994; 1995) seminal work on 'school/family/community partnerships' (Epstein, 1995, p. 701) delineates the concept of partnership as 'a better, broader term than "parental involvement" to express the shared interests, responsibilities, investments, and the overlapping spheres of influences' (Epstein, 1994, p. 39) of all stakeholders in the education of children. Notably, these all-encompassing conceptualisations of partnership are, nonetheless, presented as an expansion of PI, which remains at the centre with the aim to maximise student achievement outcomes.

Epstein's (1987) theory of overlapping spheres advocates for the integration of home and school life via 'the policies and programs of organisations and the actions and attitudes of the individuals in those organisations' (p. 130). The model proposes three spheres of family, school and community, with the child at the centre. Interactions between stakeholders are differentiated into two levels: the 'institutional' (Epstein, 1994, p. 41), such as school-wide invitations to an event;

and the 'individual' (Epstein, 1994, p. 41), for instance when a teacher calls or meets with a parent one-to-one. It recognises that there are external forces acting upon each sphere in the form of 'experience, philosophy [and] practices' (Epstein, 1994, p. 41), so that respective parties can work together on some things, but approach other activities separately. However, a major component of the theory is the argument that all stakeholders benefit from increased overlap between home and school life, whereby parents 'run school-like homes' (Epstein, 1987, p. 131) to support their children's learning, and schools become 'more responsive to the student and [are] more like families' (Epstein, 1987, p. 132). Whilst this continuity and care is arguably beneficial for a child's academic development, it puts on a par adapting organisational practices for the benefit of students with organising family life around the structures and goals of the school, which for families is arguably just one aspect of their personal life (Kingston, 2021). This rhetoric has been criticised by those who warn of the intense and wide-reaching pressures of the professionalisation of parenting (Head, 2020; Jezierski & Wall, 2019; McRobbie, 2013; Vincent, 1996), and the emotional costs of involvement for many families, particularly mothers who continue to take on the majority of caregiving responsibilities including involvement with schools (Lareau, 1989; Reay, 2000). Indeed, Hallgarten (2000) insists that 'the onus for change to improve parent-school relationships must fall onto the school, not the parent' (p. 2).

Epstein's (1995) framework for partnership continues to be cited as the model most used by schools to develop their practice (Goodall, 2022; Hamlin & Flessa, 2018). It focuses on schools developing partnerships with families to encourage and enable involvement, outlining the six types of involvement as: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision Making, and Collaborating with Community (Epstein, 1995, p. 704). Whilst there have been several revisions of the framework with publications oriented towards various professional stakeholders, these categories of involvement remain unchanged (Epstein, 2019, 2023). Distinct challenges and outcomes are specified relating to each type of PI for all parties (students, parents and teachers), though the overarching drive to implement a programme which succeeds in enabling all six types of involvement is emphatically 'children's learning and development' (Epstein, 1995, p. 712). However, Goodall (2022) calls attention to the lack of weighting given to individual involvement types, arguing that all forms are presented as equally important when, in fact, studies have suggested that particular forms of involvement are more impactful in relation to student outcomes (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Harris & Goodall, 2008;). This issue is especially salient when the framework is implemented in practice and decisions must be made about where to direct the resources and efforts of both staff and families. Furthermore, Epstein's framework has been criticised for its school-centric approach and failure to 'engage the intersections of race, class, and immigration, which are relevant to the experiences of many

parents from nondominant backgrounds' (Baquedano-López, 2013, p. 150); whilst its goal is to involve parents in partnership activities, it 'continues to place the school as the sole architect in defining the boundaries and goals of PI' (Durand & Secakusuma, 2019, p. 4) and thus partnership remains in the school's control.

The role of school leaders in shaping home-school partnerships has been explored by Auerbach (2010), who proposes a leadership continuum for school-family partnerships outlining four typologies of leaders, and provides case study examples to demonstrate the variation between leaders' approaches in practice. The continuum progresses from: leadership preventing partnerships, where leaders 'buffer the school from outside influences, including parents' (p. 734); to nominal partnerships, where leaders do invite some involvement but keep opportunities 'limited and controlled' (p. 734); to traditional partnerships, which Auerbach likens to Epstein and Sander's (2006) model, characterised by 'two-way communication and more varied involvement' (p. 735) but still centred on school goals and motives; to authentic partnerships as the ideal target. Authentic partnerships are defined as 'respectful alliances among educators, families, and community groups that value relationship building, dialogue, and power sharing as part of socially just, democratic schools' (p. 729). Auerbach developed this model specifically for low-income, urban contexts where power imbalances between professionals and parents are particularly prevalent (Boag-Munroe & Evangelou, 2012; Durand & Secakusuma, 2019; Fine, 1993; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002), and argues that leadership for authentic partnerships needs to go beyond 'symbolic activities such as coffee with the principal' (p. 729), view families with a 'strengths-based perspective' (p. 743), and share decision-making power with parents.

Auerbach's (2010) continuum has been utilised recently to explore the current climate of leadership in relation to home-school partnerships (Flores & Kyere, 2021; Tett & Macleod, 2020), which suggests that leaders' approaches to partnership are still variable and in need of investigation. A study in Scottish primary schools found that head teachers' conceptualisations of home-school partnerships influence the way partnerships are enacted in schools, and also affect how teachers and other staff engage in partnership (Tett & Macleod, 2020). This does, however, conflict with Crozier and Davies' (2007) previous findings that head teachers' personalities and attitudes towards 'minority ethnic parents' (p. 305) do not always permeate throughout the school, suggesting a need for a structural, policy approach to relations with families. Tett and Macleod (2020) found that some leaders held deficit views of parents, and where leaders were 'focussed solely on the school's agenda, [home-school partnerships] were difficult to achieve' (p. 463). In this context, family-learning practitioners (employed by the local authority to support family learning [Education Scotland, 2016]) played an important role in mediating the relationships between schools and families by communicating in a more personal and equitable

way, 'supporting parents to assert their agency' (p. 464). Similarly, Flores & Kyere (2021) also found that the 'idea of human relationship' (p. 134) was key to developing equitable partnerships with families. Leaders committed to these partnerships were actively resistant to deficit thinking of families, for example by changing school structures to adapt to the needs of parents, such as switching evening community meetings for coffee mornings that coincide with school drop-off times, giving parents a convenient time to share any issues relating to school and their children. Their findings also emphasised the need for an 'asset-based relationship approach with […] diverse families to advocate for parent empowerment' (p. 137).

Involvement and engagement

Definitions

Whilst the focus of this study is the home-school relationship, it is pertinent to review some of the literature in the field of PI and PE, as these concepts are inextricably linked to the formation of HSR. Moreover, as previously mentioned, the majority of educational literature approaches HSR through the lens of, and with an aim to increase, PE or PI. While some scholars, and indeed stakeholders (Harris & Goodall, 2008), use these terms interchangeably to mean participation in children's schooling in any form (Whitaker, 2019), others have sought to demarcate two, related but distinct, processes (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). Some argue that this inconsistency in definitions, and consequently measures, of involvement and engagement, has led to conflicting findings on the effects of PI and PE, particularly in earlier studies (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Stressing the importance of clarification, Baxter and Kilderry (2022) describe involvement as 'encompassing parents' school-based interactions and experiences' (p. 2), and engagement as 'parents' efforts to connect with and support children's learning within home and community settings' (p. 2), and attest that both of these processes can occur independently of any form of partnership with the school. Conversely, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) put forward a continuum linked to partnership, ranging from involvement at one end, which is defined as more passive participation in school-directed activities, to engagement at the other, which '[involves] a greater commitment, a greater ownership of action' (p. 400). Movement along the continuum towards the goal of PE requires a transfer of agency and control from the school to parents, resulting in more equitable relationships. Likewise, Durand and Secakusuma (2019) favour family engagement as a more inclusive term, which they argue entails a 'more dynamic focus on the iterative process of building strong home–school relationships rather than on the specific activities parents engage in' (p. 4). These examples shed light on the paradigm shift from aiming

for involvement in school activities, to a dynamic process of authentic, holistic engagement in children's learning and development (Buchanan & Buchanan, 2017; Harris & Goodall, 2008).

What "counts" as involvement and/or engagement has widened in scope over recent decades as researchers have sought the perspectives of nondominant families (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Newman et al., 2019; Roberts, 2017), prompting growing recognition of the diverse ways in which different families engage in their children's learning and lives. Historically, involvement has been based on a white, middle-class notion of good parenting (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Cooper, 2021; Fennimore, 2017), with nondominant families viewed through a deficit lens as lacking aspiration (Department for Education, 2010) and "failing" to participate in their children's education in normative ways (Newman et al., 2019). However, studies have repeatedly found that nondominant families hold high aspirations for their children and value education (Baker et al., 2014; Baquedano-López, 2013; Graham et al., 2021; Lareau, 1987), and are equally as engaged as their majority counterparts, but often in ways that are less visible in schools or not recognised within the hegemonic framing of engagement (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Kim, 2009).

Benefits

The benefits of PI and engagement have been well-documented in the literature over recent decades, building an overwhelming consensus that PE has the potential to enhance student learning outcomes (Desforges, 2003: Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Sammons et al., 2015; Wilder, 2014). However, there are some conflicting findings regarding which forms of engagement yield which benefits for the child, during which stages of childhood, and to what extent (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Many studies focus on potential impact on academic attainment and have suggested that PE in a child's learning is most beneficial, rather than generic involvement in school activities, which it has been argued offers less potential benefit to attainment (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Hill & Tyson, 2009), though it is recognised that school-based involvement plays a role in social and community connection (Harris & Goodall, 2008).

Insights from parents and children as to the benefits of PE is scarce in the literature, yet could shed light on how engagement plays out in the lives of those with the most vested interest. Harris and Goodall's (2008) case study findings identified that both parents and children saw the most important outcomes of PE as supporting children and instilling a value of education. In another study, when asked to generate and rank examples of learning experiences at home, primary school children's responses 'demonstrated [that they] were engaged in learning centred on social growth and development rather than school-based activities' (Cameron et al., 2022, p. 6). The authors interpreted three themes within children's learning at home, centred around 'skills,

knowledge and responsibilities required for: family life; self-development and learning to play/ learning through play' (p. 6). The children in this study often reasoned the importance of their examples as to how it would affect their functioning in family life and their aspirations in the future. Across these examples of parents' and children's views, children's focus on their development of skills and attitudes for life, not solely academic attainment, illustrates the need for a reframing and further investigation of PE and its benefits that is not limited to academic outcomes for the student but the impact on family life more widely.

Barriers

As might be expected given the complex nature of PE and the relationships involved (Harris & Goodall, 2008), the literature cites a wide range of potential barriers to engagement. At the individual level, parents' self-efficacy has been linked to PI levels (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2011;) If parents do not view their role as that of educator and see themselves as competent to carry out this role, they are unlikely to become involved in their child's schooling, regardless of any school intervention to encourage such involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992). Furthermore, for parents who have had negative educational experiences themselves, it can be difficult to find 'confidence and enthusiasm' (Reay, 2000, p. 577) to be involved in their children's education (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018).

At the institutional level, parents have expressed that they do not always feel welcome to become involved or feel comfortable in schools (Crozier & Davies, 2007), particularly larger secondary schools with complex systems and staff structures (Harris & Goodall, 2008). This is particularly true for nondominant parents who may hold a different first language, may not be familiar with the education system or formal communication practices that schools employ, and may be assumed by the school to be less engaged (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Murray et al., 2015; Schneider & Arnot, 2018). Therefore, while schools claim that they have made PE a central part of their ethos and obstacles to engagement have lessened in the last decades (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018), there is arguably a continued mismatch between rhetoric and practice (Graham et al., 2021), and institutional and individual perspectives, which could still be acting as a barrier to PE for some parents.

Societal-level issues are perhaps the most pervasive barrier to PE (Crozier, 1999; Lareau, 1987; Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022), and the intersecting influence of factors including social class, race and ethnicity are now recognised as shaping 'how parents engage with schools, but also […] how schools engage with them' (Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022, p. 149). Whilst working-class families are characterised as needing support from schools by means of interventions, all families

are seemingly invited to be involved in school activities and decision-making (Fine, 1993), yet it is argued that, in reality, this is more likely to include middle-class parents who are comfortable advocating for their children and manoeuvring in these spaces (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). In recent decades, many scholars have worked to dispel the assumption promoted by cultural deficit theory that nondominant families are unable or unwilling to engage in their children's education (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Harris & Goodall, 2008), and have explored the structural barriers which make engagement for these groups more difficult or less recognised (Haines Lyon, 2018). Studies have found that the class position of families determines the level of economic, social and cultural capital they can access to support their children in their education (Cooper, 2021; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000; Lareau, 1987). What is more, difficult economic circumstances can also deplete the emotional capital (Raey, 2000) that parents have available to be involved in their child's schooling as they are focussed on day-to-day survival (Jabar, 2023; Raey, 2000). Studies have also pointed to the structuring of the education system and opportunities to engage with it as hegemonic, geared towards the white middle-classes (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002) and 'devaluing the contributions of nondominant groups' (Fennimore, 2017, p. 159).

What has been found to affect home-school relationships?

Conditions for positive home-school relationships

Research on HSR often advocates for partnership between parents and professionals, and in recent years has looked for ways to ensure that relationships are equitable and inclusive of all families (Auerbach, 2010; Durand & Secakusuma, 2019), particularly those from nondominant groups whose voices were previously excluded (Fine, 1993; Graham et al., 2021; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). Key interrelated themes arise across studies looking at positive HSR: trust (Durand & Secakusuma, 2019; Flores & Kyere, 2021; Hummel et al., 2023; Roberts, 2017; Santiago, 2016; Uitto et al., 2021), mutual respect (Flores & Kyere, 2021; Graham et al., 2021) and the nature of communication between families and schools (Hummel et al., 2023; Levy, 2024; Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022; Stroetinga et al., 2022).

In quantitative terms, parental trust in schools and staff has been found to be positively associated with PI during elementary school (Santiago, 2016), and at preschool age, parental trust in education settings has been found to be higher when face-to-face communication with staff is rated better (Hummel et al., 2023). Perspectives of both school leaders and teachers have emphasised the need to build trust over time through open conversations and personal connection (Durand & Secakusuma, 2019; Flores & Kyere, 2021), and through organising

activities specifically aimed at building trust, such as invitations into the classroom (Durand & Secakusuma, 2019) and family evening events (Flores & Kyere, 2021). The importance of an asset-based approach to families is also highlighted by leaders in order to encourage respectful relationships and avoid deficit thinking towards parents (Flores & Kyere, 2021).

In recent years, researchers have increasingly sought the perspectives of parents within different contexts to explore the conditions which impact HSR, and many of the findings point to the importance of communication at various levels. A UK study carried out with parents and their children's teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Levy, 2024) found that HSR improved as a result of increased two-way communication, particularly the use of online video calls allowing both parties a window into the others' lived experiences, which 'helped to reduce boundaries between home and school and encouraged a sense of mutual respect and understanding' (Levy, 2024, p. 28. An Australian study found that where parents felt satisfied in their relationship with their child's school, school leaders employed a positive approach to the relationship and 'maintained clear and consistent communication policies' (Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022, p. 157). In Singapore, Chiong (2020) found that low-income families had 'unexpectedly close home-school relationships' (p. 23), and interviews with parents suggested that this was due to frequent and collaborative communication between home and school, a trust in the competence of schools and the state, and feeling cared for by teachers, schools and the state. However, a qualitative study with disadvantaged parents in Australia (Graham et al., 2021) highlighted that, while parents trusted and respected schools when they felt staff were acting in their children's best interests, positive relationships were most likely to arise when collaboration was initiated by schools rather than parents, which brings the equity of these partnerships into question. While the findings across these studies highlight the importance of communication and the complexity of affecting factors on the home-school relationship (Goodall, 2022), they also point to the relevance of the wider political positioning of parents and schools, and their perceived respective roles within society (Ball, 2017; Chiong, 2020; Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022).

Problematising home-school relationships

Much research on HSR, particularly that which explores the experiences of disadvantaged or nondominant groups, continues to focus on the barriers to positive relationships, and often critiques the persistent gap between rhetoric, best practice and the lived experiences of families (Ashton & Cairney, 2001; Baxter & Kilderry, 2022; Fennimore, 2017; Graham et al., 2021). While the extant literature on PE highlights the barriers which can impede parents' involvement with children's education, research on HSR often puts into question the very nature of the relationship

itself, which many argue is shaped by institutional power and neoliberal discourses (Kingston, 2021; Vincent, 2017).

There has long existed a rhetoric of egalitarian partnership within educational discourse (Ashton & Cairney, 2001), yet in practice many argue that HSR remain within the control of the institution; schools have the power to dictate what constitutes "good" parent behaviour and to judge when parents are too involved or not enough (Vincent, 2017). Investigating parents' perspectives, Robinson (2017) found 'evidence of the school and home divide' (p. 12) in interviews with parents, where they expressed that they were invited to be involved in their child's schooling but kept at a distance . Parents' views that this may be due to differing positions and perspectives of parents and teachers aligns with Goodall's (2018) assertion that 'there is often a gap between parents and school staff in relation to experience, to social class, even to language' (p. 1616) which can inhibit relationships, particularly in areas of social disadvantage. Hughes and MacNaughton (2000) also suggest that equitable relationships between parents and schools are prevented by 'othering and subordinating parental knowledge' against the professional knowledge of education staff which is framed as '"developmental" (scientific), objective, norm-referenced and applicable to all children' (p. 243).

Other studies have critiqued claims of 'open door' policies and attitudes (Ashton & Cairney, 2001; Haines Lyon, 2018; Kozak & Schnellert, 2023), with Ashton and Cairney's (2001) ethnography with Australian families suggesting that 'decisions about when the door was open rested very firmly with members of staff and that not all inquiry was treated in such an open manner' (p. 150). Analysing the discourse of parents and teachers in Canada, Kozak and Schnellert (2023) put forward the metaphor of 'the door' (p. 76) in their findings; schools claim to have an 'open door policy' (p. 76) but 'the passageway into the school is also a space that is defined by procedures, indicating a more formalized rule-bound system that is instituted by either individual teachers or the school in general to give parents and families guidelines around using the door' (p. 76). In her CPAR project, Haines Lyon (2018) worked with a group of parents in England 'to question policy, practice and the narratives of engagement within the school' and found that 'whilst home–school partnerships are claimed by the school, and parents' voices are sought via surveys, it is difficult for parents to access staff. It is a one-sided power relationship, with staff being able to open or shut the door, or to agree and arrange meetings' (p. 201). Following the impact of a personable interaction with the head teacher, the group expressed its desire for more informal communication, but this was met with resistance, with 'health and safety […] cited as a barrier to simple parent-school relationships'. (p. 201). These recent examples serve to highlight that despite the democratic rhetoric, there is much evidence to support the longstanding criticism that the home-school relationship is not 'power-neutral' (Fine, 1993, p. 682); it seems that parents are

only able to engage in HSR on schools' bureaucratic terms, with schools holding power over what is possible and acceptable, and offering only tokenistic opportunities for partnership.

Thus, negotiating the boundaries of institutional policies, scholars contend that parents are 'positioned by schools as support acts' (Haines Lyon, 2018, p. 195). Findings across several studies suggest that where parents are compliant with school-initiated calls for involvement or intervention, relationships can be positive and productive (Durand and Secakusuma, 2019; Graham et al., 2021; Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022), providing that parents are deferent to the 'ultimate authority' (Durand & Secakusuma, 2019, p. 17) of the school. However, where parents attempt to '[instigate] working partnership relations' (Graham et al., 2021) or are persistent in seeking satisfactory resolution to issues with their child's schooling, they often face conflict and risk the forfeit of their relationship with the school (Durand & Secakusuma, 2019; Fennimore, 2017; Graham et al., 2021; Haines Lyon 2018; Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022). As mentioned earlier, two-way communication has been found to produce equitable HSR, yet some argue that communication is kept one-way, as a strategy for the 'discipline of parents' (Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022, p. 158) and to maintain the traditional 'hierarchical structure' (Kozak & Schnellert, 2023, p. 70) of HSR.

Several scholars have linked this positioning of parents and dynamics of the home-school relationship to 'neoliberal governance' (Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022), whereby parents should conscript to a norm of good parenting as being self-sufficient, responsible individuals who prioritise the education of their children above all else (Jesierski & Wall, 2019; Kingston, 2019). A comparative analysis of PI discourse by Jezierski and Wall (2019) highlights the changing expectations conveyed to parents in a Canadian parenting magazine from the 1990s compared to the 2010s . Whereas parents in the 1990s were encouraged to directly support children's learning with activities such as helping with homework, parents are now advised 'to create a reading culture in the home, spend time engaging children in thoughtful discussion, create fun everyday learning opportunities, develop positive relationships with teachers and volunteer on the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA)' (p. 822). The authors suggest that this shift to 'instilling educational values, motivating and monitoring children and teaching time management and organizational skills, are all in aid of creating self-motivating and self-responsible children' (p. 823) and argue that this requires more of parents' material and emotional resources, particularly mothers. In her Foucauldian discourse analysis of school newsletters, Kingston (2021) notes that 'when terms like "working together" and "partnership" appear in the newsletters, they typically preface a set of expectations for parents' (p. 65), from basic parenting requirements to ensuring school paperwork is completed. She argues that these messages serve to 'subtly shape parents' subjectivities by cultivating certain types of '"good" neoliberal parents' (Kingston, 2021, p. 62)

who support school goals any way they can and arrange their lives around school schedules, but are restricted in their involvement, leaving the real work of education to schools. Crozier & Davies (2007) have also pointed to the 'implicit expectations' (p. 300) of schools that are based on white, middle-class assumptions and are therefore less visible and accessible to nondominant families. Others also warn of the increasing 'responsibilisation' (Chiong, 2020, p. 37) of parents for children's educational success. Some uphold that these positionings cut across factors such as race, class and culture (Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022; Vincent, 2017), whilst some emphasise the danger this poses in ignoring 'structural and economic inequalities' (Ball, 2017, p. 201) impacting nondominant families which could serve to further exacerbate disadvantage (Fennimore, 2017; Haines Lyon, 2018).

Conclusion

Much of the literature frames HSRs as partnerships (Barker & Harris, 2020; Epstein, 1995; Kambouri et al., 2022) yet continues to focus on PE based on school-centred goals as a requirement for, and the ultimate objective of, positive HSR. There is wide agreement in the field that PE, particularly in the form of academic socialisation, benefits student academic attainment (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Sammons et al., 2015), however this sits alongside critique that this should not be the only priority for the development of HSR and that a more inclusive understanding of PE and the goals that children and their parents value should be acknowledged (Cameron et al., 2022; Goodall, 2008). Furthermore, there are many barriers to PE at various levels, which are likely to impact nondominant families most (Fennimore, 2017; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Haines Lyon, 2018). Despite a growing rhetoric of collaboration and egalitarianism, research shows that HSR remain inequitable (Graham et al., 2021). Mutual respect (Flores & Kyere, 2021; Graham et al., 2021), trust (Durand & Secakusuma, 2019; Flores & Kyere, 2021; Hummel et al., 2023; Roberts, 2017; Santiago, 2016; Uitto et al., 2021) and two-way communication (Hummel et al., 2023; Levy, 2024; Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022; Stroetinga et al., 2022) are the foundations of positive HSR, yet even where these conditions are present, schools as institutions dictate the terms of acceptable engagement (Durand & Secakusuma, 2019; Graham et al., 2021). Schools, via their communication practices and formalised procedures enacted by leaders and staff, hold the power to shape relationships with families, enforce expectations and make decisions about the education of children (Kingston, 2021; Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022; Vincent, 2017). The positioning of parents within these relationships is particularly problematic for nondominant families who, it has been argued, hold less power and

capital in professional spaces (Cooper, 2021; Lareau, 1987). Based on this analysis of the field, there appears a need to look closer at HSR in their own right as 'social relationships' (Lareau, 1987, p. 74), and how they are shaped by the policies and communication practices of schools. Whilst much of the literature to date has explored the perceptions of teachers and leaders, there have been fewer studies into how HSR are experienced by parents, in particular those within nondominant groups. This small-scale study will go some way to address this gap, by exploring how HSR are enacted in policies and communications of primary schools within an area of disadvantage in a town in England.

Developing the project, developing positionalities

This mini-chapter outlines how this student research project developed, and how this was linked to my changing positionalities (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015). Beginning with my experiences as a primary school teacher which stimulated my interest in HSR as a research topic, I will reflect on how my perspective shifted following my own journey as a parent and student. I will detail the process from initial ideas and attempts, to challenges and adaptations, and my learnings from this experience. I do this to deliberately expose the research process as 'messy, complex and contradictory' (Folkes, 2023, p. 1315), reflecting on how the project evolved rather than present it only as the finished product, not least because the journey from inception to completion and the challenges along the way were central to my learnings as a novice, lone researcher. Furthermore, these challenges and the consequent adaptations may also provide implications for future research in the field of HSR and research with nondominant families in particular, especially for other beginner researchers. Rather than insert a 'ritualistic' (MacFarlane, 2021, p. 144) positionality statement, I attempt to weave reflexivity and consider my positionality throughout this dissertation, with a focus on how this impacted the research at every stage (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015), but particularly here as the decisions I made are inextricably bound up in my own experiences and resulting world view (Berger, 2013).

Experiences leading to the project

As a primary school teacher working within a large primary school in an area of my home town, known locally as a "deprived" area, relationships with the children I worked with were central to my practice, and I felt my main strength as a teacher was fostering in those children a sense of ownership - of their learning, our class community and the space we inhabited together. However, something that always bothered me was the dissonance I felt between my relationship with the children and my lack of relationship with their families. Among staff, there seemed to be a fear of parents as potentially hostile (I was advised on my first parents' evening to make sure I have a clear route to the door when meeting with parents), as well as a disdain for their lack of engagement or interest in the education of their children; feelings that I am now ashamed to say I internalised myself as I began to figure that engagement was not something I should bother to pursue with these families. As I reflect now, I can see that, having grown up myself in another area of the same town with a reputation for crime and hardship, I saw myself as an insider-outsider (Eppley, 2006), coming from a place like this one, able to 'succeed against the odds'

(Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2011, p. 33). I was different now – middle class confirmed by my position as a teacher, supported by my accent which I modified while at work, and my vocabulary and demeanour as a professional. This certainly had an impact on the relationship I had with families, but also on the lens with which I viewed them, and the "problem" of engagement, as I saw it then.

Many contextual factors also influenced my approach to HSR at this time. The school was large, with three classes per year group, and this meant that certain aspects of school life and HSR were bureaucratised by the policies of senior leadership. For example, there was little room for personalised approaches to relationships with families in each class, as senior leadership insisted that each class must receive the same "offering" from the school. Furthermore, senior leaders took responsibility for instigating plans with parents to support children with behaviour in school, as well as engaging with parents and social services regarding safeguarding issues. I was still partially involved by reporting to senior leadership, and the rationale behind these policies was framed as protecting teachers' wellbeing, allowing us to focus on teaching and learning in the classroom. Yet it put a distance between me and the families of children I worked with, and I felt I had little control in the situation. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide lockdown, this distance was exacerbated as senior leadership took responsibility for regular contact with "vulnerable" families, and team leaders in each year group communicated to teachers the school's policy for remote learning, which was a weekly offering of activities emailed to each family. From memory, I received emails from less than five families of my class and had no response at all from the other twenty or so families.

These experiences and reflections led me to question why some families appeared engaged with their children's schooling and others appeared not to be interested. I started to wonder what made the difference, asking myself "How can we get these families to engage?" When I had the opportunity to undertake this student research project, this is what I set out to explore. However, embarking on my MSc studies coincided with my eldest child starting school, and as I learned about critical paradigms and began exploring the literature on HSR, I experienced a fundamental shift in my perspective and the direction of my questioning.

The literature review highlighted pivotal themes for me as a researcher. First and foremost was the imbalance of power in the relationship between the institution and the family, particularly for nondominant families (Crozier & Davies, 2007). Second was the lack of parent voice in the literature – again, particularly of nondominant parents (Fine, 1993; Graham et al., 2021; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). Undoubtedly these two themes held particular significance for me as my son began formal education and I felt the institution of school was holding increasing expectation and power over our family life. Third was the repeated focus on engagement as a necessary

condition for, and the ultimate product of, HSR for the purpose of raising student academic achievement, rather than the nature of HSR in their own right as social interactions. These three imports were central to the initial, emergent design for the project as I began to acknowledge a 'fluidity' (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015, p. 748) in my positionality, from teacher with the power to hold expectations over parents, to resistant parent and critical researcher. Kingston's (2021) paper in particular, which presented a Foucauldian discourse analysis of school newsletters from the position of parent researcher, had a profound effect on the way I viewed HSR, opening my eyes to the discursive power that school communications hold in 'subtly shaping parents' subjectivities' (Kingston, 2021, p. 62). I wanted to make an attempt at redressing some of the power imbalance by exploring how parents (and particularly nondominant parents) felt about the HSR they experienced with their child's school. I decided to base the project within the area I had worked, as I felt I had experience of "the other side" of the relationship from my time as a teacher there, and perhaps for my own ego I wanted to feel I could contribute something to that community, to somehow improve the HSR there or to change negative perceptions of the community.

Initial design and attempts

Following a review of the literature, I wanted to explore how parents experienced HSR day-to-day rather than a one-off instance exploring their perceptions of HSR more abstractly. As a parent, I had experienced the daily messages from my son's school and was interested in the reactions to these small, regular communications and how these might shape HSR over time. Through my learning on the MSc Education course, I had become very interested in the potential of participatory methodologies as a more equitable way to do research and redress the power imbalance experienced by marginalised groups (Cornish et al., 2023; Fine et al., 2021). After discussions with my supervisor, I planned an emergent design for a partially participatory study with parents in the chosen community, whereby the topic of HSR was the focus of the project, but I could offer flexibility in that participants decided in what form and to what extent they would like to take part.

Over several months, I attempted recruitment through several avenues, advertising through local social media groups as well as displaying posters around the community, for example in shops, pharmacies, housing support offices and leisure centres. The advert contained a link and QR code to a short video where I introduced myself and the project, followed by a short sign-up survey. Interest was very low, with less than a handful of potential participants. I then began to advertise through school pastoral workers and newsletters, but this did not lead to any further sign-ups.

As a result, I adapted the project, making an application to CUREC in order to simplify the study design to a standalone interview with parents and carers, and to offer compensation for participants' time and knowledge in the form of a monetary voucher. Unfortunately, this raised no further interest, but led to many reflections about why this was the case. When I had spoken to parents casually in the field, they were all very willing to share their experiences of HSR with me, and indeed had many interesting insights to share. This reassured me that HSR was a topic worth exploring in this community, yet highlighted my inexperience as a researcher in the field.

The novice, lone researcher

My experiences during this period of failed recruitment left me questioning why I had struggled to attract participants to the study, despite sensing interest when I spoke to parents in the community. I reflected how on how uncomfortable I had felt in the field, presenting just as myself as a student with no professional structures supporting me; I was comfortable with the processes and discourse of being a teacher in this environment, but here I was alone and insecure in my demeanour. Methodological texts had failed me here, texts that claimed being an outsider as an advantage, that people within the would find being in the position of expert empowering particularly 'in the study of marginalized or otherwise disadvantaged population group' (Berger, 2013, p. 227). Perhaps the lack of interest was due to a mistrust of institutions generally, or because, although I emphasised my perspective as a parent, I had been transparent about my experience teaching in the area. Despite my no longer working there, it could be that people thought I would be there to judge them, on "the side" of the school. Or it could be that parents in the community just had many other priorities and didn't perceive that they had the time to be involved in the formalities of research.

As a lone, student researcher, these reflections were mostly considered alone, in my fieldnotes as I tracked my reflections and decision-making. Of course, I had discussions with my supervisor who was always very thorough and supportive, and I had 'kitchen table reflexivity' (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015) conversations with my course colleagues where we talked of our own experiences and positionalities and how these were impacting our research, but as a student you are effectively the research team and the decisions are yours alone. Eventually, I decided to abandon the initial study design and change tact. This felt like somewhat of a failure, which is particularly hard to take when you are working alone on something which feels very personal.

What I take as the key learning from this experience is the challenge involved in attempting to work with nondominant communities. Although I had my own experiences within this

community as a teacher, I was not a part of the community itself. Similarly, after my visits to the field, I would return to my own life, which is arguably far removed from that environment where there is much deprivation. Although I had wanted to empower parents, it is conceivable that I was actually attempting to extract what I needed without offering anything tangible in return. If I were to attempt a project like this in the future, I would need to be involved more fully in the community, perhaps volunteering with an organisation over an extended period in order to contribute to the community, gradually get to know people and build trust. It may then be possible to do something equitable and participatory based on what the community desires.

My hope is that this mini-chapter has exposed the 'messy' (Folkes, 2023, p. 1315) and personal process behind the finalised study which follows in the next chapter. I have included this because it feels transparent to admit to the challenges and how these impacted me as a novice researcher, to avoid the 'disembodied omniscient narrator' (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 961) as if this study sailed smoothly from conception to completion. I hope that these reflections help to set the context for the current study, and that they may prove helpful to any other novice researchers with an interest in working with nondominant families and communities.

Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the research methodology and methodological decision-making involved in planning and carrying out this dissertation research. It will outline the study design and research questions and the rationale behind their development. It will then describe the sample and the data collection methods used. Finally, it will explicate the analysis methods employed and consider limitations of the study.

Study Design and Research Questions

A qualitative, case study design was adopted to explore HSR within a 'most deprived' area, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of HSR as they manifest within this particular, bounded context (Miles & Huberman, 1994, as cited in Punch & Oancea, 2014; Yin, 2013). My approach sits within the poststructural paradigm, which 'links language, subjectivity, social organisation, and power' (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 961). Through reflexivity and critical, subjective interpretation, I acknowledge that 'truth is always contingent and subject to scrutiny' (Graham, 2011, p. 666). I am particularly interested in how discourse supports underlying power structures by '"constructing" the social world' (Doherty, 2007, p. 194). Drawing on Foucault's (1978/2020) concept of governmentality, this study is interested in the power structures maintained by institutional policies and practices, thus this exploration of HSR adopts a critical stance in an attempt to disrupt the hegemony of institutional discourses (Knight et al., 1990). Like Kingston (2021), 'my research questions are rooted in my personal experience' (p. 63), therefore it felt appropriate and authentic to base this study within the area where I had experienced HSR, and where my initial curiosity had stemmed from. Though (as detailed in the previous chapter) it was not possible to work collaboratively with people in the community towards any practical social change, the setting of the case study in this small area does mean that the findings could be directly relevant to and shared with the community – both parents and schools, in a suitable format – to make a real impact in the area, rather than producing solely "ivory tower" knowledge (Ramdeholl, 2013). What is more, this exploration of HSR 'through Foucauldian problematisation' (Graham, 2011, p. 666), provides an opportunity to question what has come to be taken for granted in HSR (Ball, 2019) and, in the spirit of Foucault (1980/2020), 'if not to find solutions, at least to change the given terms of the problem' (p. 220).

In light of the challenges in recruiting participants, it was not possible to gain an understanding of parents' direct experiences of HSR. I therefore opted to utilise documentary data (Punch &

Oancea, 2014) which was 'open-published' (Scott, 1990, as cited in Punch & Oancea, 2014, p. 202) to explore HSR, to try to understand how they might be experienced by parents in the case study area. This meant that I would still be able to explore HSR within the chosen area and would not need to wait for ethical approval to continue with the project**.** (There were, nonetheless, important ethical issues to consider throughout the project; these are outlined in the subsection below: Ethics.) I subscribe to Ball et al.'s (2011b) view that school texts as 'artefacts are cultural productions that carry within them sets of beliefs and meanings that speak to social processes and policy' (p. 121), and would thus be a valuable source of data to explore how HSR are enacted in schools. Influenced by Kingston's (2021) method of analysing newsletters from one school with a focus on parental involvement, I decided to build on her design to look at how the communications and policies of seven primary schools in one local area might shape the HSR experienced by parents. I explored a wider scope of data sources, to aim for as 'holistic' (Punch & Oancea, 2014, p. 151) a case as possible within the resources and time available to me. This included communication to parents in the form of newsletters and letters, as well as school-level policy documents and text from the school websites that had the potential to impact HSR, such as homework and attendance policies. The rationale and process for the inclusion of data sources is further detailed below in Data Collection.

As a parent and a teacher myself, I felt I may be well-positioned to undertake this research. This is not to suggest that I would be a neutral researcher (Van Dijk, 1993) or have a full understanding having experienced both sides of the relationship, but that I may have a partial insight into the experiences of staff enacting HSR in school as well as my own experiences of HSR as a parent. I hoped that 'critical engagement' (Kobayashi, 2003, as cited in Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015, p. 752) with these multiple positionalities could support multiple interpretations of the data and help me to remain open to contradictions.

I made the decision to include several schools within the case study, to build a picture of how HSR are taking place 'deprived' areas such as this one. This also avoided critique of any one school in particular and would potentially make the findings more relevant to HSR in other similar areas, though I must make clear that I make no attempt toward generalisability (Maxwell, 2002). On a personal level, this also helped to mediate my feelings of betrayal of colleagues working in these schools who I felt this analysis could criticise. In my experience, staff in school were doing their best with the resources available to them and were likely unaware (as I was when in my teaching post) of the subtle rhetoric potentially underpinning school policies and procedures.

I drew on the literature review to support the formulation of my research questions. A schools' formal communications, practices and policies themselves stand testament to the power of the

institution to define HSR (Knight et al., 1990), and this imbalance was something I wished to redress, despite a lack of access to authentic parent voice. Two studies in particular were key to the framing of my questions: Kingston's (2021) study focused on types of parental involvement promoted in newsletters, asking the question, 'what kind of parents do the newsletters aim to produce?'; whilst Lareau (1987) had asked, 'What do schools ask of parents in the educational experience of young children?'. Taking inspiration from these framings to critically analyse HSR, I formed my main research question:

- How is the home-school relationship constructed within school communications and policies?

As sub-questions, to help gather evidence to explain how relationships are shaped, I asked:

- What are schools communicating to parents (explicitly and implicitly)?
- What is expected of parents?
- How are parents positioned within communications and policies?

Sample

The sample included seven primary schools, all situated within the chosen local area and all members of a cluster, whereby 'several schools come together to share their resources to improve the conditions for the delivery of education' (Giordano, 2008, p. 25). Secondary schools within the cluster were excluded from the sample as HSR are experienced differently in this age group (Jeynes, 2012), and because my experience and interest is focused in the primary age group. The cluster has been active for more than 25 years. The schools collaborate in many ways, such as through sports and charity events, moderation of assessment and staff training, but are separate schools with their own policies and cultures. Within the sample, four of the schools are community schools, one is an academy, and two are Christian faith schools. To avoid identification of the schools, each will be referred to throughout this dissertation thesis using pseudonyms, as will any place names or identifiable details from the data. Appendix A provides pseudonyms and features of each school.

Data Collection

Documentary data can 'provide a rich source of analytic topics' (Punch & Oancea, 2014, p. 283), and though the texts produced by schools cannot 'be seen as replacements for other types of data' (Coffey, 2014, p. 369) nor give a full picture of how HSR are constructed and operate day-to-day, they do provide an accessible window into the context of HSR (Bowen, 2009; Tight, 2019). To

follow Foucault (1977/2020), the use of documentary data allowed me to select texts for this study that 'played a part in the reality they speak of' (p. 137).

I decided to collect data only from school websites, as all schools in the sample had active websites and websites are a main site of communication where schools publish many of their policies. Although data collected from schools' social media platforms may have afforded insights into more informal, interactive two-way communication between schools and parents (Bordalba & Bolchaca, 2019; Head, 2020), this was decided against due to time constraints as well as the ethical dilemmas involved in social media research, as social media platforms are uncertain territory in terms of consent and can be contested as a public or private domain (BERA, 2018). Since recruiting participants in this case study area had proven difficult, I felt it would be unethical to then collect data from the parents of these schools, even if it was publicly available.

First, I thoroughly explored each school's website, to get an idea of the range of documents and text that were published by each school. I made a record of possible data sources, to include any communications, policies and other text within the webpages that was either directed at parents as the intended audience, or that may give insight into how HSR were framed within the schools' policies and practices, aiming for 'the richness, breadth and depth' (Morrow, 2005, p. 256) that a range of data sources might afford. These included newsletters and policies which were explicitly addressed to parents such as homework policies, but also less obvious documents. For example, as a focal point of the study was HSR for nondominant families, I studied each school's pupil premium policy, which sets out how schools plan to spend their pupil premium grant (PPG). PPG is government 'funding to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in state-funded schools in England' (DfE, 2024b). Some of these policies included references to parental engagement and families' financial hardship, thus were included. This thorough examination was important to aim for 'adequacy of data' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, as cited in Mullet, 2018, p. 121). I then went through each website again, making a detailed record of which schools published which documents as this varied across schools. I limited the scope to documents published in relation to the academic year from September 2023 to July 2024. I downloaded the documents, organising them by document category (e.g. newsletter, vision statement, attendance policy) in preparation for analysis, to maintain the focus on the case study area rather than individual schools. A total of 206 texts were included in the final analysis; a full record of documents collected for each school can be found in Appendix A.

Ethics

Although this case study involved the use of documentary data which was publicly available, there were, nonetheless, important ethical considerations to take into account as I carried out the

research. Firstly, protecting the identity of the schools and the 'most deprived' area where I had based my research was of paramount importance. Although I did not technically recruit any participants for the research, I felt it was ethical to uphold respect for the community's right to 'be treated fairly, sensitively, and with dignity and freedom from prejudice' (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018, p. 6) by ensuring that I 'recognise the entitlement of both institutions and individual participants to privacy' (BERA, 2018, p. 21), not least because I had worked within the area and so have a professional connection to families and school staff there. To aim for anonymity, I de-identified any data that I used within the write-up of the study, such as school names, road names mentioned and names of staff. I also decided not to cite the local authority document from which I had taken the term 'most deprived'; although this could lead to repercussions in terms of judgement of my academic referencing, I reasoned that this is a term used by many local authorities when using the IMD, and that the protection of the research site was ethically non-negotiable.

Analysis

I chose to undertake a Foucauldian discourse analysis to explore how HSR are constructed in school communications and policies, building on Kingston's (2021) analysis of her son's school newsletters. Her critique had been pivotal in my thinking and framing of HSR, and as I read more about Foucault's theories of governmentality and educational studies using Foucauldian discourse analysis (Graham, 2005), I felt this was the lens through which I needed to scrutinise HSR, as themes of power were highly prevalent in the literature on HSR, particularly in nondominant communities. However, this decision brought its own challenges. Firstly, as a novice researcher undertaking a master's dissertation, it felt risky to attempt a method of analysis with no 'handy preexisting research process to follow' (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 603). Furthermore, I felt the 'awkward tension that arises when one attempts to do poststructural work whilst still satisfying the conventions of academic writing and scholarship' (Graham, 2005, p. 2). Therefore, in this section, I lay out these challenges and aim to justify my choices, as well as explicate the process of my analysis, endeavouring towards 'trustworthiness' (Locke, 2019, p. 122) and 'qualitative rigour' (Mullet, 2018, p. 137) by way of transparency and clarity in detailing my analytic process (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

I come to this analysis as a parent and a teacher, with all of the experiences those identities have entailed for me, and all of my other experiences too up to this point. 'What something means to individuals is dependent on the discourses available to them' (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 961). Therefore, the interpretations I make, the approaches I take to the analysis, are bound up

in the experiences that I have of HSR and of the education system in those roles. How I categorise the texts is informed by how I have experienced them, what I know to be school priorities, how I read these texts when received from my own son's school. Therefore, I may not have dissected them as technically as would an experienced scholar or as sophisticatedly as Foucault would have, but I have taken those units and asked questions that have only constructed themselves in my mind through a coalescence of my experiences with my reading of Foucault.

Why Foucault?

I am not a philosopher, nor am I an expert on the works of Foucault. As a novice student researcher, I have tried my best to gain an adequate understanding of his key theories within a short space of time. In fact, for some time, I actively tried to avoid using this method in my project for fear of superficiality (Graham, 2005). Yet I could not avoid that this intense interest in power structures is where I, in my criticality, have landed. I could not avoid that what I have read of Foucault's theories on power and governmentality has fundamentally changed my world view (St. Pierre, 2018), so much so that using them as a foundation for my analysis felt like the only authentic fit to explore HSR in the current context. Thus, though I have not yet read a broad and full enough account of Foucault's work as recommended by St. Pierre (2018) or gathered enough courage to aim for anything like post qualitative inquiry, I have attempted here, within the bounds of time and conventions afforded to a master's dissertation, to step outside the comfort of methodology that 'reassuringly tells [me] what "to do" (St Pierre, 2021, p. 164) '. In doing so, I have taken a practical and intuitive approach to utilising a Foucauldian lens in my analysis of school communications and policies, taking encouragement from the many references to Foucault's own repeated descriptions of his works as a 'tool box' (Allen, 2012, p. 4) rather than a prescription of any kind (Foucault, 1978/2020; Misfud & Day, 2022). My analysis is not Foucauldian in the sense that I have followed any particular thread of his complex and varying methods. I have not attempted anything like a genealogy (Foucault, 1976/2020) of HSR, nor have I extended my analysis to the wider, political '*meso* level of state reason' (Doherty, 2007, p. 201). This would not have been possible within the limits of a master's dissertation and, moreover, would not answer my research questions. I have taken a 'piecemeal' (Allen, 2012, p. 4) approach to applying Foucault's concepts, focussing attention on how 'discourse is embedded in institutions […] and administrative practices' (Villadsen, 2020, p. 317) to understand how HSR are constructed in this very specific, current context.

Foucault's (1978/2020) claim that 'we live in the era of "governmentality"' (p. 176), I understand to mean that modern society is organised and structured to 'ensure political obedience and a

docile and useful workforce for the demands of […] capitalism' (Marshall, 1990, p. 15), with this being the goal of modern Western states such as the UK government. In his lecture on governmentality, Foucault (1978/2020) discusses 'the art of government' (p. 165), that has developed as the all-embracing techniques employed by a state to shape the conduct of the population towards its own goals (Doherty, 2007). Disciplinary institutions such as schools, 'organize physical space and time with activities that have been developed over time to change people's behaviour along a number of parameters' (Marshall, 1990, p. 15). These institutions function as panopticons (Foucault, 1973/2020) whereby their design enables 'supervision, control, correction' (p. 75), which Foucault (1973/2020) asserts as 'a fundamental and characteristic dimension of the power relations that exist in our society' (p. 75). It is straightforward enough to produce examples from my own experiences of schools and teaching to apply Foucault's concepts to what I know of the UK education system. What I am interested in exploring in this analysis is how the discourse within school communications and policies construct the reality of HSR, and thus '[operate] to constitute, position, make productive, regulate, moralise and govern the citizen' (Doherty, 2007, p. 195).

Process

My analysis began with immersion in the data. Reading each document thoroughly, with my research question and sub-questions in mind, I made detailed notes on their contents and my thoughts as I went, to track my initial interpretations and to work towards a 'deep understanding of all that comprises the *data corpus*' (Morrow, 2005, p. 256, original emphasis). I refrained from any kind of coding during this stage, as I wanted to remain as open as possible to what I would find in the data. I studied the documents by category, beginning with communication documents (newsletters, then letters) and then moving onto policies. I continued each stage of my analysis in this order, based on the rationale that communications, as directly addressed to parents as the audience, constitute the outward constructions of HSR whereas policies, which are mainly directed towards staff (and arguably OFSTED), comprise the undercurrent of HSR – the assumptions, plans and priorities that are going on in the background, the rhetoric of which feed into the communications and thus shape the relationship.

I then undertook two cycles of coding, using NVivo software. Although some discourse analysts 'may not employ coding at all' (Saldaña, 2013, p. 60), I made the decision that, as a novice, it was important to at least begin by tracking and laying out my analysis in this way. Though I would not be so naïve as to assume any level of systematisation would 'guarantee validity' (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 603), I saw coding as 'a useful craft that enables deep immersion in the data, as well as transparency in the development and presentation of findings that will be useful in particular to

many novice researchers who are testing the waters of qualitative inquiry for the first time' (Skjott Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019, p. 260). During the first coding cycle, I allowed myself only to code descriptively, 'indexing' (Elliott, 2018, p. 2851) the contents of the newsletters and policies, to build a picture of what – "on the surface" - was being communicated to, asked of, expected of parents without impressing any hasty judgement about what this might mean. I reasoned that this would highlight the authors' priorities, patterns in the content and also any peculiarities. It would also allow me to return to the topics of the texts as a collection to analyse the discourses across the texts in the second cycle of coding (Saldaña, 2013; Skjott Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019).

Alongside this, however, I was engaged in deep analysis in the form of analytic memos, 'sites of conversations with [myself] about the data' (Clarke, 2005, p. 202). These felt like a more tentative way of analysing the data, to explore emerging themes and glimpses of theory without committing to code (Charmaz, 2015). In this way, I followed St. Pierre's lead and saw 'writing as *a method of data analysis*' (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 971, original emphasis) whereby, as I wrote, I 'made accidental and fortuitous connections I could not see or control' (p. 971). In my writings, I could question and probe the tones, requests, observations and notifications of the school communications and policies. I could map out underlying rhetoric and feel out theories of power and control in the relationship between schools and parents. Like St. Pierre (2018), 'I needed the aside to think-write' (p. 605). As a novice researcher comfortable with using my intuition (Skjott Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019), I was less comfortable with jumping from here to any claims about findings. Thus, I first returned to Foucault, to bring his concepts to the fore to inform the next stage of my analysis. I found that in my writings there were strong links to power, discipline, governmentality, but especially to panopticism (Foucault, 1973).

During the second coding cycle, I then used these links and my writings to assign 'higher level categories' (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, p. 264) to my analysis, constantly iterating to the questions, "What does this mean for the positioning of parents?", "What does this mean for the relationship?", and drawing on Foucault's concepts. I followed Graham's (2011) advice, '[looking] to statements not so much for what they say but what they do; that is, [questioning] what the constitutive or political effects of saying this instead of that might be?' (p. 667). From this second cycle I was able to develop key themes from the texts pertinent to my research questions. These were developed through more 'writing to think', as well as mind mapping to visualise the data and explore links between codes, categories and Foucault's concepts. These themes will be presented in the next chapter, along with key excerpts from the documentary data, to delineate my findings as I see them.

Limitations

As a case study set within a critical, poststructuralist paradigm, I cannot and do not desire to make any claim to traditional quality criteria (Lather, 1993; Mishler, 1990), but have endeavoured toward rigour by being thorough, reflexive and transparent (Mullet, 2018) in the decisions behind the methodology, study design and methods I have employed. Through my positionality, which I have attempted to weave throughout, I have 'disclosed what [I] bring to the narrative' (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126) and acknowledge that the approach I have taken is my own according to my worldview and the questions that arose following my professional and personal experiences, and the literature. Here I will acknowledge the limitations to my methodology and design, as I see them.

Firstly, a key limitation to the study was the incompleteness of data from the sample schools' communications and policies. Using data which was publicly available meant that if a school did not publish a particular document, I was not able to include it in my analysis. Undeniably, these "missing" data would have impacted my analysis (particularly more informal communications), yet for me their inclusion would still not have been the "full" picture, given the 'situational limitations of the knower' (Richardson, 2005, p. 961). Moreover, I did achieve what I judge to be a sufficient variety of sources to realise 'richness, breadth and depth' (Morrow, 2005, p. 256) in the data.

Findings

In this chapter, I will propound the central themes that I have developed from my analysis of school communications and policies, centred around my research questions and engaging a Foucauldian lens to posit what this means for HSR. During this development, it became apparent that what is expected, asked of, and communicated to parents goes some way to answering the question of how they are positioned in school texts. This is then key, but not the whole story, to answering how school texts construct HSR in this particular context. I will first present and consider two inconsistent, dualistic positionings of parents within school communications and policies as I see them. Next, using the 'intellectual tools' (Rabinow, 2020, p. 6) provided by Foucault, I will illustrate how schools, in these texts, extend their disciplinary power to parents and into the home through subtle 'techniques of government' (Foucault, 1978/2020, p. 176), and in particular the ways that the panoptic concepts of supervision, control and correction (Foucault, 1973) permeate the confines of the school gates. Whilst there was a notable variance in the tone of communications which suggested to me that individual schools subscribe to distinct perspectives on HSR, my aim is not to compare the institutions themselves but the power dynamic and governmentality at play, which I argue could be seen across schools in varying forms. I will elucidate my argument for how the institution of "the school" functions as a panopticon, how governmentality is scaffolded by 'a specific rationality' (Foucault, 1978; Gordon, 2020, p. 17), and the way that this then determines what is possible for the home-school relationship.

It is impossible to include everything; there is so much to say that I do not have the space to here, but I do not doubt that I could never see the whole picture either (Richardson, 2005). Feeling the confines of academic convention again (Graham, 2005), it has been challenging to structure my understandings into the linear argumentation required for a dissertation thesis. It feels like trying to capture an entire web of interactions and connections, spreading in all directions and all interlaced, within a single strand of thought. The selections and judgements I have made are bound up in my personal experiences of HSR, straddling my intellectual reasoning and intuition, and, in turn, I now feel these learnings impacting how I experience HSR as a parent with my son's school. My "findings" are deliberately tentative (Reay, 2000); in the spirit of Foucault, I do not aim 'to establish a final "truth" but to question the intelligibility of truth/s we have come to take for granted' (Graham, 2011, p. 666).

How are parents positioned in school communications and policies?

Partnership vs. Correction

Explicitly, parents are positioned as partners to the school in the education of their children. Within policies, schools refer to 'strong, respectful relationships with parents and families to ensure their trust and engagement' (St. Joseph's, Attendance Policy [AP]), they 'strive to develop an effective partnership between […] staff and families' (Riverbank, AP), and 'appreciate how important the links between home and school are, and the need for us to work together to ensure a good education for all children' (Greenfield Academy, Homework Policy [HP]). However, despite policy claims to 'provide opportunities for parents, children and the school to work in partnership' (Oakwood, HP), this appears to be limited to generic ethos statements. Within communications this translates to a largely one-directional relationship centred around the schools' aims and needs as found in previous studies (Kingston, 2021; Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022), with little required input from parents. Requests for parent involvement are often via physical labour (such as walking with classes to local area visits, help on trips and moving furniture) or attending events (such as parents' evenings, performances and workshops). While this may constitute parental involvement in school life akin to Auerbach's (2010) nominal partnership, it cannot reasonably be called partnership in the authentic, egalitarian sense, as it offers parents little ownership and promotes only a passive participation in school-directed activities (Auerbach, 2010; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). The types of involvement activities on offer from schools are non-academic, do not ask for parents' input on their children's education, and often seek to educate parents themselves, giving a sense that parents do not have anything besides basic skills to offer as "partners" (Fennimore, 2017).

The majority of references to partnership appear in relation to attendance, whereby schools require the support of parents to meet government attendance targets. 'Good attendance' is framed as 'essential to pupils' attainment, safety, wellbeing and future life chances' (Hillside, AP). Not only is it asserted that 'if your child is not in school, they cannot learn' (All Saints' CofE, Newsletter) with school presented as the only site of any valuable learning, but that 'children are best safeguarded from exploitation and other risks in the wider community by attending school regularly where they are supervised by qualified and caring professionals' (All Saints' CofE, AP). Thus, although schools refer to 'building strong relationships' (Oakwood, AP; All Saints' CofE, AP) and claim to 'work in partnership with parents and pupils' (Willowbrook, AP), the parents' role in the partnership is to adhere to the expectations of 'regular and prompt attendance' (Willowbrook, AP) to enable the protection and supervision of children who are safer in the hands of professionals than their unqualified parents, which links to Kingston's (2021) findings that

partnership prefaces expectations, and school practices assume children can only be properly schooled in isolation from their parents' (p. 65). If parents do not comply with the school's expectations for attendance and absence, they are routinely reported to the local authority, who hold the power to fine and prosecute parents. This is referred to in policies and some newsletters. Appendix B, taken from an Oakwood newsletter, details upcoming changes to fixed penalty notices for parents to be issued for unauthorised absences. This appears alongside a message from the headteacher that 'the school do not manage this process or profit from the fines but our attendance data is automatically reviewed by the Local Authority'. This highlights to parents the school's powerlessness in the process of fining parents and positions the school as a subject of policy (Ball et al., 2011a). Nonetheless, the potential consequences for parents via the institution of the school is likely to impact on HSR and the power dynamic within the relationship.

Partnership is also referenced in relation to homework and online safety, whereby again parents are enlisted to support the schools' agenda. These token notions of partnership can be seen as a 'tactics of government' (Foucault, 1978, p. 176) positioning parents as 'support acts' (Haines Lyon, 2018, p. 195) to meet the schools' own targets rather than a gesture of any kind of power-sharing or genuine agency that one might expect from collaboration (Hughes & McNaughton, 2000). Where parents did submit feedback via parent surveys, their responses were acknowledged but there was no evidence of any intention to take action.

> 'Of course, there are always things we can do better. A couple of you suggested that we should leave the school gate open longer in the morning beyond 8.45. Our timing is very much due to the Government legislation which tells us the minimum hours of education a week we must deliver. We open at 8.40 and hope for all the children to be in school by 8.45 to meet our statutory requirements. We start phonics straight after register at 8.55 so time really is precious in school!'
>
> (All Saints CofE, Newsletter)

Where practical suggestions are made to improve punctuality at All Saints CofE, these are dismissed in a patronising tone ('time really is precious in school!'). The necessity of current arrangements are rationalised with references to legal requirements so that they appear immovable (Doherty, 2007). On first reading, the school's reasoning could seem fair; schools have a set number of teaching hours they must fulfil each week. However, punctuality is repeatedly emphasised as a priority in school texts; one could argue, then, that adjusting the school day by five or ten minutes either side (for example, starting at 8:50am and finishing at 3:20pm) to adapt

to parents' needs while still meeting statutory requirements could be entirely possible and worthwhile as found previously in research on leadership for equitable partnerships (Flores & Kyere, 2021). By acknowledging parents' suggestions and the scope of the school to improve yet rationalising the current arrangements so that they appear the only possibility, the school asserts its professional knowledge and authority over the practices of the school day.

Schools' partnership rhetoric is further undermined by the positioning of parents as in need of correction (Foucault, 1973). School policies and communications are replete with reminders of how to provide basic parenting and how to behave as a citizen, both on school site and in the community. Newsletters and letters across schools regularly remind parents of the necessary clothing and protection for current weather conditions. These reminders function not just as a prompt to parents but also as an education in the correct care of children. For example, in a St. Joseph's newsletter, parents are reminded that children need coats and informed that 'our children love being outdoors and we love giving them the opportunity to run and get fresh air', while the Greenfield Academy newsletter advises parents that 'it's crucial to keep our children protected from the sun's rays' and that they need 'water to stay hydrated throughout the day', and parents at Willowbank are notified in a letter providing trip details that 'the beach is not muddy so shoes are better than boots'. Rather than a straightforward reminder, requests are justified as if parents do not understand the effects of weather, reasons behind basic needs such as clothing, sun protection and water, or that children like to play outside. What is also noticeable in these excerpts is the schools' references to children as 'our' children, which I argue constitutes a claiming of children and serves to subordinate parental knowledge as supplementary to the professional knowledge of school staff (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). Whilst I may be sensitive in my reading of these texts as a parent myself with a particular protective perspective over my children not belonging to an institution, I make my judgements *as a parent*, based on the entirety of the data (which I cannot show in full here). I feel these excerpts serve to demonstrate just a few of the attempts of schools to govern parents' parenting and position them as deficient, in need of supervision and correction in order to fulfil basic care requirements.

Parenting advice is also given in relation to nutrition and social media, with schools defining and explaining what is acceptable for children's health. Schools often begin messages with phrases that highlight schools' surveillance over all areas of families' lives, such as 'we have noticed' (St. Joseph's, Newsletter), 'we are aware' (Greenfield Academy, Newsletter) or 'we have seen' (Oakwood, Newsletter). This asserts the power of schools to see all, within school sites but also beyond, in children's home lives. Again, as well as correcting parents' "misgivings" in their 'child-rearing practices' (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000, p. 245), schools rationalise their governance by referring to official legislations and recommendations:

> We have noticed some children have been bringing in empty Prime bottles into school to use as water bottles. Please refrain from using these bottles as water bottles for you [*sic*] child. On Prime's official website it states; " PRIME Energy is not recommended for children under the age of 18.
>
> (St. Joseph's, Newsletter)

A superficial reading of this excerpt could claim that the school is justified in its instruction as Prime (an energy drink brand very popular with children due to its creators' status as a YouTuber), as a high-caffeine drink, is widely considered unsuitable for children, with several retailers imposing voluntary bans on sales of high-caffeine products to children under 16 (Wheeler, 2024). However, as the children are using the bottles in school to hold water only, this message serves more as a disciplinary notice for any parents who are potentially allowing their children to drink Prime at home. Thus, the schools' supervision of children – and, by extension, parents - permeates the confines of the school and into the home, deeming parents' actions inappropriate and seeking to publicly reproach and correct their behaviour. This continual focus on such details of parenting exhibits how schools as disciplinary institutions 'issue an endless number of discourses that […] pervade daily life and take charge of the minuscule ills' (Foucault, 1977/2019, p. 78) of families' lives.

Indeed, parents' behaviour, both on school site and in the community, is also directly observed and subject to scrutiny and correction in schools' texts. Reminders of the restricted use of entrances and mobile phones, prohibition of hot drinks on the playground and leaving school site promptly all feature in school newsletters. As well as restricting mobile phone use on site, schools suggest to parents what they should be doing: 'This is the time you can embrace and focus on collecting your child and hearing about their day' (All Saints' CofE, Newsletter). This statement communicates that parents have been observed not doing these things, an assumption that they are not interested in embracing their children, and further, patronises them by granting permission to do so ('you can'), as if they could not otherwise have considered this an option. The idea of parents' behaviour as problematic is further reinforced in policies written specifically to outline behaviour expectations for parents, with a large portion of these documents dedicated to listing examples of unacceptable behaviour, for example 'entering the school site under the influence of alcohol or drugs' (Greenfield Academy, Code of Conduct), 'physical abuse, threatening, oppressive or aggressive behaviour' (Hillside, Statement of Expectations) and 'damaging or destroying school property' (Oakwood, Statement of Expectations). These three examples of unacceptable behaviour constitute crimes and place parents in the position of potential delinquents who need to be explicitly told not to commit offences at their children's

place of education, thus these policies are designed to play a role in 'correcting their potentialities' (Foucault, 1973, p. 67). It is, of course, possible that schools identified a need to produce these policies on these terms as a result of previous experiences. For example, another expectation states parents must 'correct own child's behaviour especially in public where it could otherwise lead to conflict, aggressive behaviour or unsafe behaviour.' It is conceivable that historically school staff have had to intervene in such situations and want to avoid this in future. However, this explicit interference and assumption of how parents may behave with their children has potential to impact HSR so that parents may feel under surveillance, judged and thus not trust the school, leading to disengagement from the relationship.

Furthermore, parents' behaviour around the school and in the community is often mentioned in school newsletters, mainly in reference to road use, parking and interacting with members of the public.

> Once again we need to remind our community to be careful and polite when around the school site. Today several families with buggies were in the road and blocking the road outside of school at the bottom of Absolom Road and then were very rude to another parent who asked them to move out of the road. Please also keep hold of all younger children and do not let them walk alone on the road.
>
> (St. Joseph's, Newsletter)

It is unclear whether this "incident" was witnessed by school staff or reported to them. However, the public description of the situation, addressed as a reminder to the whole community, can be seen as an exhibition of the school's power in 'both supervising and constituting a knowledge' (Foucault, 1973, p. 68) of parents as subjects, and as an attempt to shame those involved into changing their alleged behaviour. It is worth noting that, whether this was a reported or a witnessed incident, the description shows only the perspective of the reporter/witness. The complexities of the interaction, the circumstances of the behaviour, are not known but the narrative from the school's perspective nonetheless serves a purpose in its government of parents as it coerces them into "good" behaviours via the threat of, albeit implied and subtle, public shaming (Foucault, 1973).

Through these varied examples of how schools seek to correct parents, we can see how schools enact a project, not just of the education of children, but of 'social improvement, therapy and order, which [operates] by identifying and correcting various forms of individual deviation from a norm' (Gordon, 2020, p. 13) - the 'norm' being, in this case, white, middle-class values and

behaviours promoted in hegemonic educational discourses (Kim, 2009; Lareau, 1987), with parents as sub-citizens who are not meeting the expected standards of parenting or acceptable behaviour. Schools' use of rationality as a passive technique to support their authority sends a message of 'common sense' (Savage, 2013, p. 87), protecting the schools' practices (Doherty, 2007), as well as serving to coerce parents in need of education themselves to correcting their behaviour to comply with the schools' expectations. The conditions of partnership, then, do not appear to be rooted in the mutual respect (Flores & Kyere, 2021; Graham et al., 2021) and trust (Durand & Secakusuma, 2019; Flores & Kyere, 2021; Hummel et al., 2023; Roberts, 2017; Santiago, 2016; Uitto et al., 2021) that previous research has found to support positive HSR.

Requiring support vs. Source of income

Situated in 'a deprived area' (All Saints' CofE, Ethos Statement), all of the schools communicate attempts to support parents financially and pastorally. From the information available, four of the seven schools employ pastoral workers to support families with 'parenting and other family issues' (Hillside, Parent Support Webpage). Schools offer food banks, preloved uniform, subsidised trips, and their newsletters regularly include posters from third parties such as the local council related to accessing financial support. Pupil premium policies feature targets to improve parental engagement, to ensure parenting requirements are met at home, and to support children receiving the PPG to access trips and clubs. In this way, schools acknowledge parents' situations and attempt to support families in a range of ways.

However, newsletters are also noticeably full of requests for financial and material contributions from the home into school. These include donations for numerous charity and fundraising non-uniform days, food banks, school discos, workshops and trips. Support for funding applications through censuses and surveys, and even generic monetary donations to the school are requested. These requests are often presented with a moral justification, such as the impact any money raised would have for the children. For example, Oakwood's newsletter invites parents to 'come and buy books and cakes to help raise money for our school but to also give your child lots of lovely books to read at home'. Here, parents are doubly obliged to purchase books at the sale: to make a contribution to children's experiences at school but also to be a good parent who values books at home. Furthermore, these are books that have been donated by families specifically for the sale. Rather than a book swap or other free arrangement which encourages books in the home for parents who may be struggling to buy them, this is designed as an opportunity for the parent community to effectively buy back its own donations to the benefit of the school.

Despite acknowledging that 'we understand that times are tough at the moment' (Oakwood, Newsletter), requests for money and resources are constant. Alongside these requests, financial pressures are also presented as a challenge for schools.

> As you know our school budget is tight and so we would really appreciate it, if you are still waiting to pay for a trip, that a contribution you can afford is made towards the visit. We are monitoring the cost of the trips carefully and where possible using the minibuses to transport the children rather than use expensive coach hire. The Mambury trips are heavily subsidised […] to make them affordable for our families. We really would like to continue with the current offering next year as the children gain so much from an off site visit, but this will come down to the income covering the costs.
>
> (Oakwood, Newsletter)

Here, parents are asked to make a contribution towards an upcoming trip, with the school citing budget restrictions as the reason for potential cut-backs on their trip offering. The school details its scrupulous reviewing of their practices to save money, positioning itself as in financial hardship, and refers to parents benefitting from what the school is doing to make trips affordable. The school's implication that they will not be able to continue trips without parents' contributions positions the school itself as in need and the parents morally obligated to support to ensure their children benefit from these experiences. It is unclear whether the school has consulted parents on what they can reasonably afford to contribute towards school trips, but the assumption is implied that parents are currently *choosing* not to, rather than not being financially able. Moreover, by relating its own financial struggles to parents at the hands of government funding – or lack of – schools themselves are presented not just as producers of policy, but also as consumers of policy themselves (Ball et al., 2011a). This sheds light on the inner workings of governmentality as it filters throughout society through the spread of institutions, their policies and practices (Foucault, 1978). Though this could serve to inspire some solidarity between parents and schools as both subjects of policy and undergoing hardship, it is arguable that schools' financial challenges as institutions are less crucial than families' challenges to access food and clothing and the reliance on food banks and pre-loved clothing donations.

How is the home-school relationship constructed within school communications and policies?

Here I will expand on three interconnected themes of tone, panopticism and rationality (Foucault, 1978), which are 'techniques of government' (Foucault, 1978/2020, p. 176) that I have already touched on in demonstrating how parents are positioned. However, I will focus now on how these techniques in themselves construct the home-school relationship and suggest how this might impact what is possible within that relationship.

Tone

'Tone is a literary device that conveys the author's attitude toward the subject' (Academy of American Poets, 2024) and audience of a text. The tone of school communications and policies is, understandably, variable between text types and schools as they are authored by different people within individual working cultures. Whilst all policies employ a fairly formal tone using educational discourses, school communications range more widely between schools, from detached to friendly and personable. Polite requests in a formal register, such as 'children should' (St Joseph's, Newsletter), 'can we ask that' (Oakwood, Newsletter), 'please refrain' (All Saint's CofE, Newsletter) and 'we kindly request' (Greenfield Academy, Newsletter), often create a tentative tone which potentially serves to maintain amiability between the school and parents. However, "reminders" to parents often adopt a positive, passive tone with implied consequences, whereby the school thanks the parents already exhibiting a desired behaviour in order to highlight to other parents where they are lacking.

> We are very happy to see that most of our children are in school. Pupil attendance at St Joseph's is good but we do have to inform parents if their child's attendance is below 93%. Miss Hargreaves has posted letters to parents whose child's attendance was below this figure.
>
> (St Joseph's, Newsletter)

The reference to 'most' children being in school infers that some are not, whilst the positive remarks about being 'happy' and 'good' attendance effectively "soften the blow" of the notification that some parents will be receiving letters about their child's attendance. Furthermore, the letter is framed as a requirement for the school by saying 'we do have to', when in fact there is no government guidance about precisely how or when schools must monitor attendance (DfE, 2024a). This excerpt serves as an example of the way that schools say one thing to parents but

actually mean another. Children and parents are continually monitored, their performance recorded via attendance records, late marks, assessments. “Well done” to the parents who have usually reads also as “oh dear” to those who have not. I argue that, particularly in nondominant communities where observation and state intervention in the life of the family can be all too real (Boag Munroe & Evangelou, 2012, this disingenuously passive tone, while avoiding direct criticism of parents, actually breeds paranoia of being surveyed and judged, and leads to a relationship that cannot be fully trusting. What is more, the superficially positive tone can also be seen as euphemistic framing (Stanley & Neck, 2024), and I suggest that in school texts this functions as a coercive technique to promote agreement and docility in parents. The avoidance of directly confrontational language potentially makes it difficult to challenge school ideas of expectations to fit the socially acceptable norm promoted in school texts (Kenway, 1990, p. 175). For example, the All Saints’ CofE newsletter message declaring, ‘We strongly believe reading with your children everyday is a real pleasure but also one that develops children’s skills in reading’, suggests that, not only is reading with your child daily supportive of their development, but that it is emphatically enjoyable. This may not be true for parents whose children find reading difficult, who struggle themselves with reading or who do not have time to do this every day. However, the positive framing of the school’s emphatic belief could make it difficult to challenge the expectation that daily reading is achievable and pleasurable. This may result in certain parents feeling alienated or powerless to challenge the school’s narrative and, I contend, could contribute to a disengagement from the home-school relationship.

Tone and Panopticism

However, across all schools, this tone is often unstable, even within individual texts, particularly in relation to parent behaviour. The following headteacher’s message demonstrates how the tone of school texts can quickly change:

> As I write this we are about to welcome parents for our annual Meet the Teacher session. I am hoping your children are pulling you into classes right now! We hope you valued having time to chat to your new teacher, ask any burning questions and get to know the new classrooms.
>
> Extremely sad to say we were sent a photo yesterday of a black car parked on the kerb on Spring Gardens outside Holly Class at drop off time. This is totally illegal and dangerous. I will

> be forwarding the photo to our traffic officer. […] We will email a photo to all parents if this continues to happen.
>
> (All Saint's CofE, Newsletter)

Here, the friendly, informal tone is immediately followed by a scolding reprimand for parent parking. It highlights the school's power to observe and record parents' behaviour, and this is followed by a threat to publicly shame such behaviour by effectively "outing" the parent to the entire parent community. In a relationship where the dynamic can be altered so dramatically at any time that the school deems necessary, it is possible to see that trust and egalitarian partnership are unlikely. Add to this the school's power to constantly monitor parents both within and outside school, to report low attendance and safeguarding concerns which can result in fines, sanctions or prosecution, and it is undeniable that the school holds specific power over parents' conduct (Foucault, 1978). In this way, the school functions as a panopticon, not just for its students but perhaps more so for parents, enacting 'a constant supervision of individuals by someone who exercised a power over them' (Foucault, 1973/2020, p. 68). This is not to say that upholding children's right to regular education and safeguarding their welfare is not desirable; what I mean to say is that the power of the school as an institution and the way this is communicated to and enacted on parents has consequences for the kind of relationship that can exist in this dynamic. What is possible within the home-school relationship, then, is firmly in the hands of the school as an institution, and an equal partnership seems impossible.

Rationality

As I have shown in my analysis of schools' positioning of parents within texts, schools' expectations and requests of parents, as well as their own practices, are almost always rationalised, often with reference to research or pedagogical knowledge. Communication about attendance, for example, is often framed in terms of what a small, regular amount of 'missed learning' (Greenfield Academy, AP) equates to over a longer period of time. For example, 'coming in 5 minutes late each day means [children] miss 25 minutes learning time over a week and 3 hours over a half term' (St. Joseph's CofE, Newsletter). Schools also use visual aids to enforce their claims.

> We found this poster really useful to show why 95% is the expected standard and that anything below this is a concern to us. Remember if a child misses 10 days of school – that is 10 Maths lessons, 10 phonics sessions (up to 4 phonics sounds) and a whole unit of writing. Attendance is vitally important. If your child is not in school, they cannot learn. We expect all

children to come to school, even when they have a cold. If your child is really poorly we will always contact you, otherwise please do send them into school.

(All Saint's CofE, Newsletter)

Here the school refers to a poster (See Appendix C) published by an unnamed third party to give weight to their setting of acceptable attendance at 95% or higher. By utilising '"objective" knowledges' (Kenway, 1990, p. 175) to endorse their practices in this way, schools 'produce, promote and service "regimes of truth"' (Kenway, 1990, p. 175) to coerce parents into changing their behaviour to suit the schools' goals. Furthermore, 95% attendance is presented here to pertain to a child missing 10 consecutive school days, which is not how the majority of school absences are reported to play out (DfE, 2024a). Conversely, this technique of rationality is also used (as in the example of parent feedback suggestions on punctuality discussed earlier) to defend school practices and justify why they should not change. Thus, professional knowledge is substantiated by statistical data and legislation, thus positioning the school as the 'ultimate authority' (Durand & Secakusuma, 2019, p. 17) therefore devaluing parent knowledge. Indeed, in the above example, the school asserts itself as more capable of judging whether or not a parent's child is unwell or not; parents should defer and the school should decide. In terms of HSR, this leaves parents with little authority. Thanks to the authentication of schools' claims by research and legislation, parents are left with little power to challenge practices they do not agree with or resist school requests in any form. Parents are receivers of knowledge from the professional domain of the school, which could in turn actually lead to less engaged parents as they may not perceive they have any agency within HSR. Thus, I argue that the techniques used in school texts to govern parents have both intended and potentially unintended consequences for what is possible within HSR.

Conclusions

This qualitative case study, carried out within the 'most deprived' area of a large town in England, set out to explore how school communications and policies construct HSR in this particular context. To do this, communications and policies from seven schools were analysed using a FDA to consider how parents are positioned within schools' texts, what schools ask and expect of parents and, ultimately, how the texts construct HSR.

To take a summary of my analyses of how schools position parents within their communications and policies, I have argued that these texts position parents as partners yet undermine any possibilities for authentic partnership through their assessment of parents as deficient in their parenting and behaviour, in need of correction and control by the school, and thus having little to offer to HSR. School texts promote a partnership rhetoric, but this largely consists of general statements of collaboration towards school goals which actually amount to compliance from parents placing schools in the position of power and control, making authentic partnership unattainable. Although schools do not always have complete power over their practices as they implement local and state level policies, the implications of these practices, such as reporting and fines for parents, are likely to impede a trusting, open relationship. Furthermore, parents are positioned as in need of financial and pastoral support, and schools have practices in place to provide this. Yet while schools communicate their understanding of parents' financial hardships and personal circumstances, they persistently ask for monetary and material contributions from parents, positioning schools themselves as "in need". In this way, schools can be seen as consumers of policy (Ball et al., 2011a); schools themselves are governed by the state and this then filters through to the authoring of their policies and communications. This contradiction in positioning could lead to some solidarity between parents and schools, or it could lead parents to feel their struggles are not truly understood by institutions that promote their own hardship as on a par with access to food and clothing.

These positionings contribute to the construction of HSR but, crucially, are enacted in conjunction with particular 'techniques of government' (Foucault, 1978/2020, p. 176). The tone of school texts, in particular newsletters, is often polite, positive and passive. This gives the sense that schools say one thing but actually mean another; that, as a panopticon, they are always supervising, and aim to correct the citizen by means of 'molding and transformation of individuals in terms of certain norms' (Foucault, 1973/2020, p. 75), which I have argued likely breeds mistrust in and disengagement from HSR. Furthermore, this tone is not always predictable, and can shift to a tone of scolding that issues threats of discipline such as reporting, fining and public

shaming (Foucault, 1976). Add to this the way school approaches, decisions and practices are bolstered by rationalities (Foucault, 1978b) citing legal requirements, legislation, and research claims and statistics, serving to dissuade resistance and coerce parent compliance with school requests and expectations, and it is possible to see how school authority is maintained within the relationship, thus impeding egalitarian partnership.

These findings align with much of the research literature on HSR which critiques the mismatch between schools' partnership rhetoric and the realities of their practices from the perspective of parents (Graham et al., 2021). Whilst it was not possible to access parents' perceptions within this study, I have aimed through my analysis to consider how school communications and policies may be received from a parent's perspective and to advocate for the voice of parents within HSR which still appears within the power and control of schools (Durand & Secakusuma, 2019). Thus, while at times I have tried to acknowledge the predicament of schools and keep my analysis open to the schools' perspective, my fundamental aim is to disrupt the hegemony of institutional discourses (Knight et al., 1990).

The approaches of schools to HSR within this study support the findings of Saltmarsh & McPherson (2022) that the social status of parent communities shape 'how parents engage with schools, but also […] how schools engage with them' (p. 149). Agreeing with Haines Lyon (2018), I argue that parents are 'positioned by schools as support acts' (p. 195), but moreover the positionings found in these school texts are fraught with contradictions which impede the trust (Durand & Secakusuma, 2019; Flores & Kyere, 2021; Hummel et al., 2023; Roberts, 2017; Santiago, 2016; Uitto et al., 2021), and mutual respect (Flores & Kyere, 2021; Graham et al., 2021) which research has shown to be supportive to positive HSR. My analysis of school texts supports the findings of Kingston (2021) that HSR are shaped by institutional power, and I extend this to suggest that schools themselves are caught in the '"web of control" of the state bureaucracy' (Kenway, 1990, p. 175) as they consume, interpret and enact policy from the local authority and central government (Ball et al., 2011b).

Whilst a number of my findings were to be expected given the extant literature on the inequitable conditions of HSR and PE within nondominant communities, I was surprised to find that, rather than the schools encroaching on families' homelife in terms of organising schedules and expecting a lot from parents in terms of engagement or involvement (Kingston, 2021), I found the opposite within this case. Rather than evidence for the 'responsibilisation' (Chiong, 2020, p. 37) of parents for their children's academic success, I found that parents were positioned as sub-citizens who schools consider as needing education themselves, particularly in terms of parenting and their own behaviour. I acknowledge, however, that schools may defend their attempts to correct

parents as necessary in order to provide support for the ultimate benefit of the children to which they have a duty of care (DfE, 2024c). The perspective of schools is potentially another truth in this complex relationship, and I do not attempt here 'to establish a final "truth"' (Graham et al., 2011, p. 666), nor do I wish to undermine the importance of children's wellbeing. However, regardless of a multiplicity of truths or any moral defence of schools' practices, it must be acknowledged that this does limit the possibilities of HSR within this community. The relationship between an institution with powers of 'supervision, control, correction' (Foucault, 1973/2020, p. 75) and a sub-citizen in need of reform cannot by definition be equitable.

Limitations

This study into HSR is deliberately situated within a case study area, and takes a poststructural approach to the research process and tentative claims to knowledge (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Within this framing, I believe it makes a valuable contribution to the extant literature on HSR within nondominant communities, yet there are several limitations to my findings which must be acknowledged as I take the view that there are assessments of rigour and quality which are applicable and important across research paradigms (Morrow, 2005). The main limitation is arguably the variance in the data sources I was able to access. Having a varying number and type of texts from each school meant that I had more potential information about HSR from some schools than others. In particular, there were three schools that did not publish their newsletters on their websites which meant that I was not able to analyse many of their communications (though for some schools I was able to access letters which helped to mitigate this somewhat). As my analysis of the data was not for direct comparison of schools, I feel this is a limitation that does not affect the authenticity of my findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000) and I uphold that the data collected was adequate to undertake my analysis (Morrow, 2005).

What is more, I must acknowledge again that my findings are my interpretations alone and are bound up in how I receive these texts as a teacher and a parent. I have, throughout my analysis and writing, engaged my reflexivity and constantly questioned the fairness of my interpretations in light of the data that I have available to me (Creswell & Miller, 2000). My positionality as a parent informs my critical stance on the power of institutions over individuals' lives, yet my positionality as a teacher draws me towards the middle, to aim to consider "the other side of the story", which I see as a strength of my analysis. Therefore, at times, I have tried to incorporate a somewhat balanced analysis for the sake of fairness to my school colleagues, both in this context and educators more widely. Nonetheless, it is possible to argue that this study is limited in that it does not have direct access to the views of stakeholders within this context: parents, children and

school staff. Yet I uphold that 'a postmodernist position does allow us to know "something" without claiming to know everything. Having a partial, local, and historical knowledge is still knowing' (Richardson, 2005, p. 961). I feel I have gained valuable understandings from my analysis of school communications and policies which could be used to empower parents by questioning what is taken for granted (Ball, 2019) and highlight to schools what they may also not be aware of. This could be built on in the future by incorporating the views of both the subjects (parents and children) and the authors (schools, local authorities and governments) of those texts.

Implications and future opportunities

Whilst this study has focused on the '*micro-level* realm of schools' (Savage, 2013, p. 88), some of my findings do point towards '*macro-level*' (Savage, 2013, p. 88) governance in schools' positioning of themselves as consumers and subjects of policy. Thus, a possibility for future research would be to use Foucault's concept of governmentality to further explore how these findings about the construction of HSR fit within the wider political landscape.

Another interesting avenue to explore would be the repetition of this study within a different case, such as an affluent area, or within schools where PE is deemed to be high or where parents are particularly satisfied with the relationship. This could shed light on whether and how schools approach communities differently, and whether parents are governed in the same or different ways. It is possible that knowledge of how HSR are enacted in different contexts would illuminate areas where change is possible.

Most importantly, I feel future research should continue to attempt to advocate for the voice of nondominant families. Whilst it wasn't possible to access parents directly in this study, the opportunity to understand more about parents' perceptions of communications and policy in HSR, particularly the more informal communications between parent and school, would add further detail to the 'picture' (Richardson, 2005, p. 961). Moreover, I believe a priority for future researchers should be to work collaboratively with parents in nondominant communities to give power to their perspective in a way that they feel is supportive and important.

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Appendix A: Sample and data source features.

School pseudonym	*School type*	*News-letters*	*Letters*	*PP Policy/Strategy*	*Homework policy*	*Attendance*	*Home-school agreement*	*Pastoral worker*	*Values/ethos/vision statement*	*Parent support*	*Parent conduct*	*Complaints*	
St. Joseph's	Catholic	35	-	1	1	1	-	-	2	1	-	1	
Riverbank	Community	-	-	1	1	2	-	1	1	1	-	1	
Hillside	Community	-	2	1	1	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	
Willowbrook	Community	-	8	1	1	2	-	1	2	-	-	1	
Oakwood	Community	17	18	1	1	2	-	-	1	-	1	2	
Greenfield Academy	Academy	35	-	1	1	1	-	-	1	1	1	1	
All Saints' CofE	C of E	36	-	1	-	2	-	-	1	-	-	1	
	Total	**123**	**28**	**7**	**6**	**13**	**2**	**3**	**9**	**4**	**3**	**8**	
											Total	**206**	

Appendix B: Penalty notice fines update poster extract from Oakwood Newsletter (original source not cited)

Appendix C: Attendance poster extract from All Saint's CofE Newsletter (original source not cited)