Beyond Bridging: The Prospects for Porosity in Parental Engagement Initiatives

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Abstract This paper explores the prospect of porosity in widening participation work with parents/carers from multiply deprived communities. Porosity offers a conceptual lens through which spaces can be viewed as interconnected and fluid, and not as bounded entities. The paper draws upon an evaluation of a pilot widening participation project. We reflect on the experiences of parents and the course co-ordinator as the participants move between social realms – the university campus and the home environment/local community – appraising the extent to which understandings of both change as a result of project participation. We conclude that widening participation programmes may offer porosity – with changes often experienced by parents in their home environments. However, concerns are expressed over whether these changes can be sustained in the long-term and the lack of change in participating Higher Education institutions. A process of mutual co-creation of widening participation programmes is advocated, which could allow for greater porosity with the potential to further break down structural barriers.

Key words Widening participation; Widening access; Deprived areas; Parental engagement; Higher Education; Scotland

Introduction

There is a tendency to think of educational institutions as discrete and to position them on a linear track through which the learner progresses – from antenatal classes, through playgroup, nursery classes, primary schools, secondary schools to tertiary education. Preparation for transition (e.g., nursery children visiting primary schools) and utilising earlier stages as a learning resource (e.g., university students undertaking dissertation research in schools) trouble the exclusivity of age-stages and

constitute a form of bridging across them. In this paper, we draw upon the work of Holloway and Valentine (2000), to advocate for porosity in parental engagement initiatives, and in so doing offer an addition to bridging as a means to problematise linear thinking and the compartmentalisation of education into discrete age stages. We acknowledge that while the dynamics of a specific setting contribute to its character, institutions are also shaped by the influences of the wider communities of which they are part; we argue that it is precisely this fluidity and porosity that have potential to unlock the possibilities of parental engagement. For example, in our research drawing upon an evaluation of a programme targeted at parents from areas of multiple deprivation, we explore the divide between the spaces of the academy and parental background and context in order to highlight areas of disconnect in such initiatives.

This is set with an understanding that in an ever-changing world, institutions and places are continually being made and re-made and '… do not have single, unique "identities"' (Massey, 1991: 29). Through the lens of porosity, an alternative is offered to the goal of achieving acculturation through widening participation; the objective moves away from 'making them like us' to a realisation that both the academy and the community can be strengthened by allowing what each offers to permeate the other.

Our argument is developed from research undertaken to evaluate a parental engagement initiative within a university setting. This project sought to provide parents, from typically multiply deprived areas, with confidence, skills, and knowledge to, in turn, enable them to support their young child's learning of literacy and numeracy in the home. The project is part of a broader and longer-term programme to tackle the under-representation of young people from these communities progressing to Higher Education and other positive post-school destinations (which include Further Education, employment, training, voluntary work or personal skills development. For example, see Scottish Government, 2021). In this context, early parental engagement in their child's education is conceived as a strategy, which in conjunction with other interventions will widen participation.

We begin with a contextualisation of the literature on parental engagement in education before summarising the recent policy developments in widening participation work in Scotland. We then introduce the concept of 'porosity', highlighting its potential value to enrich widening participation. Following this we will introduce *Families Connect,* the widening participation pilot project that was

evaluated as part of this research. Having reviewed our methodological approach, we present an analysis and discussion of our findings, which is an exploration of porosity in one university's widening participation work with parents/carers from multiply deprived communities. We argue that conceptualising spaces as unbounded and porous may have a progressive impact both on those communities and the university itself.

Parental engagement

Parental engagement is one strategy that has been deployed to widen participation. In turn, it takes different forms and serves a range of purposes. Most commonly, it is encouraged in schools with the aim of improving outcomes for their children. The outcomes of this work are typically focused on children for the present – to improve children's engagement and learning outcomes. However, the outcomes of this work can also be conceived in the longer term (increasing the chances of future positive destinations for that child), and can be directed at the adult, as well as the child (to encourage the parent/guardian to re-engage with learning or take steps to re-enter the labour market). In these guises, engaging parents in their child's early education can be conceived as a strategy to widen participation in higher education, especially for those from multiply deprived backgrounds.

There is a wealth of research which demonstrates that parental engagement in children's learning has positive impact (Hattie, 2009; Harris and Goodall, 2008), although the wider family, community, and social circumstances in which a child is situated also play a significant role in shaping the life of a young child (White, 2008). Although there are some who argue that there is a weak association between parental engagement and attainment (Gorard and See, 2013), most research has found positive and strong associations between parental involvement and children's education outcomes (Sylva et al., 2004; Bradshaw et al., 2012; Cooper et al., 2010). For example, the *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education* (EPPE) study found that the positive effect of a stimulating home learning environment during the early years of a child's life can influence the educational attainment of the child. Indeed, Sylva and colleagues (2004) have argued that the quality of the home learning environment is more important for children's social and intellectual development than family socio-economic status, occupation, or education, contending that, 'what parents do is more important than who parents are' (Sylva et al., 2004: 1). On a cautionary note, it has also been contended that parents

need to be 'engaged' in their child's learning and not simply 'involved' in schooling (Harris and Goodall, 2008; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011; Goodall and Montgomery, 2014).

The target groups for widening participation activities are often older children and young people, with parents, at best, directly involved as observers or indirectly 'involved' as third parties informed about activities their children are undertaking. This peripheral engagement of parents in widening participation work in Higher Education is disadvantageous for children from families without a Higher Education background (Kerrigan and Church, 2011), with even the value of 'ambient immersion' in a university found to have a positive impact of parents' inclination to support children's university ambitions (Canovan and Luck, 2018). Without knowledge or understanding of Higher Education, parents are less well placed to shape the informed decision-making of their children with regards to accessing Higher Education – important to consider as parents often exert a strong influence on their child's decision-making (Dismore, 2009). This is important not only at the point of decision-making for applications; a lack of information for parents on what young people can expect from Higher Education, including how to access appropriate support, may also adversely impact the experience of Higher Education for those who are able to access it (Marshall, 2016; Zimdars, Sullivan and Heath, 2009).

Additionally, the majority of widening participation and fair access work tends to not engage with young children. This is despite numerous reports of the need for prolonged and sustained interactions between Higher Education and families in order to build, and foster, strong relationships with parents and their children – and best meet their needs (Croll et al., 2016; Mulcahy and Baars, 2018). Indeed, in their work exploring Higher Education outreach in schools, Gale and colleagues (2010) argue that capacity building, across communities, schools, and Higher Education institutions, whereby programs familiarise young people and their parents with Higher Education to develop 'cultures of possibility', is a crucial element of improving outcomes for those from multiply deprived backgrounds. Further, they note that such programmes need to begin early in a child's education pathway in order to encourage cultural and dispositional shifts related to achievement and aspirations.

Despite the value placed on parental engagement, and the positive impact it can have on a child's educational attainment, opportunities, and future life chances, it is important to acknowledge the societal and structural constraints faced by parents from disadvantaged backgrounds (Trowler, Allan and Din,

2019). Doyle and Keane (2019), in their exploration of the perspectives of parents of early school leavers, illustrate that survival is prioritised over education in a context of socio-economic deprivation, while Bailey (2020) notes the preference of parents for 'making money'. They frame these findings within Maslow's hierarchy of needs to highlight how basic human needs (psychological and safety) must be met before higher level needs (education) can be realised.

The Scottish context

Universities tend to be viewed as fulfilling a particular purpose in society that is enduring and stable, and is associated with extending the bounds of knowledge for the greater good and imparting this knowledge to those studying within. Inadvertently, or by design, universities have traditionally been viewed as exclusive and elitist. While Scotland still seeks to promote world-class research, there has been a recent policy focus on widening participation work stemming from a Scottish Government ambition to ensure that every child has the same chance of progressing into university, irrespective of socio-economic status (Scottish Government, 2016). This seeks to tackle the inequality that young people from Scotland's most deprived communities are four times less likely to enter university compared to those from the least deprived communities (Scottish Government, 2016). In order to narrow this gap, a time-limited Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) was established. In their final report, the CoWA highlighted a range of actions to drive forward progress towards fair access. Of significance for this paper was the highlighting of the potential benefit of engaging with younger children and their families in order to 'raise expectations, aspiration and attainment' (Scottish Government, 2016: 44). Indeed, the report recommended:

> 'Universities and colleges should increase engagement with our youngest children and their families as part of the provision of a coordinated package of support for those in our most deprived communities.' (Scottish Government, 2016: 44)

However, despite the policy recommendations of CoWA, Browitt and Ingram (2018) highlight gaps in widening access activities that support early engagement with children and foster parental engagement. In the Scottish context, efforts to engage young people and their families are often focused at the secondary school level (ages 11–18), and typically in its upper stages.

The Scottish Government's commitment to widening participation was strengthened with the appointment of Peter Scott as the first Commissioner for Fair Access in December 2016, following the publication of CoWA's final report. Subsequent annual reports from the Commissioner have detailed the progress made regarding widening access and participation in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2019; 2020). The Commissioner has observed that Scotland is a 'pace-setter' in the UK regarding widening access and participation – with fair access embedded in most aspects of Scottish Higher Education (Scottish Government, 2020). However, he also acknowledged the deficit-approach that currently typifies widening access work; here, he is critical that young people are viewed in terms of their educational and socio-economic disadvantage, with insufficient attention (if at all) given to their skills, aptitudes, and competencies (characteristics of an asset-based approach). Scott observes that widening access initiatives must be firmly rooted in a commitment to social justice, drawing upon young people's capacities and a notion of a 'good society' whereby all learners ultimately benefit (Scottish Government, 2019).

These conclusions are pertinent to this paper as we seek to reflect on our observation that approaches to widening participation through parental engagement do not always adopt an asset-based approach in their pursuit of social justice. We will preface this analysis with an overview of the conceptual framing of porosity, which provides the means to better understand socio-spatial practices that are embedded in parental engagement initiatives.

Families Connect

To reflect on these issues, we consider *Families Connect,* an eight-week project comprising interactive two-hour workshops at Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU), which aims to develop parents' confidence and skills to, in turn, enable them to support their child's learning of literacy and numeracy in the home. The project is a long-term contribution to GCU's and the nation's widening participation agendas. Enabling parents to better support their own child's learning at pre-school and in the early years of primary school level is rationalised as making a contribution to a longitudinal programme of widening participation work in these communities (McKendrick, 2016). In addition to this longer-term goal, this project also aims to identify more immediate opportunities for skill development amongst the parents who attend the project. This is pertinent for the local

context, with GCU a leader in widening access to Higher Education, particularly through The Caledonian Club – a participation and community engagement initiative which works in, and across, the local community to break down barriers to Higher Education. However, this project, and its findings, also offer lessons to be learned for other Higher Education institutions in considering, and developing, parental engagement initiatives.

Participants were parents of nursery school children (with children aged between 3 and 5 years old) attending *Families Connect* partner schools in Lochside[i] (2 miles or 10 minutes drive from GCU) and Hillview (7 miles or 25 minutes from GCU). In total, thirteen parents took part – eleven from Lochside and two from Hillview – of whom all were female. The project comprised eight sessions (Table 1), with these running on a Wednesday morning from 9.30–11.30 a.m. The co-ordinator and primary facilitator of the project was Andrea. For session 4, a co-facilitator was present who supported the parents to create a story book.

Session number and name	Overview
Session 1: Breakfast stay and play	An introduction to the *Families Connect* project.
Session 2: Pathways to happiness	The aim of this workshop was to build self-esteem and confidence. These skills could then be utilised at home by the participants with their children.
Session 3: In other words, part 1	This session was to be focused on literacy learning and covered confidence with words.
Session 4: In other words, part 2	This session was to be focused on literacy learning and being confident with words. This session would invite parents to contribute to a story book.
Session 5: Numbers through play, part 1	This first numeracy skills session would involve parents being shown how everyday objects can be used to support their children's numeracy skills.
Session 6: Numbers through play, part 2	This week, part 2 of the numeracy sessions, learning from the first session would be consolidated by encouraging parents to have a positive attitude about numbers.

Session 7: Pathways to futures	This would serve as a complementary session to the first week and consider the aspirations of the parents and the endless possibilities for everyone.
Session 8: Prizegiving party	Party session for the parents to mark the completion of the project.

Table 1: *Families Connect* session overview

Evaluation method

The Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit (SPIRU), independent to *Families Connect*, was asked to evaluate the pilot project. The evaluation utilised a mixed methods approach to achieve an in-depth understanding of participant and staff experiences.

Research methodology

A multiple qualitative research methods strategy was deployed, which included the appraisal of course documentation; analysis of a reflective audio diary, comprising recordings from the project co-ordinator at the end of each session in response to our prompts; ethnographic observations gathered from three sessions; and interviews with parents who participated in the project. The multiple methods design enabled a deep understanding of the parents' experiences of the project (Fielding and Fielding, 1986; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007; Pearce, 2012) creating an enriched and bright portrait (Jick, 1979). In this paper, we primarily draw upon the interview data, observations and co-ordinator reflections.

Interviews

Parents who took part in the project were invited to take part in an interview. The pre-school/school headteachers were utilised in order to gain access to these parents; eight out of thirteen parents were interviewed, with these interviews being held in a private room within the pre-school/school. These semi-structured interviews were focused (Merton and Kendall, 1946) and short in length, ranging from 25 minutes to 62 minutes, which ensured that research objectives were fulfilled without being overly demanding on the parents, who often had busy and demanding schedules. Semi-structured interviews allowed for a purposeful, systematic and comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences of the project, while keeping the interview focused on

the desired objective (Creswell, 2007) – the evaluation of *Families Connect.*

Observations and co-ordinator reflections

Four of the ten sessions were attended by the researchers. Observations at these sessions were not structured. Instead, the primary intentions of the observations were to allow for the researchers to become known, and familiar, to the participants and to enable the researchers to develop an understanding of the group culture (Bernard, 1994). Prior to the start of the project, the research team developed a structured topic guide. This guide encouraged the co-ordinator to reflect, and audio-record her reflections, shortly after each session. These recordings provided insights into how the project developed over time, but also provided the researchers with an understanding of how the project co-ordinator rationalised what had taken place in each session.

Data analysis

All parents consented for the interviews to be audio-recorded, and these were then transcribed, coded and analysed by the research team. Thematic analysis was utilised during the data analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This data driven, bottom-up process of analysis involves six phases: data familiarisation; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining themes; and writing-up findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The findings from the multiple methods were analysed separately, and then considered as a whole. The inductive approach to analysis allowed for the actual project impacts and experiences to emerge, moving beyond a narrow focus of appraisal of pre-defined outcomes (Scriven, 1991; Thomas, 2006).

Reflections from a parental engagement initiative: *Families Connect*

The social aspects of the project emerged as being of primary importance to the participants and were portrayed as its defining feature. Many parents reported that the project provided them with a 'place to get their story out and socialise' (Lynn). It transpired that many of the parents commented on previously limited contact with the other adult participants, with their attention focused on their children, home and often other caring responsibilities (for their own parents and/or partners). This suggests that parents not only valued, but also needed, the

opportunity to engage with other adults, given the family-focused and somewhat isolated lives that they were living. Inadvertently, by providing a space in which parents could interact, the barriers between local communities and Higher Education institutions were broken down, as the Higher Education environment was experienced as welcoming, sociable and comfortable. Although it might be necessary, in order to justify spending for parental engagement initiatives work, to focus on raising aspirations and attainment, at least it should be acknowledged that the social focus is a precursor to this, if not a worthy goal in its own right.

The fun element of the project was not only important for socialisation; it also helped individual mental wellbeing. Parents were able to 'meet other people…[and]…have a laugh' (Louise), and attending the group was seen to 'brighten people's day' (Stacey). The co-ordinator, Andrea, spoke to the researchers early on in the project commenting on how she would need to adapt the pre-planned sessions (which were originally tightly defined and scheduled) in order to provide more social time due to participants' desire for more informal, conversation-led activities. A key strength of *Families Connect* was that Andrea was willing to adapt the project in order to provide sessions that best supported the parents and met their needs. This change in curriculum was not made apparent to the group and could not be understood to constitute collaborative curriculum design. However, it is responsive and reflexive, highlighting how universities and academic staff can adapt, allowing the previously unarticulated needs of visitors to shape the learning space. Nevertheless, it might be argued that this top-down, one-sided porosity (with university staff adapting to parents' needs without first consulting the parents about their needs and wants) is less welcome than one which is based on a co-created curriculum design (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2011), whereby '…staff and students work collaboratively with one another to create components of curricula and/or pedagogical approaches' (Bovill et al., 2016: 196).

Parents often reported that the group-led discussions, which were introduced after the first two weeks, were the most valued part of the *Families Connect* experience. These discussions allowed for the sharing of experience and stories of home life, which created a sense of solidarity and mutual support amongst the parents and provided reassurance about parenting approaches. One parent spoke about finding out that another parent in the group was going through a similar situation to her (the diagnosis of a child with attention deficit disorder) – and how knowing others were going through a shared experience helped her to cope with her current situation.

> Stacey: … it was quite good going to the group 'cause there was another mum there … whose son was the same age as my son, and she was going through the exact same thing. Yeah, so it sorta let you know you're not the only person … your son isn't being horrible to you, he's actually got something wrong with him … hearing that from the other mum's point of view too helped.

Another parent commented that hearing others' experiences reassured her that 'nobody needs to be perfect' and it helped her to 'chill out' when it came to be a parent (Melanie). Further, by sharing experiences with each other and by having the experience of doing something for oneself some mothers began to realise the importance of looking after themselves.

> Stacey: … you need to look after yourself, but you also need to think about yourself too. Andrea made us aware of that. We're a mother, yeah, but also a human being.
> Researcher: Did you discuss *Families Connect* with anyone else? Like family or friends?
> Wendy: Yeah, I spoke to a few parents in school asking what it was. It is quite hard to explain it, I said you would have to be there to understand it. It was to relax you [to] give you a focus point on you for yourself.

However, it is worth noting that this positive self-development and positive group culture was attributed to Andrea, with the parents' own role often unacknowledged. This was apparent for one individual who had applied for a Further Education course during the project with assistance being provided by both Andrea and Andrea's colleagues for the completion of the online application form. The individual was successful in gaining access to this course and she attributed this accomplishment entirely to Andrea and her support – without recognising her own contribution and self-development over the duration of the project. Non-recognition of their own assets is indicative of a lack of self-esteem – and might be considered a failing when one explicit aim of the project was to build and develop parental self-confidence and esteem. Concerns might also be raised regarding the impact of time-limited parental engagement initiatives if they do not help to support parents to realise and recognise their own self-development during the project.

All of the parents spoke highly of Andrea and her facilitation of the project. In particular, participants appreciated how 'down to earth' (Melanie) and 'so friendly' (Lynn) Andrea was which helped to change their views of university.

> Stacey: See looking at Andrea you'd think she was a total snob. Like, you'd think she'd be just stuck up, but as soon as she opens her mouth up you realise right away like no, she's just everybody else.
> Researcher: Is that important?
> Stacey: Hugely important. She never shied away either from telling us all about her kids and that and her life. If we were discussing something and she knew she'd been there, then she'd say too, just like one of us. She was just such a lovely woman.

These comments suggest that in order for parents to fit in they need to feel a sense of shared experience and commonality with the people in the spaces in which they occupy. This has important implications for who represents the university in family and parental engagement. A sense of belonging in spaces was also important, with parents often holding negative pre-conceptions of university prior to attending the project, with some reporting that they had previously thought university was costly and unwelcoming.

> Stacey: I always thought people who go to university are, like, well-off people. Like, I thought you seriously needed to pay a huge amount of money to go to university like take out big, massive loans and I thought your parents had to save up all their lives for you to go and that. But, like I thought it was full of people who thought they were better than anybody else, but soon as we walked in that door literally anybody we walked by would say hi and that was nice … I think it's very welcoming.

Other participants commented that they had previously thought of university as places where 'smart' people go and only for those who 'do well at school' (Louise). Through participation in the project, parents found out more about university and met some of those working in the university (Andrea and the researchers). They also perceived that they sampled what they thought the university setting was like through regular attendance at the sessions. This led participants to change their previously held views on university and university life, including fostering a sense of 'anyone can do it' (Melanie) with regards to university study.

Two parents from Lochside commented on how they were '*just* from Lochside' (Stacey, *emphasis* added), which is 'not top rate' (Melanie). Therefore, having a facilitator and co-ordinator as personable as Andrea helped the participants to feel at ease in a space and culture which was not only unfamiliar to them, but

which was also perceived as superior to what they were used to. Many of the participants commented on the comfortable environment (Lynn) and 'completely open space' (Louise) of the project which allowed for the sharing of thoughts and ideas without feeling judged.

However, it is important to note that the parents' experiences of university life and university spaces were limited during their involvement with the project. All of the sessions were held in the same room, which was removed from the university's teaching spaces. Further, participants had little interaction with academic staff and students, were unable to access all areas of the university (such as the library) and were unable to login to university computers nor access the university intranet (due to not being issued a student card and computer login details). In terms of porosity in parental engagement initiatives, this limited use of the university space suggests some shortcomings. Parents have little chance to impact upon, and influence, the wider university, with these participants from local communities primarily detached from the wider life of the university, while within the university campus.

Furthering this idea of the local community and parents being detached from the university while on campus, the parents conveyed a sense that the project could have been held anywhere. The one caveat that was stressed was that it was important to be in a space removed from their children and their wider domestic environment in order to allow them to 'switch off' from parenting mode. One parent felt they could have the sessions in the pre-school/school in which their child(ren) was situated 'as long as I'm still getting out to do something' (Lynn). Another parent agreed that the sessions could be held in the local nursery and reflected that this may encourage parents to sign up to the project (due to accessibility). However, one parent felt she could only be comfortable in the project when in a different location to her children as when her children are nearby her children's 'senses are all round you' (Melanie). Thereby, having children close by would prevent her from focusing on the sessions.

The first two sessions of *Families Connect* focused primarily on personal aspirations and sought to highlight to parents that their goals were achievable. This idea of individual aspiration was interwoven throughout the rest of the project with parents discussing and querying possible avenues, such as Further Education and employment. For most, Further Education courses and career opportunities had been considered, but were dismissed as immediate goals due to concerns over costs and

financial resources which would affect not only them, but also the wider household and family, including partners, children, and elderly parents. Four of the parents commented that they were unsure how attending Further Education or taking up a job offer would affect their benefit entitlement – with parents unwilling or unable to risk losing a vital means of support.

> Jean: I'd like to go to college to be a sports therapist, but I don't know if I can start this year, it will depend on the timetable and I need to look in to how it will affect money and things.

> Fay: … if I went to college I would have my housing benefit taken away from me.

> Clare: The only thing that is putting some of them *[the parents on the project]* off is they will lose welfare, so Andrea was saying perhaps we could have someone come along and chat about that.

> Louise: [I] am meant to be doing a back to work calculator today at job club. Now they are saying [I] don't apply for universal credit because there is going to be changes. I have been offered a part time job, but I don't know if I am going to be able to take it because I might be worse off.

Aspirations are clearly already present, but structural barriers prevail, which prevent the parents from realising these ambitions (Treanor, 2017). This is exacerbated by the lack of information and support, which the parents on the project felt they needed in order to access the workplace and education opportunities (Treanor, 2017). Louise also highlights that poorly-paid employment could potentially result in her facing recurrent, in-work poverty (Shildrick et al., 2010); not all of the so-called 'positive destinations' to which widening access populations are directed are to be welcomed. This raises questions regarding whether parental engagement projects, and even wider widening participation initiatives, can address issues of inequality in accessing university if wider structural inequality and inequity is not reduced, as 'education cannot compensate for society' (Bernstein, 1970). Further, it may be that family engagement projects offer parents a greater hope in achieving their aspirations, and as a result temporarily raise aspirations. However, without considering the wider context of the lived reality of these parents, the parents' aspirations (and university aspirations for these parents) cannot be realised resulting in a sense of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011). Therefore, the space of

university and community ultimately remain bounded, not porous, in that these spaces cannot be penetrated by those targeted through widening participation as a result of wider systemic inequalities.

The focus on aspirations in a time-limited project, or indeed widening participation work more generally, is being reconsidered. Recent research suggests that parents living in multiply deprived areas often hold high hopes and aspirations for their children (Treanor, 2017; Kintrea, St. Clair and Houston, 2011), but they find it difficult to access the knowledge and resources which can help their children to achieve their aspirations (Treanor, 2017). Sinclair, McKendrick and Scott (2010) argue that the focus on low aspirations fails to alleviate the deprivation faced by these individuals which limits their educational attainment, resulting in an inhibition to achieve full citizenship in society. Treanor (2017) continues that perpetuating the 'poverty of aspiration' myth leads to a negation of wider, systemic issues at the education and societal levels leading to a conflation of poverty discourses and a labelling of those from disadvantaged backgrounds as deficient. Therefore, a focus for family engagement activities could be in supporting parents and children to understand the opportunities around them through the provision of knowledge and resources necessary to capitalise upon them. Parents in the project often held high aspirations for theirselves and their children, but with regards to realising their own aspirations, parents raised concerns over how to negotiate complex benefit systems and precarious work environments. For parents, there were concerns regarding benefit eligibility, managing household costs, childcare provision/cost, and flexible employment patterns. The parents simply did not see a way to manage employment or Further/Higher Education alongside their current responsibilities nor did they have access or signposting to resources that could support them to realise their aspirations.

Conclusions

It is evident that participating parents had a positive experience of the *Families Connect* project. However, in considering whether porosity is achieved through parental engagement initiatives, it is apparent that there is a disconnect, with the university remaining a bounded space, while parents are expected to, and do, to an extent, change through their project participation. However, it is not clear if these changes will affect future Higher Education participation, and an enhancement of the life chances of the parents' children, in the longer term, as it is unclear if parents are

aware of these changes in their own self-development that could positively influence their children's lives. As argued in this paper, many parents were unaware of their valuable contribution in constructing a positive group culture, while other parents did not acknowledge their self-development, which had changed through their interaction with the project (e.g. applying for and being accepted on to a Further Education course, changing their parenting style, and considering new future possibilities). This should be a key concern for those working within parental engagement, as if parents are not supported in realising and recognising their personal self-development, these changes may not be sustained post-project, and negate the value and potential of such initiatives. As a result, there is a threat that parents may not then pass these experiences, laden with new skills and knowledge, on to their children and others within their local social network, limiting both the potential positive impact on their children, and the reach of impact among the wider community – and limiting the impact of wider fair access initiatives and policy agendas.

Further, curriculum design in parental engagement work needs to be relevant to the expressed and immediate interests of parents. In this paper we have raised concerns regarding initiatives where the curriculum has a focus on raising aspirations. We noted that this is not a 'problem' that needs to be addressed (Treanor, 2017). Instead, we suggest parental engagement work should strive to consider, and account for, the voices of participants in planning such initiatives through a process of mutual co-creation (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2011). This could allow for parents' voices to be heard regarding what support and guidance they require in order to achieve their and their children's aspirations. Further, an alignment in thinking may occur whereby, through its parental engagement work and wider widening participation agenda, a university can embed itself into the heart of local communities, with these spaces being viewed as localised, familiar and *for* the community. In particular, for multiply deprived communities, working alongside – *with* and *for* – the community could assist with breaking down barriers between spaces, resulting in both academic institutions and local communities learning and benefiting though such interactions.

Despite this study being focused in one specific context, the findings do offer broader insights, and learnings, for those working to develop parental engagement initiatives – and acts as a reminder of the need for collaborative working in order to realise transformation and the wider aims of such programmes, (for example, in widening access to Higher Education for those from multiply deprived communities). Further, perhaps, through

the breaking down of such barriers, and increasing porosity, Higher Education institutions may, through time, encourage more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to attend university. This will only be achieved when these interventions are sensitive to lived experiences, which favours a strong co-production in design. Until institutions are porous, the boundaries of privilege will remain, and inequalities will persist within the education system (Crozier et al., 2008), lessening the likelihood of Higher Education achieving what it purports to become – a system that is truly open to all.

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[i] Names of all participants, partner schools and communities have been anonymised in this paper.

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