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# Working towards improved collaboration: reviewing provision and support for Christian parents/carers

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**ABSTRACT**

It is increasingly acknowledged by a range of sectors, particularly health and educational, that collaboration with parents is fundamental to improving the developmental outcomes of children. It is also becoming more commonplace within the UK church and para-church organisations to emphasise the importance of supporting parents as they seek to nurture their child's Christian faith. This raises multiple questions around the resourcing of institutions such as churches and school to form supportive, collaborative partnerships with parents for the sake of the children's spiritual growth and development. This exploratory study collected data from three different perspectives: a review of tools and resources; interviews of practitioners and online surveys of parents in seventeen case-study contexts. In each arena, the provision and support for parents and carers for nurturing their Christian faith was investigated. Epstein's *types of involvement* theory was used as a framework for analysis to map the nature of resources currently available for churches and faith-based schools wanting to collaborate with parents and carers, as well as to identify gaps and opportunities for future resourcing to enhance this kind of collaboration and partnerships.

## 1. Introduction

Collaborating with parents and carers improves aspects such as the educational outcomes and social emotional functioning of children (Armstrong 2020; Costa et al. 2021; Smith et al. 2020). In the UK, working in partnership with parents and carers is an underpinning principle of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and state-run entities, such as the NHS,[1] HMRC,[2] NCT[3] and the Local Government Association.[4] Further to this provision of formal and institutional support for families, support is available for daily challenges and responsibilities of parents and carers,[5] such as tantrums, mental health, racism,[6] and general perinatal support.[7] Other organisations focus on home and school connections (Ghate and Ramella 2002) to support school attendance and courses such as Triple P[8] and Incredible Years[9] seek to enhance the skills and confidence of parents and carers.

This paper explores provision and resourcing of support for parents and carers who wish to nurture the Christian faith in their child. Many of the established UK churches emphasise the value of family and express a desire to collaborate with parents and carers. For example, the Catholic church expresses its aim to empower parents and encourage faith-filled Catholic families,[10] and the Presbyterian Church of Ireland[11] sees the role of the congregation as supporting parents in their task as being the primary disciplers of their children. The Baptist Union asserts the need to nurture

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faith in children and young people by providing the space to explore, experience and experiment in their lives with God (Grant and Ray 2010), whilst the Church of England[12] emphasises the need to be available to support families in everyday life rather than only to implement interventions when things go wrong. However, the resourcing of this area was anecdotally reported to be limited. This paper is part of a broader project exploring collaboration between church, home and school, although this particular paper aims to explore and analyse the resource provision in the UK for Christian parents seeking to nurture their child's Christian faith, using the Epstein *types of involvement* as a theoretical framework for exploration (Epstein 2001). The research questions for this paper are therefore: What resources are available for churches and faith-based schools to work in partnership with parents and carers to support a child's faith development? What is the nature of these resources when mapped using the framework of Epstein's types of involvement (Epstein 2001)? And what gaps and opportunities may be identified for future resourcing in order to enhance collaboration with parents and carers?

## 2. Support for parents, carers and families

Announced in 1998, and launched in 1999, the UK sought to improve the delivery of services and support to young children and their families through the Sure Start programme, with an underlying belief that investing in young children would benefit the wider society (Eisenstadt 2011) and a particular focus on those from underprivileged backgrounds (Glass 1999). Included in the Sure Start model was the aim to provide targeted resources working with parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual, social and emotional development of children, offering skills training for parents, personal development courses, practical advice and support such as debt counselling, language or literacy training (Glass 1999). Attendance on some courses is stipulated by schools or medical bodies before diagnosis for certain conditions, or by educational bodies for behavioural issues, or by the judicial system in case of child contact or custody situations. However, Moran and Ghate (2005) question their effectiveness as situations often remain unchanged. Boyle (2023) also questioned reality and aspirations of such programmes. Yet, Barnes and Senior (2006) found that when the organisations referring to or running the courses are previously in a positive relationship with the parents, the retention rate and positive outcomes are greater.

In contrast to these targeted courses, Epstein (2001) argued that working with or alongside parents or carers should not be left to occasional, crisis-led interventions. Indeed, parental engagement has been found to enhance academic, personal and social achievement on the part of the child (McWayne et al. 2004; Rattenborg et al. 2019; Yamauchi et al. 2017) in addition to improvements to home and family life (Barlow and Stewart-Brown 2001). In the USA, the importance of parent and school partnership is regarded so strongly that it is federally and often state mandated (Grant and Ray 2010), indicating that building relationships between provision providers, such as schools and parents, should not be limited to extreme circumstances but regarded as the norm. Epstein (2001) argued that segmenting students into school child and home child is ignoring the whole child, adding that reducing or removing the support, guidance and input from parents, wider family and community is to the detriment of the child and whole community. This sentiment is relevant also in the domains of home and church due to strong evidence that parents have vital influence over their child's faith formation (Bengston, 20132013; Smith and Adamczyk 2020) and that partnership between family and church is of critical importance (Casson et al. 2020; Roberto 2020).

## 3. The role of parents, carers and family in children's faith formation

Thompson (1996) referred to family as the 'forming centre' of a child's faith, and many have documented the value of the family being intentionally involved in nurturing a child's faith (Holmes 2023; Roberto 2020; Turner 2018). Research indicates that parents who interact with their children in warm, affirming and respectful ways are more likely to pass on their religious tradition,

beliefs and practices (Bengtson 2017). Furthermore, Christian parents have been encouraged to frame their nurture of a child's faith as part of the child's ordinary and day-to-day experience (Beckwith 2010; Thompson 1999; Turner 2018). Role modelling is key (Bengtson 2017; Dean 2010; Westerhoff 2012), echoing Fowler's notion that a child's faith develops experientially and through encounters with stories, images and the influence of others (Fowler 2001). Similarly, Westerhoff (2012) stated that common memories and traditions are an important aspect of a child's experiential formation of faith, connecting with their participation in Christian practices, rituals and listening to stories of faith which help the child to feel a sense of belonging within the faith community (Thompson 1999).

Despite encouragement for parents to be active in this area, Dean (2010) observed that many Christian parents struggle with this, and Mark (2016) revealed that only 36% of parents feel confident passing on the Christian faith to their children. Indeed, parent respondents told England (2014) that passing on the Christian faith to their children was eleventh out of twelve in importance of values to convey, although Mark (2016) noted that values are transferred from parent to child, whether actively or passively, but nonetheless transmitted. Similarly, Beckwith (2010) posited that the reasons parents struggle with nurturing their child's faith are feelings of inadequacy regarding their own faith understanding and demands of family life and commitments. Further to this, the professionalisation of children's ministry in churches has conveyed a sense of parent's involvement in the upbringing of their child being reduced (Turner 2018), combined with a culture of parents outsourcing their child's extra-curricular activities, and hence their spiritual input also (Csinos and Beckwith 2013). These trends are compounded by increased work demands upon parents, resulting in work – life conflicts (Anuradha and Mrinalini 2022). In light of this, this paper explored what resourcing is available to support Christian parents in this quest.

## 4. Methodology

This explorative research sought to examine provision of resourcing for parents and carers who wish to nurture the Christian faith in their child. This occurred through three separate lenses: a review of tools and resources, an online survey of parents, and online interviews with church or school practitioners about resources.

The first stage was to review and analyse resources. An initial internet search was conducted to discover which organisations may offer resources for churches and schools to aid parents with faith transmission. A total of 25 organisations were considered with eight dismissed immediately if they worked outside the UK or if their resources were not specifically targeted to encouraging parents in faith transmission. The remaining Christian organisations, who worked with children and families were contacted, initially by email and most were followed up with a zoom call. This had a snowball sampling effect (Parker, Scott, and Geddes 2019), with some organisations signposting to others. Each organisation was asked about any resources they had for use in school or church to encourage parents/carers in the area of faith in the home. Once information about these resources was obtained, they were catalogued according to Epstein's types of parental involvement (Epstein, 2011), as this enabled review of the purpose and nature of the resources analysed (Pollock and Berge 2018). The six types of involvement detailed in Epstein's framework are all areas which were found to be effective in fostering greater collaborations with parents in school settings generally (Epstein 2018). Generating a review of resources against these markers of involvement demonstrated methodically the purposes of existing resources and the extent to which they served a range of needs, hence highlighting gaps and opportunities in resources available to support Christian parents to support their child's faith. Figure 1 shows this review.

The second and third strands of research comprised collecting insights from parents (using an online survey) and church or school practitioners (using interviews via zoom) from seventeen case study contexts. The case study settings were all Church of England settings across the UK, each of which opted to take part in this project since they wanted to enhance their work with parent/carers

| Epstein Types | Church | School |
|---|---|---|
| **Type 1: Parenting** | **For use in church with parents/carers:**<br>- Intergenerational discussion activities for use as families in church. (Going for Growth, GenOn Ministries, Christian Reformed Church, Intergeneration Church Tool Kit, Worship for Everyone)<br>- Parenting for Faith video-based course<br>- Care for the Family courses for parents | - Care for the Family courses for parents<br>- Kitchen Table Project to help parent/carers develop skills to strengthen family life at home |
| **Type 2: Communicating** | Nil | Nil |
| **Type 3: Volunteering** | Nil | Nil |
| **Type 4: Learning at home** | - Parenting for Faith questions to discuss with children<br>- Parenting for Faith tips on handling specific stages or events<br>**-** BRF Messy Church mini booklets<br>**-** Mothers Union ideas sheets for topical discussions<br>**-** Lectio for Families: free app for family Bible reading<br>- Faith in Kids book, podcasts and parent blogs<br>**-** Blackburn Diocese Board of Education**:** Bible study podlets for families<br>**-** God Venture faith-based activities and resources for families to do at home together<br>**-** The New City Catechism for children & parents to learn core doctrines of Christian faith<br>**-** Church of England, Faith at Home campaign<br>- Scripture Union GOA Parent's Portal to guide parent/carers in answering questions which may arise<br>- Prayer bag<br>- Kitchen Table Project to help parent/carers develop skills to strengthen family life at home<br>- Salvation Army downloadable activity sheets for families.<br>- Bible Society- 3 ½ minute Bible overview, Easter and Christmas videos | **For schools to provide to parents/carers to do together with children:**<br>**-** Parenting for Faith – school transition postcards<br>- Prayer Spaces in Schools |
| **Type 5: Decision making** | Nil | Nil |
| **Type 6: Collaborating with communities** | - Muddy Church outdoor activities | - Prayer spaces in school<br>- Muddy Church outdoor activities |

**Figure 1.** Mapping of the support resources according to Epstein's types of involvement.

to support children's faith formation. Therefore, within each case study context, the school and church practitioners were first interviewed about their perspectives on the resources they utilised or knew were available. Fifteen participated in these semi-structured interviews, answering questions about which resources were used in their setting, what their experiences were of those resources, and whether they could see any gaps or opportunities for resource development. Each interview was for 30 min to allow time for probing and full discussion, and took place on zoom to facilitate access to

a good geographical spread of participants. The zoom interviews were recorded and transcribed prior to analysis. Subsequently, they invited parents to then provide their opinions via an online survey about support available to them as they sought to support their child's faith formation. The online survey included questions about what their school or church already did to support parents/carers to support their child's faith, what they would like to see and their perceptions of resources available. Fifty-five parents from a mixture of these Church of England school and church settings responded to the survey. This data cannot be claimed to be representative since it was taken from only these case study contexts, but it is helpful to hear some indications of parent/carer responses related to supported available to them. The survey data was analysed thematically, in line with the approach of Clarke and Braun (2017), with initial coding, followed by cluster coding and subsequent identification of themes within this data. Conversely, the practitioner data was transcribed, then analysed using narrative analysis and deductive coding (Riessman 2008) to aid the capturing of their context as part of their response. Once initial transcription and analysis of the interviews and surveys had taken place, these insights were then viewed through the lens of the *types of parent involvement* (Epstein 2018) alongside the resource review data.

This project was subject to scrutiny and ethical approval of Liverpool Hope University. This ensured that in each of the three strands, all participants were able to give informed consent, since they were provided with information about the nature of the project, the voluntary participation and their right to withdraw. They were also assured of anonymity and confidentiality of participants, and particular care was taken to ensure this amongst the case study settings so that neither practitioners or parents know who had taken part. The interviews took place on zoom and the surveys were online, which facilitated this confidentiality. In the reporting of the findings, care was taken to ensure that participant identities were not evident. Participants were also reassured of the safe storage of data collected.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Review of resources

Figure 1 shows the resources catalogued according to the six types of parent involvement (Epstein, 2009).

#### 5.1.1. Type 1 resources (parenting)
A significant number of resources were identified as falling within this category of involvement; assisting families with parenting skills, understanding of child development and establishing home conditions to be conducive to learning. Two broad groupings of these resources were evident: those for use in the church settings and those for churches to provide to parents/carers to utilise at home.

For use within the church context, Care for the Family provided a range of courses for parents which were accessible for parents of faith or no faith. These varied from 'one-off' sessions on a specific topic such as mental health (A Mind of Their Own) and screen use (Left to their Own Devices) as well as longer courses such as Parent Talk and Time Out courses. The length of these courses varied from 4 to 8 sessions, covering various ages and topics. The Time Out courses were led by a trained, licenced facilitator, giving credibility in certain public sectors, whereas the others were video-led. The video-led courses would by nature be easier to lead and may be easier for parents to access since the material is delivered by a third party. The facilitated courses, however, can be tweaked and delivered at a pace which accommodates those in the group. As there is no faith component these can be accessed more widely, however this does not meet the brief of this research project which is exploring support of faith in the home context.

Faith-based courses from Care for the Family included Raising Faith and Getting Your Kids Through Church. Parenting for Faith also produced courses for parents of babies and toddlers through to teen years. All of these were video-led, however the Parenting for Faith course

came with full leaders notes so that they could be led in person by facilitators who were more confident. The Raising Faith Course began with the assumption that those watching were Christian parents whereas the Parenting for Faith made no such assumption. All these courses were offered free to churches and organisations if cost would otherwise be prohibitive. Parenting for Faith also had a series of bitesize videos offering the main point of each session from the main course tailored to younger families which was produced to be run with young children present in settings such as a Toddler Group. There was no assumption that the parent had any faith and this was noted several times in the videos. The primary role of parents in a child's life and spiritual relationship was acknowledged and celebrated. The realities of the highs and lows of parenting was noted in these sessions, with the aim of helping parents feel they were not alone in the journey with their young child. For those not wishing or are unable to attend a course, organisations often produced books which contained much of the same material as the course so could be read alongside a course or be accessed as a stand-alone piece.

Parenting for Faith hosted Facebook monthly live lunches and evening sessions for parents to deal with contemporary issues, making them much more accessible to dip in for a one-off session. Similarly Faith in Kids who initially produced web-based pre-recorded material, including parents blogs and podcasts on contemporary family issues, had expanded to include live web-based sessions. These were designed to help parents in tackling difficult issues their family may be facing as well as to help think through the questions children may be asking, thus helping them formulate their own answers. The benefit of podcasts, and Facebook groups is that they can be accessed on mobile devices making them accessible to a wider audience and can be listened to on demand, making them ideal for busy parents. Faith in Kids had recently published: *Raising Confident Kids in a Confusing World* in efforts to support Christian parents/carers in this way (Drew 2023). This material was being used in guest workshops to inspire and encourage parents.

In terms of material for use in the school context only Prayer Spaces for Schools 'at home' resources and the Parenting for Faith's postcard for starting or changing schools were produced specifically produced for school to use to support parents with faith transmission. Most resources produced for churches, however, could be adapted. For example, links to web pages, book ideas, discussion starters or questions could be added to newsletters. Activity sheets such as those by the Mothers Union, Kitchen Table or Muddy Church could be printed and sent home.

### 5.1.2. Type 2 resources (communicating)
There were no resources found which could be attributed to this category, for use in either churches or schools.

### 5.1.3. Type 3 resources (volunteering)
There were no resources found which could be attributed to this category, for use in either churches or schools.

### 5.1.4. Type 4 resources (learning at home)
The other group of resources in this category were for parents/carers to use at home. These could be offered by churches and, schools to support parents in their family faith journeys. The majority of these resources were accessible online to use directly or print at home, although, some such as *God Venture*, can be ordered online and are delivered in printed form. Faith in Kids and Blackburn Diocese were two organisations that delivered podcasts for children and families, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Church of England produced a series of videos which engaged with children and families. The podcasts and videos could be listened to and watched by the children with little or no parental involvement, however other resources, for example, Care the Families Kitchen Table project, Lectio for Families and New City Catechism assumed family engagement. Lectio and New City both had apps which were available through a variety of devices making them accessible to most families.

Both these were to encourage Bible reading and prayer within the home. New City also included Bible memorisation.

Generally, the resources mentioned above assumed faith in the adults facilitating their use, however, the Mothers Union topical sheets, BRF's mini booklets and Parenting for Faith's 101 questions to initiate conversations about God, 101 topics for chatting to God and postcards containing tips on handling specific times or events, are produced with those of little or no faith, in mind as a gentle introduction to family faith conversations. All written resources except the mini booklets and God Venture could be printed or used on an electronic device. With these resources, the topics covered were varied and generally there were no 'right' answers meaning parents and children can engage equally without anyone feeling inferior.

Music and videos could also be used regardless of the adult's faith. Much is written about the importance of how music enhances general learning (Campabello; De Carlo; O'Neil; Vacek;) and as music plays a vital role in church worship it could be used for great benefit in the role of discipleship. Considering childhood spiritual development, Bunge (2012) emphasised the importance of music. Therefore, used well, churches could encourage the use music as easy resource for discipleship in the home since it can be listened to on a variety of online free or subscription platforms. Videos which tell Bible stories could also be used and a variety of these such as the Church of England's Faith at Home were produced during Covid and are still available online.

Discussion and listening formed a large part of the resources above, however, Muddy Church, some of the Salvation Army, Kitchen Table and Blackburn Diocese resources are created with exploration and activities in mind. These generally consisted of outdoor activities around a spiritual theme to help parent/carers develop skills which strengthen family life and faith at home. There were also hands-on ideas to encourage prayer within the family on Prayer Spaces at Home[13] and through other internet searches.

### 5.1.5. Type 5 resources (decision making)

There were no resources found which could be attributed to this category, for use in either churches or schools.

### 5.1.6. Type 6 resources (collaborating with communities)

Muddy Church was the only resource identified as being in the category of church *collaborating with communities*. The Muddy Church approach sought to connect the church with their local community, whether rural or urban, and provide outdoor-worshipping communities to enjoy the outdoors, nature, and creation, based on the concept of 'wondering and wandering', whereas families wandered through the outdoors area of their community, what was seen and heard was used to encourage wondering about God as participants follow the activity sheets. For example, the four-part Psalm 23 trail where families were encouraged to consider themes found in the Psalms such as peace, invitation and dwelling. On each page, there were questions such as 'I wonder if you can see God's footprints?' which could be chatted through while the children were hunting for the missing sheep. This is not didactic as there is no right answer so can encourage a wide range of views from all ages.

Prayer spaces were made specifically for use in schools thus offering opportunities for collaboration with the wider school community. As some of the activities are outdoor prayer spaces these can be done within the school grounds but may also be run in nearby community spaces. Many of the Muddy Church resources could be adapted and used in an outdoor school setting.

### 5.2. Parent/carer perspectives on resources to support parent/carers in supporting their child's faith

Of the 55 responses, only three parents stated that they did not know what their school or church did to support parents in this way, indicating that the vast majority of parents in this sample did feel that

this was occurring in some way. However, 54% of the codes generated in the responses to this question related to the activity of the church or school to nurture the child's faithfor example, church services, collective worship, Sunday School and church events. A further 11% cited the general ethos of the school being faith centred, or the relationship which the clergy or church children's worker has with the children. This therefore leaves only 35% of the responses to this question as being related to tangible ways in which the school or church are authentically supporting parents to this end. These remaining responses were divided equally between types 1, 2 and 4, with one response in type 3 (volunteering).

The responses which fitted into the type one (parenting) category were about parenting courses, parent prayer support groups and support and advice being readily available for parents/carers from the school or church. For example, one parent reported that if their child had a question about faith that they could not answer, they would approach their vicar to explain things. Another third of these responses were allocated to the type 2 (communicating) category, since they reported either general information being shared with them via the church newsletter or specific information shared with them about what their child had been learning about faith in church or school. There was only one response which fitted into the type 3 (volunteering) category, with the parent stating that their school gets parents involved in some of the faith activities of the school. The remaining third of responses to this question were denoted as type 4 (learning at home) since they conveyed a sense of resourcing faith nurture to occur in the home context. This occurred through communication and dissemination of ideas and resources to be done at home. There were no responses in this parent survey which were relevant to type 5 (decision making) or type 6 (collaborating with communities).

When asked for their ideas of what would be helpful, there were 57 codes generated within the responses. These were clustered and sorted into themes and then allocated to the Epstein categories, where appropriate. Whilst 11% stated that they did not know what would be helpful, and 12% indicated that they desired to remain reliant upon the school or church, the remaining responses fitted into one of Epstein's types of parent involvement. However, none of the parent responses were relevant to type 3 (volunteering). The type with most responses (28%) was type 4; learning at home. Suggestions arose about 'conversation starters' and suggestions for how to talk about faith at home, reading materials, ways to pray as a family and materials such as worksheets which could be done with the child at home. The next most common type was type 2 (communicating), with desires for more information about what their child is learning about or engaging with related to faith in church or school. Indeed, four parents expressed the desire for 1:1 parent meetings with their child's teacher, vicar or Sunday School leader about their child's faith activities. The next most common category was type one (parenting), in which 16% of the responses were logged. These responses included the notions of desiring advice to raise their child as a Christian within a culture where there may be hostility to faith, advice about how to answer their child's questions about faith and parenting courses in general. Seven percent of the responses related to type 6 (collaborating with communities) and were very much about desires for mentoring and peer support operating with the school or church community. One parent expressed this as having other parents to journey with. Finally, a small number (5%) of the responses related to a desire to be involved in decision making (type 5), specifically to share their ideas in meetings regarding the future activities of the church or school related to child's faith nurture.

### 5.3. Practitioner perspectives about resources

When practitioners were asked about the resources they used to support parents with faith at home, it was striking that many spoke more about what activity or provision they provided at school or church to support a child's faith, rather than about how they equipped or empowered parents to take an active role in this. For example, one partnership of church and school suggested that adjusting church service times so that services were accessible for families would meet this aim of supporting them for faith at home. Another school requested resources to help them to involve

parents more in eucharistic services, which would be worship-based and non-intimidating for parents so they can learn the story even if they do not believe it. These responses were couched in a perceived narrative of families being dissatisfied by what is currently on offer, and hence no engaging with it. Yet these responses all point to children's faith nurture being primarily driven by the church, and the role of parents is merely to bring their child to church, rather than to play an active role in their faith nurture within the home context. This reveals an underlying narrative of the church feeling they have primary responsibility for this, even though during the interviews the church representatives expressed that supporting children's faith formation should be a joint endeavour. Similarly, all of the churches mentioned all-age or intergenerational services as part of their current provision, although only one of the participant churches explicitly stated that these services seek to communicate to parents through these services the importance of role modelling participation in faith to their child. In church–school partnership 1, there had been attempts to run an all-age service for families in the school hall. However, it was reported in the interviews that since this had not led to increased families attending church, a new service had been started in the church targeting children and families to 'try to reach them'. This also reveals a narrative of the church being a service provider for families rather than coming alongside and collaborating together or discerning together what would be most helpful to support the faith formation of their children.

Further to this, four of the ten churches discussed the role of clergy in supporting parents to these endeavours, although they did not detail how this was actively carried out. One church explained that empowering parents to support their child's faith was a new idea for their clergy, although another setting stated that their clergy were confident in empowering parents but struggled to find the time to do it intentionally. Another Church explained that the clergy were supportive and involved but that the ministry to parents was still held by the Children's Pastor, and hence the clergy did not want to overstep or offend. Conversely, two churches explained that the concept of parents discipling their children was new for families. One church felt that their parents would generally acknowledge their role as primary disciplers but that the church was still on a journey to helping them feel equipped in this. Three churches mentioned how attitudes towards parents discipling children varied from family to family, with one church suggesting that this was often linked to how confident parents are with their own faith. These narratives all revealed low confidence levels amongst clergy and churches relating to knowing how best to support family faith formation. In all of the settings, there was a sense of 'trial and error' as the churches and schools tried different approaches and resources. They reported that the availability of resources to aid these approaches were scant.

Regarding the types of parent involvement expressed by the practitioners, three churches mentioned activity which could be allocated to type one (parenting); describing the use of courses and formal resources to support them in empowering parents including the parenting for faith course and certificate for church staff, Care for the Family resources and baptism preparation. This was part of the narrative that parents were deficit and needed equipping by the church. Although these resources did bring challenges mainly of time and personnel to run them, they were conveyed in the interviews as being in the 'comfort zone' of churches to run, reinforcing the discourse of the church being responsible for children's faith formation rather than the parents. One partnership setting discussed engaging parents in sessions to aid thinking about big questions of identity and purpose.

Type two (communicating) was the category most cited by these participants and was interwoven into their structures of running events and activities. One school–church partnership reported inviting parents to things that the children were doing, such as Open the Book, or learning about communion. They viewed this as valuable since it communicated information to the parents about their child's faith activity and involvement. This was part of a narrative of wanting to keep parents 'in the loop', although this always appeared to be done after the event had been planned and set up. One school stated that they would like resources related to key celebration of all the faiths, including videos for parents outlining what each festival means, its significance, why it happens and how it

links to a Christian festival. This again would enable parents to access this information at home, and to be aware of the content before it occurs in school. This revealed the schools attempts to embellish and enhance what they were doing but also conveyed the reality of frustration at limited time available for schools to do this. Another school similarly expressed a desire for help in preparing resources for spiritual spaces and knowing where to signpost parents to access appropriate books and websites. This was all conveyed with the caveat that sometimes teachers do not have a personal faith or feel that they cannot share it.

Amongst these participant settings, there were no activities which could be categorised as type 3 (volunteering), although there were significant components of type 4 (learning at home). Four of the churches referenced sending resources home for families to do at home, with two of these specifically mentioning seasonal resources, such as advent, Lent and Pentecost. One of the participant churches described sending home Sunday lunch discussion questions as the children's groups and sermon are based on the same theme, whilst another identified the need for resources which would allow parents and children to have regular Bible discussions at home. One school desired help in producing a prayer bag to go between home and school with the child entailing faith conversation starters and prayer activities to provide impetus for child and parents to participate together. This was viewed by the setting as a potential bridge between school and home, and also an activity which could also be accessible to parents who did not have their own active faith and belief. Awareness of families with limited or not faith of their own were at the forefront of many of the narratives of school representative, revealing the constant balance which the schools were required to maintain. One church disseminated resources for parents through their church website, although two of the churches stated that resources were often not used by families when they are sent out. This narrative of families not accessing or utilising resources sent home was widespread across the church and school settings alike.

There did not appear to be any activities occurring in these participant settings related to type 5 (decision making) although there was some activity related to bolstering a sense of community and communal support, so this was allocated to type 6 (collaborating with communities). Examples of this were that many expressed the value of staff members regularly connecting with parents either via phone calls, meet ups or conversations after church services to affirm and support them in their role a faith nurturers in the home context. Whilst two of the churches expressed difficulties quantifying this support due to its informal nature, two described families supporting one another, such as through Whatsapp groups. They suggested that family-to-family support and discipleship is becoming more common and is highly effective. Maintaining the physical presence of the church, one church suggested that opening the church more so that it was seen as a place for parents to go for general support could facilitate peer support but still within the church context.

## 6. Discussion

Whilst the majority of parents did feel that support of family faith was occurring, over half of the respondents pointed towards the activities of the church or school to meet this need. Namely, they did not convey that they comprehended the role of the parent in their child's faith nurture. This reflects the observation that many contemporary parents outsource their child's spiritual input (Csinos and Beckwith 2013). In recent years, there has been an increasing awareness of the role and responsibility of parents in the faith formation of children rather than seeing this as the church's responsibility (Casson et al., 2023; Roberto 2020). The practitioner interviews revealed a similar trend, whereby the activities of the church or school were seen as the primary focus of the child's faith nurture. They explained barriers as being time pressures on clergy in addition to hesitancy due to role boundaries and not wishing to encroach upon the activity of children's team or parents. The distinction between 'separate responsibilities', 'shared responsibilities' and 'sequential responsibilities' of families and schools may be helpful in this conversation, since it highlights potential and perhaps unspoken competition and conflict between families and schools (Epstein 2001). Using

these phrases to convey the parameters and differing responsibilities of each party may help to clarify the situation and aid navigation of more collaborative arrangements.

The analysis of resources revealed that most of the resources produced for parents to support faith at home were of type 1 or 4, namely parenting/family support programmes and ideas for supporting learning at home, in line with school or church-set curricula or learning outcomes (Epstein 2001). However, many have questioned the reality and aspirations of such programmes (Boyle 2023). Due to this focus on types 1 and 4, it was evident that there was minimal resourcing of types 2, 3, 5 and 6, which highlights the need for a broader and more holistic view of involving parents/carers. This resonates with the emphasis for school or church leaders to be active change agents and build teams who effectively involve families and communities (Epstein and Sanders 2006). This need for a more holistic mindset and practice was evident in the resourcing of both church and school contexts.

The desires expressed by parents tended to be focussed on equipping parents for the eventuality of their child asking them challenging faith questions, but also a desire for information about the faith activities of the school or church with their child, so that they can be aware but also build upon this. Many of the school settings also sought to develop this information sharing with parents and expressed a need for resources in this endeavour. It is surprising that this is not already occurring, although this emphasised further the need for enhanced resourcing to this end, so that schools and churches may be better equipped to share such information. Alongside this, the parents suggested that 1:1 meetings could be valuable to aid this information sharing. Furthermore, the participant parents desired relational support from other parents, clergy or teachers. This can build upon established organisational relationships with parents (Barnes and Senior 2006). The church and parachurch organisations such as *Parenting for Faith* and *Faith in Kids* are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of parental involvement in a child's faith formation (Bengtson 2017; Casson et al. 2020, Smith and Adamczyk, 2020). Therefore, churches or faith organisations who do have existing relationships with families are in ideal positions to support families as appropriate. However, resources for schools to work with parents do not mirror this increase in awareness. Indeed, there are minimal resources to this end.

In slight contrast to the desires of parents, the practitioners often stated that they needed to do more parenting courses or similar to train the parents how to be more active and involved in supporting their child's faith. This contrast is interesting and perhaps again relates to Epstein's distinction between separate responsibilities', 'shared responsibilities' and 'sequential responsibilities' (Epstein 2001). Slight caution is needed since facilitator-led courses may reinforce the notion of leaders being experts, and consequently disempowering parents. Since most of these resources constituted a series of sessions held over a number of weeks, there is a heavy time demand on attendees. Childcare is may be an issue, which could result in only one parent being able to attend. As we are considering the transmission of faith this is concerning as Christians surveyed for the Longitudinal Study of Generation (LSG), who came to faith in the home, claim it was fathers who are the major factor in the faith transition (Bengtson, Putney, Harris, 2013, p. 76). Hence, if fathers are not engaging in any training, they could continue to feel inadequate in this crucial role. This highlights the need for these resources to be personalisable and adaptable in order to meet the needs of the families involved. Equally, there is significant need for accessibility and not to make any assumptions about parental faith when conversing with parents/carers about their child's faith formation.

It is evident that the time demands on modern-day parents are enormous (Anuradha and Mrinalini 2022). Further to this, during the recent cost-of-living crisis, it has reported that families have struggled to buy books for their children.[14] This connects with concerns of how best to support parents with lower education levels because of social isolation, reading difficulties and increased likelihood of needing an interpreter (Axford et al. 2012). This prompts reflection therefore on how these courses may be used in a way which is accessible to all parents which suits their busy life and regardless of social and academic status. This may include ideas such as incorporating the responsibilities of parents in preaching themes and illustrations which are applicable to family faith,

opportunities in services to share tools for sharing faith with others, a library of resources for families, signposting to resources and support on church/school social media or newsletters and regularly praying with and for parents/carers. In addition, parents could be included when deciding topics and content of children faith formation topics for the church-run groups and encouraged to give regular feedback and be in dialogue with the church and/or school. This would all help to build confidence in parents/carers which is so often lacking (Dean 2010; Mark 2016).

## 6.1. Gaps and opportunities

Resources for schools to use for type one of parent involvement were less than those produced for churches. The only organisation that had any material produced specifically to support schools to support faith at home was *Prayer Spaces in School/Home*. The remaining resources were primarily targeting church use but may be also appropriate for school use. When organisations were asked what resources were available for schools to help parents with faith formation in their children, the question seemed an anathema to them, and they signposted to their parent or church resources thus by-passing any involvement with the school. In this research, parents listed school as one of the primary influencers for faith, however, resourcing organisations do not seem to recognise this, resulting in minimal resources for their use.

Whilst at first glance, there are numerous resources in the type 1 (parenting) sector, they primarily seem to reply on the ability of parents to read and access discussion-based content. There seem to be gaps for those who have lower levels of education or where English is not their first language so may struggle to read or follow the material. Simplifying the material to plain or easy to read English would make the content easier to read, understand and use in their daily lives.

It has also been highlighted that these courses are predominantly accessed by the mother, therefore, there are significant gaps in the resources for those navigating the role as father. Addressing and seeking to overcome the stigma and work/family demands for fathers attending a course is necessary. Time needs to be spent developing the relationships and then material needs to be delivered in an appropriate and relevant way to fathers, using examples and illustrations they can identify with.

## 6.2. Limitations

It is acknowledged that there may be other resources available for this sector which are more informal and less well publicised, and hence not captured by this research project. It may also be that the practitioners and parents are not aware of resources which do exist, so a further development of this project could be for resource providers to meet with focus groups of parents and practitioners and for evaluation and feedback of the appropriateness and effectiveness of the resources to occur. Furthermore, asking parents and practitioners about their suggestions for resources in a vacuum and somewhat uninformed way may have impeded their ideas and possibilities. Whilst they were asked in this open way to avoid skewing responses, it could be beneficial to probe more fully into the discussion about potential resource needs to reveal more nuanced and detailed information and desires.

## 7. Conclusion

In line with its research aims, this paper sought to identify the availability and nature of resources designed to support churches and faith-schools to form supportive and collaborative partnerships with parents that aid the nurture of the Christian faith in children. Parent and leader perspectives alongside an online search identified numerous key resources available which have been developed by, and thus are relevant to, a range of church denominations and traditions. The content and delivery of these is varied including amongst others: parenting courses, books, webinars, conversation starters, activity sheets and music. Resources were overwhelmingly aimed at churches wanting to collaborate

with parents and typically focused on activities which support general parenting approaches and knowledge *(Epstein's type one)* and learning at home *(Epstein's type four)*. Although many of these could be utilised by schools with some adaptation and tweaking, it is evident that specific resourcing for faith-based schools wishing to equip and collaborate with parents for children's faith nurture is extremely limited. 'Prayer spaces in schools' was the only organisation identified as intentionally providing resources for this purpose through their 'Prayer Spaces at Home Resources'. The comments of both practitioners and parents in the study suggested that although attitudes towards children's faith nurture are changing, increasingly emphasising the role of parents sharing faith in the home, the activities, resources and provision currently offered to support a child's faith more often centre around church or school. There were several barriers identified by both parents and leaders that limit the effectiveness of collaboration with parents, including a hesitancy around encroaching on the 'other's' responsibilities. Some conversation around the 'separate responsibilities', 'shared responsibilities' and 'sequential responsibilities' of families and schools (Epstein 2001) may be helpful to aid more collaborative partnerships in future. There was a noted absence of type 2, 3, 5 and 6 resources and thus future resources could consider these as areas of focus. Resources that centre on increasing communication and information sharing between churches, schools and parents would be a welcome addition to the current offering. Approaches that encourage family involvement in these institutions through volunteering and decision making, as well as making the most of community connections may also be potentially beneficial in increasing the effectiveness of these partnerships going forward. Consideration of how resources can be used to collaborate with all parents irrespective of their gender, personal faith, levels of education or confidence with the Engligh language. These findings are significant for leaders in church, para-church organisations, and faith-based schools as well as those creating and providing resources for these. Existing resources have clearly been crucial to these organisations partnering with parents thus far but it seems an expansion of the nature of these is required to increase effective collaboration between these spheres of influence on the faith development of children. While care must be taken not to extrapolate these finding beyond the UK church and school contexts from which they were derived, the underlying conclusions drawn from this data may well be applicable to similar institutions across the globe and thus could have far reaching effects on those nurturing faith, both Christian and other, in children everywhere.

## Notes

1. https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/support-and-services/services-and-support-for-parents/
2. https://www.gov.uk/browse/childcare-parenting/financial-help-children
3. https://www.nct.org.uk/
4. https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/working-support-positive–437.pdf
5. https://www.barnardos.org.uk/ and https://www.home-start.org.uk/
6. https://www.nspcc.org.uk/ and https://www.familylives.org.uk/
7. https://www.nct.org.uk/, https://parents1st.org.uk/, https://www.parentkind.org.uk/
8. https://www.triplep.net/glo-en/home/
9. https://www.incredibleyears.com/who-we-are
10. https://www.catholicfamilyfaith.org/
11. https://www.presbyterianireland.org/Resources/Congregational-Life/Youth-and-Children/Family-ministry/Families-0%E2%80%9311.aspx
12. https://www.churchofengland.org/about/archbishops-commissions/families-and-households/ways-which-church-communities-support
13. https://prayerspacesinschools.com/prayer-spaces-at-home/
14. https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-young-people-book-access-cost-of-living/

## Disclosure statement

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