**How are parents involved? Investigating interactions and involvement between Church of England schools and churches with parents**

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

 Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest – there are no conflicts of interest

 Research involving Human Participants – This research involved human participants and was approved

by the university ethics committee.

 Informed consent – Informed consent was gained from all participants

**Abstract**

Whilst schools often seek partnerships with parents to aid children’s academic learning and school engagement, this paper investigates the nature of parent involvement with church and school to facilitate children’s faith formation using an interpretive phenomenological lens. Epstein’s *types of family involvement* model was used as a theoretical framework to examine the overlapping spheres of influence (school, church and home) and the extent to which they are functional and operational in fostering children’s faith formation. This pioneering research asks the questions: Do faith schools, churches and parents *want* to collaborate for the sake of their children’s faith? How do churches and schools engage with parents to support children’s faith formation? And how could collaborations be further developed?

In-depth empirical data was collected from case study contexts: nine churches and eight schools, capturing teacher or church worker and parental perspectives in each context. This revealed that whilst there is significant desire for enhanced collaboration across these sectors, there is often a lack of confidence and awareness of possibilities. It is recommended that investment is made into resourcing and training to bring about a change of culture to see expectations and genuine realities of more shared responsibility and authentic collaboration across the sectors to enhance children’s faith formation.

**Key words:** family involvement, partnership with parents, church, child’s faith formation

**Introduction**

Partnership with parents is often championed in educational and community contexts[[1]](#footnote-2) since family participation in children’s education brings many academic, personal, and social benefits (Yamauchi et al., 2017), with learning outcomes such as behaviour, academic achievement and wellbeing improving when parents engage with their child’s school (Povey et al., 2016). Going beyond engagement or participation, it is argued that optimal child learning outcomes occur when the key educators in a child’s life (parents and school) develop respectful and collaborative partnerships working towards common goals (Emerson et al., 2012). This argument is more than tokenistic parent contact or involvement and emphasises the need for authentic and ongoing cooperative ventures (Epstein, 2001). Similarly, from a faith perspective, the influence of parents and family on a child’s faith formation is evident (Bengston, 2013; Smith and Adamczyk, 2021) and the need for effective partnerships between church and family to strengthen a child’s faith formation is clear (Roberto, 2020; Casson et al., 2020; Casson et al., 2023). However, to date there has been minimal academic consideration of the functionality and effectiveness of partnerships between parents and church, or parents and faith school relating to children’s faith formation. Bengston (2013) called for credible research to investigate untested and vague traditions and approaches, and yet there is still limited robust exploration of this area. This paper therefore investigated how parents/carers were involved and displayed interaction between church and faith school in case study settings. The UK provides a unique opportunity to explore these settings since the national Church of England runs both churches and schools within their regional diocese.[[2]](#footnote-3) They are linked and collaborate in varied ways. It is therefore possible within this context to examine churches who wish to develop their partnership with parents, and compare their circumstances with schools who wish to develop their partnership with parents, and settings where school and church already collaborate and wish to together develop involvement of parents for the sake of their child’s faith formation. So this paper asks: Do faith schools, churches and parents *want* to collaborate for the sake of the child’s faith? *How* do such collaborations occur? And how could collaborations be further developed? These questions are the focus of this empirical research paper.

**Partnership with parents in schools**

Contemporary policies promote greater parent participation in schools, both as participants in developing school policy and management and for supporting children’s learning (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). Over time, the language related to such participation has changed to ‘parent involvement,’ ‘family engagement,’ and ‘family–school partnerships’ (Yamauchi et al., 2017). Further to this, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) call for a move from ‘parental involvement’ with schools to ‘parental engagement’ with children’s learning, arguing that engagement involves more than mere activity, which is intimated by the term ‘involvement.’ Alongside this shift in terminology, Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) documented that there is considerable variation in how schools manage their relationships with parents, in addition to what parents themselves view as important for engagement with their child’s school, and existing literature says little about how parental engagement can be extended, enhanced and facilitated to maximise educational achievement in schools (Harris and Goodall, 2007).

A positive school climate is key for facilitating parental engagement (Whitaker and Hoover-Dempsey, 2013; Povey et al., 2016), and school leaders have a key role in shaping this climate and fostering parent engagement through their leadership style, communication, attitudes and expectations (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014). The attitude of leaders towards parents is a significant factor in determining whether they feel entitled to be involved in the everyday activities of the school, or whether they feel too intimidated to enter the school gates (Barr and Saltmarsh, 2014). Trusting relationships need to be built between teachers and parents through significant effort and creativity on the part of teachers and schools (Emerson et al., 2012). Perceptions of parent–teacher exchanges and teacher responsiveness are also fundamental (Powell et al., 2010). Rudney (2005) argued that teachers can often make assumptions about groups of parents based on very little actual knowledge about them or their situation, so it is important that parents are listened to and their hopes and aspirations for their child should be taken forward by schools (Lamb, 2009). Day (2013) developed an approach incorporating active listening, solution orientated psychology and problem solving in a four-stage framework (explore, focus, plan, review) to understand parental hopes and concerns for their child and foster a collaborative relationship. This concurs with [Goodall and Montgomery’s (2014)](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0883035516302890?casa_token=XKbf_6qUE5IAAAAA:r7JJe3la9q4qIkvVZQ7GOiFqBUA87YNPTmhqK8bQct8nJF7RnFxqo-W2RCPV_i5Aqrg4uxP7tA#bib0150) assertion that the agency for a child’s learning belongs to parents, supported by schools and thus should drive this interaction. However, rather than a tension between the school’s agency for teaching and the parent’s agency for engagement in their children’s learning, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) argued that the two should work together, each being recognised as valuable in its own right, rather than as solely an adjunct to the other.

Factors which were found to inhibit parent involvement in schools were time pressures, work commitments, family commitments, caring responsibilities, timing of events and a lack of parent interest (Povey et al., 2016). In addition, public transport/cost, childcare and children at different schools were cited as barriers, so that parents asked for flexibility by schools in these activities and interactions (Day, 2013). Alongside flexibility, Povey et al. (2016) called for schools to build the capacity of parents by training them in aspects of the curriculum. Parents equally emphasised the value in parents having fun with other parents and their children, with activities in school where they can learn together (Day, 2013). Two-way communication between school and parents, incorporating the ideas of parents and staff has been shown to help all parties to feel included (Mleczko and Kington, 2013). Day (2013) also reported on the need for parents to be aware of other parents’ children’s needs and have empathy for one another, as some parents voiced feelings of loneliness, isolation and frustration. This highlights the holistic and multidimensional nature of family engagement with schools and the crucial roles of all parties within interactions.

**Working with parents in a faith context**

In this paper, faith formation is taken to be the collective aim of stakeholders in the Christian community (Roberto, 2020; Smith and Adamczyk, 2021), namely supporting the child to be continually developing in their spiritual activity expressed through the Christian faith. Early attachment experiences have been shown to be spiritually significant (Surr 2011), and a child’s interactions and experiences in the first few years of life are key in forming their lifelong attitudes and dispositions (Berne, 1972); both demonstrating the strong influence of parents in a child’s faith formation. Westerhoff (1976) depicted a child’s faith maturing in a similar way to a tree’s rings developing over time, and highlighted the key role that parents play in this maturation process. However, Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlighted that many other influences interplay as part of a child’s development and wellbeing. For example, Allen (2012) and Yust (2012) stated that the intergenerational nature of church is beneficial to a child’s Christian experiences as part of their mesosystem influences, and Holmes (2021) confirmed that the relational support provided by churches is particularly valued by parents and children alike. Bengston (2013) revealed that more contact amongst the family leads to increased family solidarity, and Seibel (2018) developed this further, arguing that it indicates the immense potential value of intergenerational cohesion and involvement of families within church life. In this sense, the whole church community truly partnering with families in their quest for facilitating children’s faith formation mirrors models of collaboration amongst educational settings outlined above. Roberto (2020) described this as religious socialisation, which he believed to be significant in a child’s faith formation.

Strommen and Hardel (2000) emphasised that the context of any work the church does with children or young people is family. Further to this, Barna (2019) asserted the need for rituals and practices to be enhanced in the homes of believers so that their homes could also be a sacred space, not only the church. This focus on home having the potential to be a rich spiritual environment for children resonates with many of the above authors affirming the influence and role that parents play. Indeed, Goodman and Dyer (2020) found that faith transmission was most prominent in families with high levels of family religious practices. With this in mind, the Church of England’s Growing Faith Foundation boldly seeks to change the culture of the Church of England to see the church and faith school working much more collaboratively with families.[[3]](#footnote-4) This concurs with Roberto (2020), who called for the church to focus on specific programmes and activities for families which provide a seamless fostering of faith in partnership with parents, throughout the childhood years, whilst Seibel (2018) highlighted the importance of ensuring that structures in place within churches encourage and enable intergenerational connections. Within a faith school context, Worsley (2008) espoused the potential for them to be places of Christian nurture and holistic discipleship, in a similar way to that of churches.

**Epstein’s ‘types of family involvement’**

Epstein (2001) called for an integration of different strands of theories of family and school’s relations, to allow attention to characteristics of family-school relationships. Figure 1a depicts this notion as overlapping spheres of influence on a child’s learning. Epstein emphasised that the three spheres are both nonoverlapping (ie separate entities) and overlapping in different degrees, controlled by time, experience in family and experience in school (shown in the diagram as external forces of A, B, C and D). Figure 1b considers the interpersonal relationships and influence patterns, both within organisation (denoted by lower case) and between organisations (denoted by capital letters). The two diagrams together reveal the complexity of interactions and involvement of the different parties with one another.

Epstein (2001) observed that over time children connect with a series of different teachers, but usually remain connected with the same family, resulting in dynamic and continually changing patterns of relationships between family and school. This highlights the notion of family and school simultaneously functioning as both separate and interconnected entities. However, Epstein (2001) found that most teachers do not know the goals held by parents for their child, and conversely most parents are unclear of the activities carried out by teachers. Consequently, Epstein (2018) asserted that teacher education regarding partnerships must take future teachers beyond routine communications with parents so that they can implement goal-linked engagement activities for student learning.

Epstein (2018) found that future teachers in a variety of countries were not adequately prepared to work in effective partnership programmes with the families of their pupils, and hence investigated ideas which could be incorporated into their training to enrich the teacher’s abilities in this regard. Hands-on activities were found to increase future teachers’ knowledge and attitudes about parents as partners, which led to greater competence of teachers to make connections with parents (Epstein, 2018). Likewise, watching and rating videos or taking part in simulated conversations noting the tone and quality of a teacher’s discussions with parents enabled enhanced perceptive listening skills and responses to parents’ feelings amongst trainee teachers. It could be interesting to consider how these sorts of teacher training activities could be implemented in church settings.

Epstein (2001) identified six types of involvement (figure 1c) which are in the areas of overlap of the spheres of influence model. These six types of involvement provide guidance on how schools could aid involvement of families and communities with a child’s education, at home and school. Type one relates to aspects where the practices of parents/carers at home support the child’s school life and where school understands the child’s home life. Type two is concerning effective communication occurring between the home and school environments. Type three refers to parents being recruited and utilised as volunteers within the school context. Type four involvement takes place when school provides information to parents/carers so that they can support their child’s learning at home, such as homework or other items relating to the school curriculum. Type five describes the involvement of parents in decision-making in the school context, namely viewing parents/carers as leaders and representatives within the decision-making arena. The sixth type of involvement is about collaborating with the community, whereby the community is integrated into the school’s educational processes to enhance the child’s learning and development. This framework of six ‘types’ enables identification of markers of involvement, and hence provided an appropriate framework for this research study.

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**Figure 1a: Overlapping spheres of influence of family, school and community on a child’s learning (External structure of theoretical model) (Epstein, 2001, p.28).**

A close-up of a book

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**Figure 1b: Overlapping spheres of influence of family, school and community on a child’s learning (Internal structure of theoretical model) (Epstein, 2001, p.28).**

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**A close-up of a document

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**Figure 1c: Six Types of Parental Involvement (Epstein, 2009)**

**Methodology**

In line with the aim of this paper to investigate whether the interactions between church or faith school with parents are collaborative or dysfunctional, an interpretive phenomenological inquiry (Frechette, 2020) was employed since that enabled in-depth exploration of lived experiences in these settings. This approach allowed enhanced researcher reflexivity and hence observation of what is seemingly hidden or less obvious, which aligned with the aims of this research which were as yet an under-researched topic. The research team were all experienced practitioners amongst children’s faith formation programmes and had all worked in both school and church contexts. Whilst their prior experience undoubtedly informed their interpretation of the data collected, there was intentional effort to lay aside their experience and to listen in depth and objectively to the rich and varied responses of participants. Interpretive phenomenological inquiry therefore facilitated the data analysis to bring to the fore taken-for-granted practices and assumptions relating to the functionality of children’s faith formation in these overlapping spheres, and move beyond description, to interpretation, and lead to the “so what?” within the data analysis (Frechette, 2020). Thus, allowing investigation of collaboration versus dysfunctionality of the interactions.

Data was collected using in-depth interviews on zoom with key players in these church, home and school interactions and online surveys of parents in each setting. The overarching research questions were: Do faith schools, churches and parents *want* to collaborate for the sake of the child’s faith? *How* do such collaborations occur? And how could collaborations be further developed? These questions are the focus of this empirical research paper, to investigate the impact of these interactions on a child’s faith formation, and hence were the starting point for the semi-structured interview prompts. Further probing added depth to the interview discussions.

Participant settings responded to a research invitation disseminated through existing Church of England school and church networks, which means that they were inclined to be more interested or actively engaged in working with parents. Nevertheless, although this limited the data pool from including schools or churches who did not wish to work with parents, this was inevitable as it would have been unethical to recruit contexts who did not desire activity of this sort and then ask why they were not. There were 17 case study contexts; of which nine were church representatives and eight were school leaders. The project was approved by the ethics committee of \*\*\* University, and participants were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, safe storage of their interview data and their right to withdraw.

In addition to the interviews with church or school leaders, surveys were also undertaken with parents in each setting to capture their perspectives on children’s faith formation. The parent participants (n=52) were again self-selecting and hence cannot be viewed as a representative sample. Five were male and 47 female. No demographic information was collected in order that the survey was not too intrusive and assured participants of anonymity.

Epstein’s types of family involvement (1987, 1992) was adopted due to being identified as the most popular framework amongst academic literature (Yamauchi et al., 2017). However, whereas the focus of Epstein’s model was a child’s learning, in this study the focus was a child’s spiritual development. In the same way in which Epstein used the model to identify markers of involvement and subsequently provide guidance on how schools could aid involvement of families and communities with a child’s education, the model was used as a framework for analysis in this study. In this study, the case study contexts provided opportunities to explore activity in the overlapping spheres (see figure 2), so that case study (i) contexts represented schools who wished to develop collaborations with parents (n=4 settings), case studies (ii) were churches who wished to develop their collaborations with parents (n=5 settings), and case studies (iii) were settings where there was existing partnership between school and church and a desire to enhance their collaborative work with parents as well as one another (n=4 settings). The settings were a range of sizes, demographic areas and rural/urban locations, although they were self-selecting so are not claimed to be a representative sample. In most contexts, the leader was the primary research participant (headteacher or vicar), although in a few cases, this was delegated to a youth worker, chaplain or teacher with a special interest in this area. The main research contact then served as gatekeeper and invited parent participants.

The interview data was first mapped into the six categories/types of involvement (figure 1c), so that it was possible to see which types of involvement were most prevalent, and highlight any gaps. The data was then transcribed and analysed thematically using the 6-step method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify key themes and patterns in the responses. This approach, often used when studying the experiences of families, faith and parenting approaches for example by Butėnaitė (2019) and Holmes (2022), is both methodical and flexible while also enabling detailed and robust conclusions to be drawn. The interview responses and survey data were initially analysed to generate codes representing the information, before groups of similar codes were clustered together to identify key themes within the six types of involvement.

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**Figure 2: Adaptation of Epstein’s (2001) model, used in this study to explore a child’s spiritual develpment**

**Findings**

*Desire for collaborating to empower parents*

The very fact that these schools and churches opted to participate in this study indicates that they did want to collaborate with parents specifically regarding children’s faith formation. This is further supported by the fact that when analysed through a framework of Epstein’s types of family involvement, all the settings in our study were already using at least one of these approaches to involve parents with their child’s faith. Most of the participants expressed early in the interviews their underpinning beliefs that working collaboratively with parents was a positive ethos to enhance a child’s faith formation, such as school 4 remarking ‘we are passionate about working with parents,’ although school 2 said that the parents were a ‘mixed bag’ in terms of how they connected with school, and there was a desire to use this project to strengthen this work.’ This shows an attentiveness and awareness to the parents, acknowledging that the parents are all unique in their interactions. These schools both explained that there had been a change since the Covid pandemic, so that it now felt more difficult to connect and work with parents. This sentiment is one which is widely espoused across various sectors, and it is hence important to understand this wider societal relevance of these particular challenges. It is therefore key that the ensuing discussions are attentive to these changed societal trends in the post-Covid world since they are likely to be felt much more widely than only our case study contexts. Nevertheless, this project sought to investigate the impact of enhanced efforts in this regard. It was notable that three schools (schools 1,4 and 5) made comments that parents were informed that the school’s Christian values were woven through the school through lessons, curriculum and policies, and three schools (schools 1,2 and 5) said that parents readily accepted these values. So, whilst the school settings all expressed a desire to work collaboratively with parents, the interviews in these case study settings indicated that it was a one-directional communication towards parents. All of the schools explained the importance of the Christian faith in their school, and that they expected the parents to support this, but yet in these early conversations, this seemed to be information-sharing rather than collaboration. This underpinning ethos would undoubtedly impact upon the way in which the parents and school work together regarding supporting children’s faith formation.

The church leaders expressed this more strongly than the schools leaders, with all of the church leaders reporting that partnership with parents was a hugely significant focus within their church, reporting ‘there are great benefits of church staff regularly connecting with parents via phone calls, meet ups or conversations after church services’ (churches 2,3,4,5). However, churches 2 and 5 illuminated the challenges of quantifying this since the support was of such an informal nature. Churches 2, 4 and 5 reported increased evidence of peer support of parents for one another, although church 3 expressed that he felt families often still wanted the church to support them through difficult seasons of life. This perhaps intimates a lack of confidence of parents and a consequent reliance upon the church to support the child’s faith through challenging circumstances. Yet interestingly, neither the church or parents seemed to have questioned this reliance on the church, suggesting that it is a well-established and deeply ingrained perspective of the roles. Church 4 reported that there had been discussion within their church about whose role it was to empower the parents and it had been decided that the children’s pastor should have main responsibility for this, although church 3 stated that their work with parents was clergy-led, whilst church 2 said that the clergy were restricted in this role due to time limitations. The attitudes of clergy, staff, parents and congregation towards the significance of empowering parents to support faith formation in children were wide-ranging, with most leaders suggesting that it is a culture they are trying to facilitate but recognising that clergy and families’ confidence in this area varied greatly between individuals. In all of the church settings, there was a sense of parents being in some way deficit in this regard – that they needed to be more confident and take ownership for their child’s faith formation. However, none of the case study settings gave any explanation of any efforts they adopted to rectify this perceived need. Nevertheless, schools 2 and 5 stated that there needed to be a two-way relationship with some ‘give and take’ between school and church. This sense of flexibility was not expressed at all as a possibility in any other interviews, since the majority of the schools explained that they had many demands upon their time and hence limited time for actively supporting children’s faith formation.

In contrast to the clear desire for partnership with parents, the importance placed on school and church settings working together to empower parents varied significantly in our study. There was evidence in the interviews to suggest that all of the participant schools were keen to work with local churches on issues of faith and spirituality and were in fact doing so already. Collective worship was a significant way in which the schools collaborated with their local churches; with all schools mentioning that clergy or volunteers from the local church run weekly collective worship, and three out of four schools (schools 1,2 and 5) noting that they attend a local church for services or events around festivals in the church calendar. School 5 shared that involving parents in acts of collective worship is a way of engaging them with their child’s faith formation. Whilst this difference in language, of ‘involving’ rather than simply ‘informing’ indicates more efforts towards collaboration. However, when actually delving into the detail of this, it was clear that the parents were invited to come along and observe rather than to be actively involved or participate in any way, other than joining in with singing or praying collectively. Nevertheless, many of the school leaders and parents alike highlighted the value of these occurrences, with school 5 emphasising that further to this, their church had successfully supported their school through recent changes and this had been greatly valued. However, when church representatives were asked who they felt were the key people in children’s spiritual lives, a range of people were noted including parents, church staff and kids/youth group leaders, but teachers or schools support staff were not included in the responses. This indicates a lack of awareness that Church of England schools had a meaningful role to play in children’s faith formation. Indeed, when asked what they felt might be helpful in better empowering parents, no church leader referenced or inferred a desire to work closer with schools. This is particularly interesting given the emphasis that is put on the role of school and church-school collaboration by many in religious circles, including the Church of England of which all our participants were members. The interviews did not explicitly ask church leaders about their involvement with schools so it may be that there are existing connections that were not spoken of, but the lack of mention suggests this might not be a high priority for clergy, children and family workers in churches. In fact, the only mentions of school in church interviews were around the impact of admission protocols and as barriers to empowering parents.

That being said, the five school-church partnerships in our study who were already intentionally working together for the benefit of children’s faith development and looking to empower parents as part of this, are examples to suggest that there are some who are actively working towards a three-way collaboration between school, church and parents. These three-way collaborations were sometimes characterised by shared staff (two of the church/school partnerships) or individuals spending significant amounts of time in both contexts. For partnership 1, this was in the form of a chaplain and for partnership 2, this was a pastoral worker. The remaining partnerships shared how the church staff spent a lot of time in the school leading and co-leading events. This highlights the depth of communication and collaboration that is possible between churches and schools and suggests that employing staff to work in both settings may be beneficial for strengthening such collaborative working. However, partnership 4 stated that they advertise church services and events on the school website but few families attend as a result. This indicates that whilst the school/church partnership functions effectively in the school context, it is perhaps not transferrable to function in the church setting and also that the parents are not invested or active in this collaborative way of working since they do not tend to take part in church events when invited.

*Parental desire to collaborate*

The surveys contained a blend of closed and open-ended questions to aid insights into the parent perspectives. Whilst the closed questions were helpful in giving some ‘snapshot’ indications, care was taken to consider these as some slight pointers to parent opinions rather than to overgeneralise the findings. The textual and open-ended responses provided more in-depth insights. The open-ended survey responses conveyed a strong desire for collaboration. Indeed, of the 52 parent responses, only three stated that the school had the most important role in a child’s faith nurture, as these three participants stated that they did not attend church themselves and did not take part in faith activities in the home. They therefore said that the faith school was the primary place of faith nurture for their child. However, all of the remaining 49 parent participants wrote of the need for church and school to work together with parents, with many stating that parents were the strongest influence on the child, and the school or church should therefore support them. This shows a very strong desire of the parents in this sample to work collaboratively with the other contexts, although it must be noted that these parents may be more keen in this area, which is why they responded to the survey. Nevertheless, there is a significant sense of parents desiring collaboration in this area.

Figure 3 shows that a significant proportion (64%) of the parent respondents reported that their child’s school or church talked to them about their child’s faith development, either occasionally or frequently, although 25% stated that they did not. Interestingly, 15% of parent respondents were not sure whether they did so.

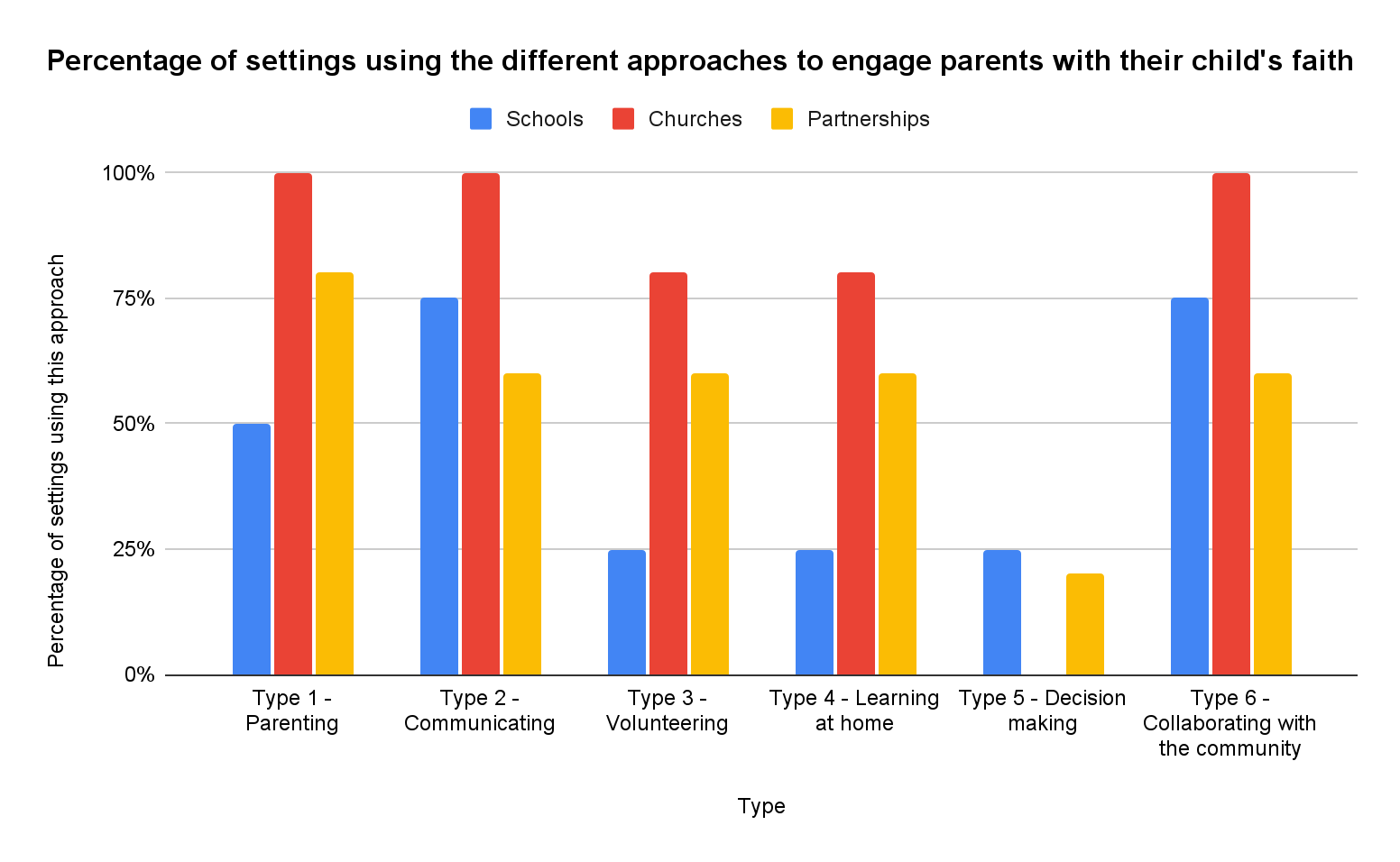
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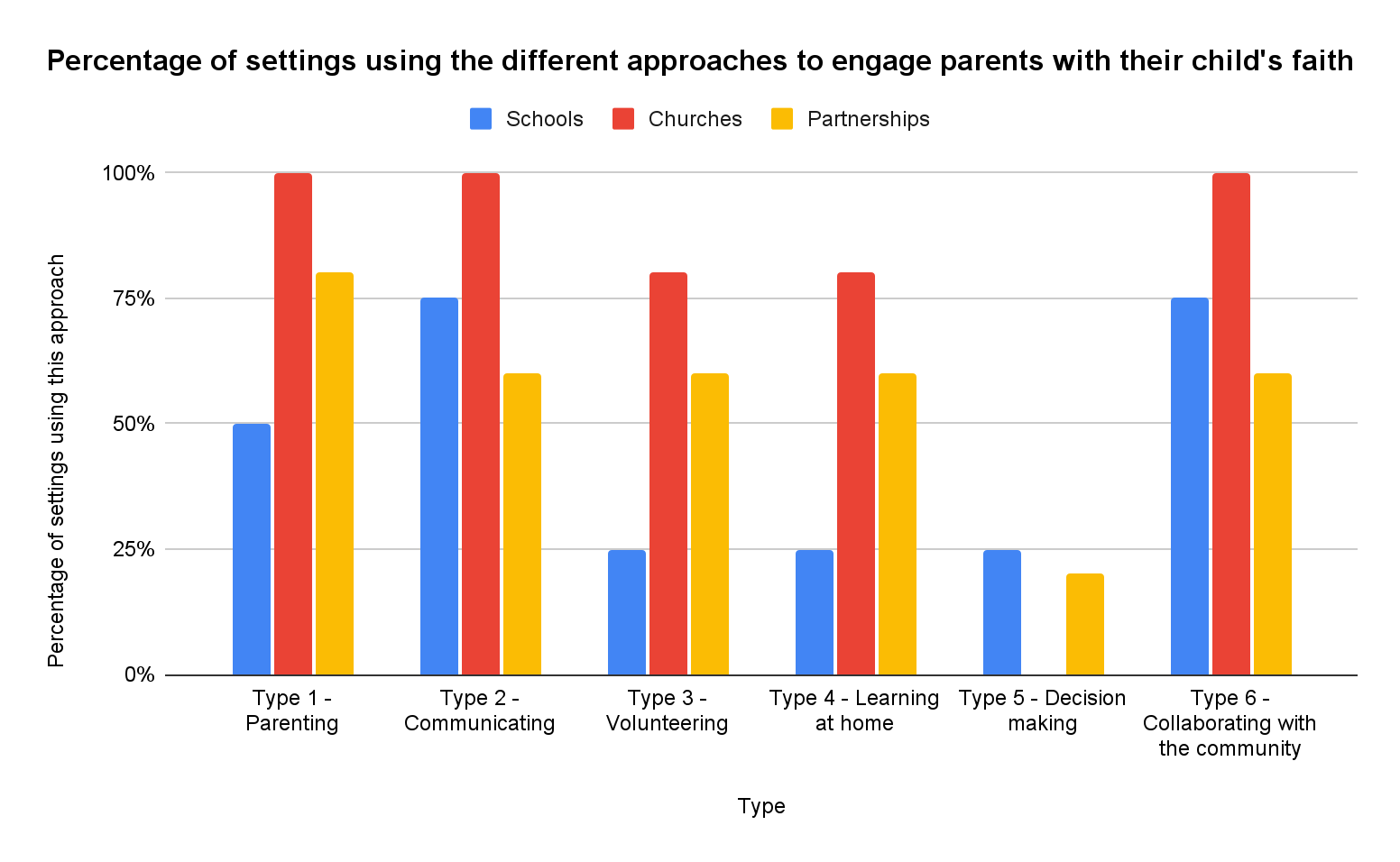
### Figure 3: Does your school or church ever talk to parents about their child's faith development?

Flowing from this initial question, when asked about what the parent respondents would find helpful, two broad themes emerged. The first related to resourcing, with 52% of the responses being requests for tools to facilitate prayer or discussion in the home context. Many said that they knew there were copious resources available for this, but they desired help with finding and selecting appropriate tools to meet their family’s needs. One parent said that there was a need for signposting to resources to aid the adult’s faith also, although the majority were about resourcing family faith. The remaining 48% of the responses conveyed relational aspects, such as 1:1 conversations with the vicar, youthworker or school about their child’s faith journey. Others proposed a mentoring approach, to facilitate peer support amongst parents and families, whilst many said that it would be beneficial to be updated about what their children are hearing or experiencing in school or church related to faith, so that the parents could connect with this in some way.

*Epstein’s types of parent involvement evident in the case study settings*

Figure 4 reveals the extent to which Epstein’s approach types were used by i) the schools, ii) churches and iii) the existing church-school partnerships.



 **Figure 4: Percentage of settings using the different types of involvement to support parents in engaging more with their child’s faith.**

* *Case study school settings*

Whilst figure 4 shows the percentage of settings using each approach, the actual mentions of each approach by the settings revealed slightly different statistics. The most common methods mentioned by schools were examples of type 2 and 6 approaches. Type 2 centred on communication between home and school about children’s faith development, making up 58% of the approaches mentioned by schools and being used by three out of four schools in our study. Examples of this included discussions at parents evening and end of year reports, pictures on a school’s website showing things families had been doing at home, and inviting parents to attend and observe worship held in school or a local church. This is in line with the findings of Mleczko and Kington (2013) who report on the importance of two-way communication. The effectiveness of these approaches appears to be inconsistent with a number of school leaders reporting that parental uptake of such invitations was varied, and a range of parental responses with some stating that schools were good at this kind of communication and others commenting that there was no discussion of faith matters at school or with teachers. Type 6 (collaborating with communities) responses (26%), again with three out of four schools mentioned ideas involving collaborating with the community in order to support parents in nurturing their child’s spiritual growth. One example of this was a parent’s prayer group where school parents would meet regularly with the local vicar to pray for requests written down by families and collected using a prayer box. Other examples included the local Parochial Church Council (PCC) helping to draw up the school values, parents receiving church newsletters via school, and an after-school Bible study group run by the church and school. Type 1 (parenting) was present in slightly fewer responses, whilst type 3 (volunteering), 4 and 5 approaches were the least used by schools in our study, with only one school out of four reporting using these and them each making up less than 5% of the total approaches reported.

* *Case study church settings*

The most common approach used by the churches in our study were examples of Epstein’s type 1 (parenting) approach, focusing on increasing parental knowledge or confidence and helping facilitate a positive parenting environment in which spiritual development can then occur. These approaches made up nearly a third (33%) of all the ideas currently used by churches, and were used by all the churches in our study. Two churches (40%) ran courses for parents using *Care for The Family* and *Parenting for Faith* resources, two churches (40%) ran one-off or adhoc events for parents on relevant topics or parenting focused prayer nights, and 60% of churches discussed the topic of parenting for faith in church services or expressed a desire to do so. One church (20%) mentioned that they explained to parents in their services the importance of role modelling for children and encourage them to help their children engage with services, for example suggesting they point out to their children where they are in their service book as they go through the service. This is an approach that is increasingly being encouraged by the wider Christian community, referred to for example by Parenting for Faith as part of their key tools ‘creating windows’ and ‘framing’ (Turner, 2018).

The prevalence of type one approaches was closely followed by type 2 (communication) examples currently used by all churches in our study and making up 28% of all the activities and ideas mentioned by church leaders. These examples varied from holding termly services or meetings to update and support parents, to communicating regularly and sharing ideas via whatsapp groups. One church shared how they invite parents into a session at the end of their holiday club to give parents an insight into what the children have been doing, while another church buys books for children and families to use at home which correspond with the content they are doing in their Sunday children’s groups. Parent responses also supported this view and highlighted the value of discussions with clergy or children’s workers, having similar themes for children and adults in church services, and sharing of songs that children were singing in their activities. One participant quote highlighting this approach can be seen below:

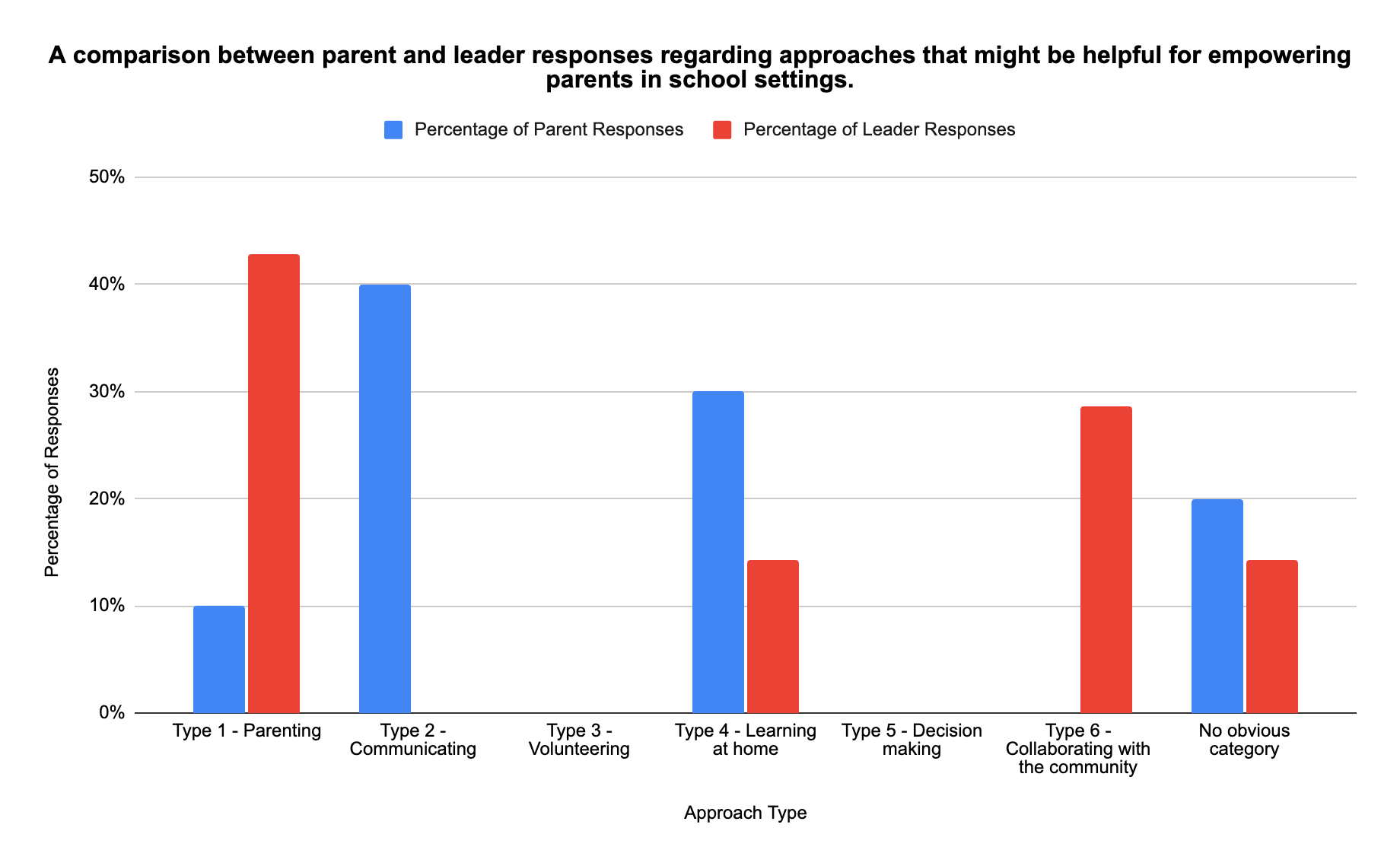
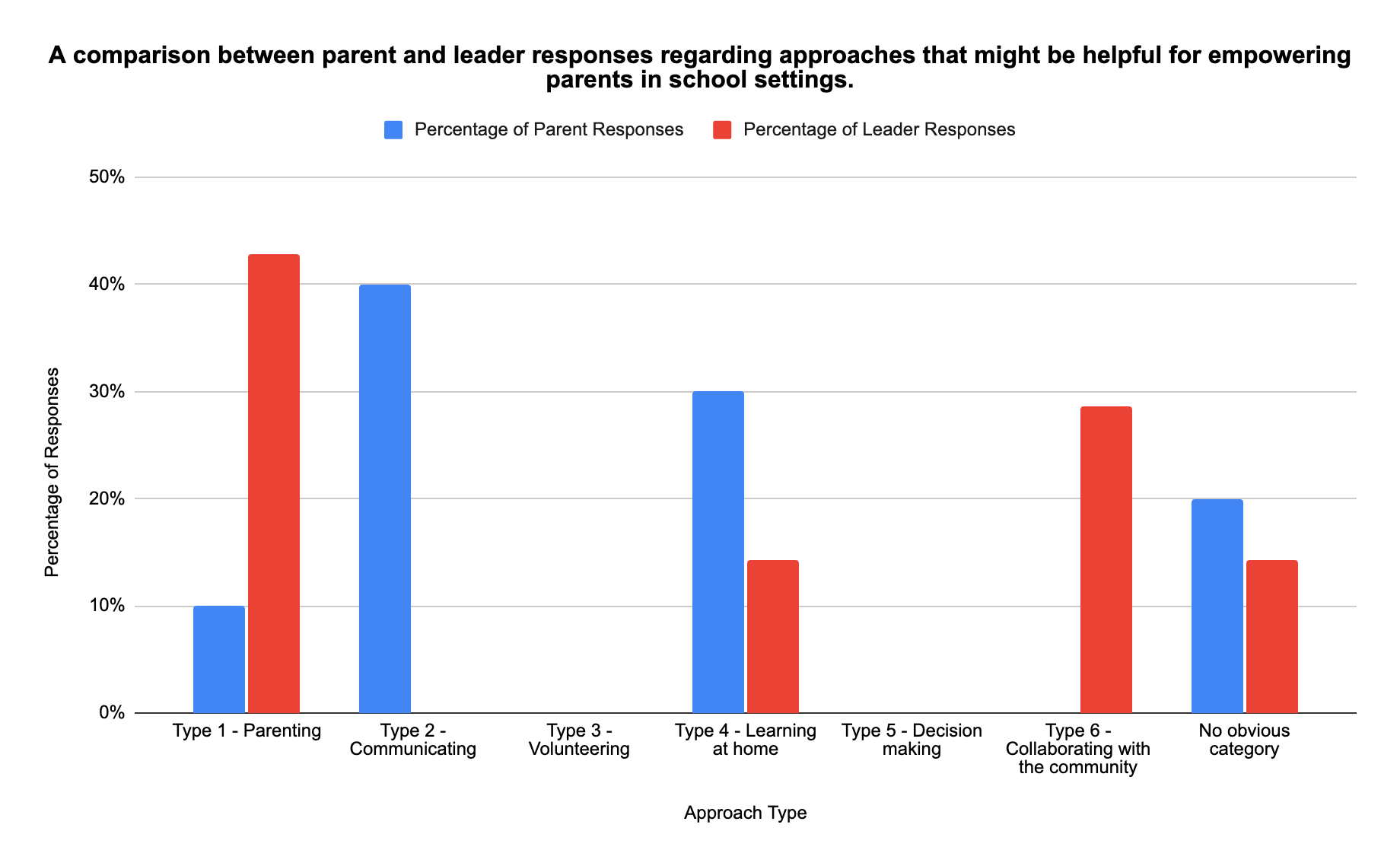
“Our church is always encouraging us to engage in our children's faith journey, by sharing what they are covering in the children's sessions. The children's workers are also instrumental in developing strong relationships with our children and us by talking to them regularly and showing an interest in their lives.”

The churches in our study appeared to have more developed efforts to empower parents than both the schools and partnerships depicted. All of churches were already using type 1 (parenting), type 2 (communication) and type 6 (collaborating with communities) approaches, with 80% using type 3 (volunteering) and type 4 (learning at home). Notably missing were examples of type 5 (decision making) approaches whereby parents or families could be involved in decision making as a way to empower them in their faith.

* *Case study settings of existing church-school partnerships*

Similarly to churches, the most common approach type used by existing church-school partnerships in our study was type 1 (24%) (parenting). This was followed by type 3 (volunteering) (22%) and then equally by 3, 4 & 6 (18%). The type 1 examples included one school leader reflecting on how supportive the church had been to school families during the pandemic when very sadly their headteacher died, while another shared about a monthly worship service that had run in the school building for the past 16 years. One partnership mentioned hosting a parenting course for school parents, however unlike the churches in our study whose parents say they benefited from courses, this was not taken up very well. Within their church programmes, one partnership highlighted using informal conversations and sermon series content to inform and encourage family discipleship. Similar to the findings of schools in our study, the effectiveness of type 2 (communication) approaches could be questioned based on the large variety of parent responses. When asked: ‘How does this work in your school/church?’ just under half of the comments relating to communication were stating communication methods currently used such as update meetings, newsletters and conversations with children's/family worker. In contrast, more than half of these comments held an underlying negative sentiment suggesting information was often absent, limited or generic. This suggests that particularly where schools are involved, communication is either varied from family to family, or for some reasons the communication offered by schools is not being ‘heard’ by some of the parents in their community. This is something that should be considered further to improve parental engagement with their child’s faith formation. Similar to the findings from the schools and churches in our study, type 5 (decision making) approaches that involve children or families in decision making as a form of engagement. Indeed, more than half of the existing partnerships in our study were utilising all the approaches excluding type 5 (decision making). The only mention of such an approach by anyone in the study was one existing partnership who mentioned that parent surveys had informed the creation of their new school vision. Once again this raises questions around the use of type 5 approaches that could form the basis of future research.

*Opportunities for development*

The settings were asked about what resourcing or training they would find helpful to aid them in further empowering parents in their setting. Once analysed, the responses were sorted into the Epstein framework and are shown in figure 5.

**Figure 5: Parent and leader responses regarding types of resources/training which would be helpful to empower parents in school settings.**

* *Opportunities for development in schools*

When asked which types of resources they thought would be helpful to empower parents to nurture their child’s faith (figure 5), the most common responses were types 2 and type 4, with type 2 having a slight lead. These suggestions included opportunities to chat to the vicar, feedback on the content of school services and ideas and resources for exploring faith at home, for example ways to talk about faith at home or ideas for praying with your family. School leader responses to a similar question were also most commonly type 2 and 4 examples, though a higher percentage of these were type 2 ideas such as: videos, prayer bags, conservation starters, book recommendations and website links. Interestingly, 22% of the parent responses suggested the benefit of collaboration with the local church including calls for signposting to events such as Alpha courses[[4]](#footnote-5) and the presence of youth-workers in church. When considering this alongside the fact that many of the type 2 responses suggested by parents, discussed above, also referred to communication involving the vicar or church leader, it seems that some school parents appear to place significant importance on collaboration between church, school and parents.

* *Opportunities for development in churches*

Once again, type 4 approaches were suggested most frequently by church parents (33%) including: ideas for faith discussions and advice answering questions, faith play-based activities, and help on how to pray as a family. In contrast to the school responses discussed above, the next most common responses from parents were type 1 (23%) in nature, suggesting that parenting courses, resources to help parents grow in faith and help navigating cultural issues such as phones would be valued and considered helpful by parents. Type 2 and type 6 (collaborating with communities) approaches were equally referenced by parents, each making up 13% of the responses and included calls for parent consultation meetings with children and youth workers alongside more peer-to-peer support from other parents, both those with children of a similar age and those with older children who may be able to act as a mentor and share their experiences. The majority of leader responses to this question were type 6 (collaborating with communities) approaches (44%) suggesting a desire for collaborative support from the community. Interestingly these were slightly different to those suggested by parents. Leaders suggested the importance of children meeting up with one another, church leaders having 1-2-1 meetups with teens and including grandparents involved with courses and events to provide intergenerational learning. Almost half of the responses in this category related to leaders wanting support for themselves, talking to others doing similar jobs or working towards similar visions for ideas, help and support. Only 17% of church leader responses were focused on type 4 approaches - a smaller percentage than the same category in parent responses. This may reflect their hesitancy to put too much effort into these approaches, feeling that they have not as yet been received well or used by parents.

* *Opportunities for development in existing church-school partnerships*

When partnership parents were asked what they thought might be helpful for empowering parents they identified type 1 (10%), type 2 (40%) & type 4 (30%) approaches along with some which did not easily fit into a category (20%). The most popular approach suggested was type 2 (40%) focusing on ideas which would improve their understanding of what children were covering at school such as feedback on topics covered in RE, discussions in parent’s evenings and ‘cheat sheets’ of the main topics covered including answers to possible questions. This was closely followed by type 4 (30%) suggestions of ways to increase learning at home such as questions to ask at home to facilitate faith discussion and guided learning, such as worksheets, to fo with children outside of school. When partnership leaders were asked the same question, they also suggested type 4 approaches (14%) whereby one partnership mentioned the need for resources to encourage Bible talk at home. In contrast to parent responses, the most common approach reported by partnership leaders were type 1 (43%) focusing on making church a place where parents go for support and can ask questions for themselves such as ‘who am I? or ‘why am I here?’. In contrast to parents, leaders did not suggest any type 2 ideas around increasing or improving communication, and instead placed significant emphasis on collaborating with the community, suggesting a number of type 6 (collaborating with communities) approaches (29%) such as the potential of congregation members going into school and sharing their beliefs and experiences, particularly because teachers can face barriers in sharing their own faith with children.

Many responses from schools, churches and church-school partnerships in our study did not obviously fit into an Epstein category. Some examples of these included: fun child-focused activities and services that fit into the lifestyle of young families - being short, easy to understand and at suitable times of day. Another key theme was the importance of ‘variety’ suggesting that different things are helpful for different families and providing flexible or tailored approaches for families might be valuable. Several of the suggestions from parents in existing church-school partnerships in particular highlighted how important parents deemed school for their child’s faith development, asking for ‘more sessions in schools on faith’ as well as that they were ‘happy to rely on school to do it.’

Notably absent, or extremely limited, from the suggestions of parents and leaders across all the settings were examples of type 3 (volunteering) and type 5 approaches (decision making). This is in line with other findings reported above that these approaches are less commonly used by the settings. It is difficult to know whether leaders and parents do not think these are important because they have tried them in the past and found them ineffective or whether they have never thought to try them.

***Discussion and Recommendations***

This paper sought to investigate how church and school settings were working collaboratively in their work with parents to support children’s faith formation. Our findings suggest that both the schools and churches in our study were actively searching for ways to involve parents in their children’s faith formation. It seems that some parents and school leaders believe that church-school collaboration is beneficial, and whilst this is also recognised by church leaders currently working with schools, such a view was not specifically articulated by the other church leaders in our study. However, there are indications that the overall ethos and working towards this is minimal. The parent participants overwhelmingly desired collaborative working and involvement, requesting equipping through both resourcing and relational support. Many said that there are already conversations and contact about how parents could be supported but that this could be developed further. Developing the climate of school and church is key to effectively facilitating parental engagement with a child’s faith (Povey et al., 2016), and Barr & Saltmarsh (2014) emphasise the need for school or church leaders to set this climate through their working style and expectations they convey through the activities of their setting.

The range of Epstein approaches currently being employed within the participant settings suggests that churches and schools working together are better resourced than schools alone to increase the competence and confidence of parents supporting their child’s faith formation. In general, the findings suggest that churches appear to be the furthest along in the process of involving parents in child faith formation with a higher percentage of their settings reporting using the various approaches, followed by church-school partnership settings, and then schools. Despite being ‘behind’ in engaging parents with faith formation, this analysis shows that many of the approaches all settings used for involving parents are things that schools are experienced in doing with other aspects of the curriculum. Involving parents in this way is key since Francis and Village (2019) found that parents play a crucial role in promoting and maintaining a positive attitude toward Christianity among their children. Therefore, our research findings reveal a gap in schools feeling equipped and empowered to utilise and engage these techniques and activities for the purpose of supporting parents in supporting their child’s faith. This is largely due to the fact that individual Church of England schools are responsible for expressing their individual mission statements and admissions policies (Francis and Village, 2019). This means that they have the ability to devise and tailor their approach in this regard since it is not provided centrally. However, few of the case study schools had capacity to do so, which indicates that perhaps Church of England schools more widely may require support in this regard.

It was evident that there was a desire and willingness in all participant settings to collaborate more with parents to support the child’s faith journey, although there was also a feeling conveyed that they needed to facilitate a change of culture in this regard, and there were diverse levels of confidence in clergy and families, and not all contexts seemed to grasp the possibilities of rich and genuine collaborative working across the sectors, rather than merely including some superficial connections (Epstein, 2001). This concurs with a call for changed terminology from mere involvement to engagement (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). One of the key features of this collaborative agenda though was that whilst each sector (church and school) was keen to collaborate with parents themselves, there was less awareness or interest in collaborating as the three sectors together (church, school and home). Specifically, the churches seemed to be less aware of the influence and involvement schools had upon a child’s faith and did not always recognise the important role which faith schools played in a child’s faith nurture. This restricts the possible benefits of collaborative working (Emerson et al., 2012; Povey et al., 2016; Yamauchi et al., 2017), and is not consistent with the Church of England’s vision to see all sectors working together.[[5]](#footnote-6) Furthermore, it contradicts the assertion of [Goodall and Montgomery (2014)](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0883035516302890?casa_token=XKbf_6qUE5IAAAAA:r7JJe3la9q4qIkvVZQ7GOiFqBUA87YNPTmhqK8bQct8nJF7RnFxqo-W2RCPV_i5Aqrg4uxP7tA#bib0150) that the agency for a child’s learning belongs to parents, supported by schools and Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model of the microsystem of close contacts being highly influential, amongst the many other influences interacting.

Sharing of key personnel seemed to be a fundamental way in which church and school worked together. This created overlap between the sectors in meaningful and tangible ways. However, translating this collaborating to include the home context also is a significant additional level to this approach, and was very much desired by our parent participants. Including parents as partners in this working relationship could be highly impactful in supporting the child’s faith and would indicate that the church and school contexts acknowledge the significant impact of family on a child’s faith (Bengston, 2013; Smith and Adamczyk, 2021). When asked for areas for future development, both parents and leaders alike said about conversations with the clergy or presence of a church youthwork in a school setting, emphasising the need for empowerment of parents occurring from within a place of relationship. Interestingly, no-one suggested either of these to visit or dialogue with the home context, once again intimating that this sort of approach is simply not the norm, although Emerson et al. (2012) asserted the need for trusting relationships between teachers and parents. Enhancing this relational side of collaboration is therefore a priority, and part of religious socialisation as part of the child’s faith formation (Roberto, 2020).

When considering the types of parent involvement, the majority of approaches mentioned by churches and schools were modes of communication regarding existing activity in any one setting. This seems to be the most straight forward type of involvement to be incorporated and tends to be primarily unidirectional hence not very collaborative by nature, which does not align with the above discussions about collaborative working. Furthermore, there were also negative comments related to communication, revealing the frustrations felt by parents when appropriate information is not shared with parents in a way which feels satisfactory. It is striking that when asked for training and resourcing opportunities, the most common answer from parents was related to improving communication. This indicates a mismatch, whereby schools and churches are saying that the most common type of collaboration with parents is communicating with them, yet parents are putting this area forward as the primary need to be enhanced. It is therefore important that training opportunities and resourcing are produced and implemented, even in settings where they feel they are successfully carrying out communication to ensure that it is meeting the needs of parents in the best way possible. This is particularly key since Smith and Adamczyk (2021) found that parents do not differ much in their fundamental background assumptions about raising their child, although these ideas are mainly culturally informed. Therefore, training and resourcing which equips churches and schools to better understand and collaborate with these culturally informed mindsets would be highly effective.

Communicating within the community was next in terms of frequency of mentions from respondents. Schools connecting in with activities such as prayer groups or Bible study groups was a beneficial direction for some of these settings. Another approach which was prevalent (more so in churches) was type 1; seeking to increase parental knowledge or confidence and facilitate a positive parenting environment in which spiritual development can then occur. This was utilised more in churches than schools, suggesting that churches felt more confident than schools in guiding parents in this way. These efforts tended to be utilising externally produced courses which could be picked up and delivered for parents with minimal preparation. Parallels to this approach could be drawn with the findings of Povey et al. (2016) who emphasised the importance of building the capacity of parents through relevant training. It may be that the participant schools did not feel this form of activity was in their remit, gifting or capacity due to time constraints. There is clearly a need for more resources which can be picked up and used with minimal effort or time. However, many settings also emphasised that these resources need to be flexible and able to be tailored to each individual context or family. Development of these resources would serve to support parents in the context of the efforts of the church or school, as proposed by Strommen and Hardel (2000).

The volunteering and decision-making types of involvement were minimally used in our participant schools. This could be asking parents for their views on what topics it would be useful to cover in collective worship, RE lessons, Church sermons or children’s and youth groups. It could also be providing volunteering opportunities for families in both church and school settings where adults and children can get involved with faith activities side-by-side. Another avenue for this kind of involvement could be through the inclusion of both parent and young people’s voices in key policies and decisions through their presence on relevant councils and committees. It is not clear why these types have not been evidenced in our study. Are these approaches being used but are unreported? Or are there barriers that prevent them from using them? These types of activity involve an intentional investment of time and commitment on the part of parents. But equally this can only occur if there is permission given by the schools for parents to be involved in this way. The minimal presence of these types of activity indicates that involving parents in this way is not the norm and it would require intentional change of mindset both parties to enable involvement in this way in the future. It is striking that when asked for future opportunities and resourcing needs, neither parents, church leaders or school leaders responded that there were opportunities or needs in this area, further supporting an understanding that this aspect is simply not on the radar of schools, churches or families.

Activity which involves learning at home was also very minimal in the school settings, although higher in church settings. This intimates that existing thinking about children’s faith development within the school participants was limited largely to the school context, whilst churches did seem to be more aware of this as a possibility. Exploring ways for the school to foster and facilitate learning about faith to continue in the home context is perhaps something the schools could take a lead on, highlighting good practice which is already occurring, and exploring together how this could be further enhanced. This will serve to strengthen the child’s faith formation process (Roberto, 2020; Casson et al., 2023), and enable the child to view their home as a sacred space also (Worsley, 2008; Barna, 2019).

Epstein’s *types of parent involvement* is therefore a helpful framework for analysing the extent to which parents are involved and engaged collaboratively with their child’s church or school with regard to their child’s faith development. Intentional work is needed to equip and empower both schools and churches in supporting parents in this regard, and that a relational component is key in all of this. Awareness of each of these areas would bolster the sense of overlapping spheres of influence described by Epstein (2001), which would strengthen experiences of faith formation for the child.

**Limitations**

It is acknowledged that whilst this research project explored the participant contexts in depth, the project was limited in scope due to small numbers. It would be good to develop this further and to explore whether these findings are representative other UK church, school and home contexts. Another development of this research would be to observe the contexts in a longitudinal manner to aid monitoring of how collaborations change over time and the impact of any interventions or changes of approach. Another idea would be to explore the different roles of teacher, school leader, or formation director and compare the differences in their responses. It would also be beneficial to include the voice of the child in this research, to provide their perspective of what is helpful to them and their faith journey in terms of these different sectors and collaboration between them.

**Conclusion**

This paper sought to provide insights to the void of research on this topic, highlighted by Bengston (2013). There does seem to be a desire by schools and churches in this sample to collaborate more with parents to support children’s faith formation, but it is apparent that parents are not always equally keen and often do not see the value in such partnerships. This seems to be due to the prevailing culture which sets this tone and expectation for contemporary children’s faith formation models and approaches. Whilst there is evidence of collaboration with parents in these participant contexts, it seems to be limited in terms of prevalence and type. There are opportunities to develop collaboration particularly regarding volunteering, decision making and learning at home. More broadly, there is significant need to go beyond one directional communication to parents and to develop much richer, deeper and authentic modes of collaboration. Suggestions and opportunities suggested by all parties tended to be limited to development of what was in existence, rather than related to different types of involvement. This indicates that there is lack of awareness amongst all sectors of the possibilities which could be developed or generated to enhance collaboration in this way. It is clear from this research that there is a significant need for a shift in culture in these contexts to set expectations and ethos of shared responsibility and working together to support the child’s faith formation. There is a need to further explore resourcing and training provision and needs surrounding this as many participants seemed to be lacking confidence despite having desire to enhance collaboration with parents.

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2. <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/education-and-schools/growing-faith-foundation> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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4. <https://alpha.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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