

## **Parental engagement in special schools: a practice based approach to school cultural transition**

Parental engagement is widely acknowledged to have a positive impact on children's learning in mainstream education, and interventions to increase parental engagement have had some success in improving educational outcomes (See & Gorard 2015). However, there has been little research on parental engagement in special education. Differences in desired outcomes for children in special schools, and the particular challenges faced by these children and parents, mean that enhancing parental engagement requires consideration in this context.

This study explores the nature of parental engagement in special schools, taking a practice theoretical approach to social change, which facilitates a view of parental engagement as emerging from everyday parenting and school practices. Practices arise from materials, meanings, and competences (Shove et al., 2012), and are interconnected and performed in particular, socially contextual ways by actors in the system. A transition of parental engagement 'culture' can be encouraged and supported by exploring where practices can be recrafted, by changing their elements, to enable parental engagement. Existing practices that constrain parental engagement can be substituted with new/alternative practices, and changes can be made to how practices interrelate (Spurling et al., 2013).

The study involves case study research with two special schools, to firstly explore the practices which foster, or could foster, parental engagement, in terms of their practice anatomy and interrelationship. Qualitative fieldwork includes interviews with parents and workshops with school staff, to discuss the full value of parental engagement and mobilise staff to form a coalition for cultural transition (Vihalemm et al., 2015). These insights are used to work with the schools to develop and evaluate a programme to strengthen a culture of parental engagement, focusing on practices as the sites of intervention. This paper will present the findings so far from the study, and implications for rolling out a practice-oriented approach to cultural transition for enhancing parental engagement in special schools.

See, B. H. & Gorard, S. (2015) The role of parents in young people's education — a critical review of the causal evidence. *Oxford Review of Education*, 41:3, 346-366.

Shove, E., Watson, M. & Pantzar, M. (2012) *The Dynamics of Social Practice*. London: Sage.

Spurling, N., McMeekin, A., Shove, E., Southerton, D. & Welch, D. (2013) Sustainable Practices Research Group Report: Interventions in practice: re-framing policy approaches to consumer behavior. Available from [www.sprg.ac.uk/uploads/sprg-report-sept-2013.pdf](http://www.sprg.ac.uk/uploads/sprg-report-sept-2013.pdf)

Vihalemm, T., Keller, M. & Kiisel, M. (2015) *From Intervention to Social Change – A guide to reshaping everyday practices*. London: Routledge.