

When parents walk through the school gate they carry more than concerns.

(Bridging the Gap #2)



Silence doesn't always mean disinterest. Sometimes, it means survival.



For some, stepping into a school is returning to a place that once made them feel small.



Trauma doesn't wait outside. It often walks in with them.



Emotional safety is key. Engagement starts with trust, not attendance.



Let's stop asking "Why don't parents engage?" Start asking, "What has their experience taught them?"



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Bridging the Gap #2: When Parents Carry More Than Just Concerns Through the School Gate

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In the journey of building partnerships between schools and parents, I've learned something that reshaped how I understand parental engagement: **Parents don't come to schools empty-handed.** They bring their lived experiences, their stories, and sometimes, their wounds.

We often speak about the lack of parental involvement as if it's a matter of disinterest or lack of time. But the truth is far more layered.

Silent Voices, Loud Stories

Some parents attend every meeting, always on time, and always present. Yet they never speak. They nod. They listen. But they don't engage.

For a long time, this silence was easy to misread as apathy. But when we sit with it- when we build relationships and truly listen- we begin to see it differently. **Their silence is not indifference. It's survival.** It's the weight of being back in a space where their voices once didn't matter.

For many, stepping into a school is an act of courage.

Walking through the school gate isn't neutral for everyone. It can be a return to a place that once made them feel small, unheard, or punished for asking questions. Some were told they weren't smart enough. Others were never invited to speak at all.

Now, as adults, they walk back into that system and those memories echo.

Trauma Doesn't Stay Behind

I've been in rooms where a quiet parent finally found their voice and what poured out wasn't just school feedback, but **decades of hurt and mistrust** that began with their own education.

We often talk about creating "safe spaces" for dialogue and collaboration. But safety goes beyond physical presence. **Emotional safety** means recognizing that trauma doesn't wait outside the school gate. In fact, that very gate can trigger it.

When parents seem disengaged or reluctant to speak up, it may not be because they don't care. It may be because they're afraid they won't be heard again.

They've said:

- *"I'm scared I'll say the wrong thing and be judged."*
- *"Last time I raised something, it went nowhere."*
- *"Being here brings back bad memories."*

This trauma is not just personal-it's systemic. It's tied to a broader story of inequality, exclusion, and the long legacy of an education system that didn't affirm their value.

Holding Space for Healing

So, what does it mean to truly engage parents?

It means creating **emotionally safe environments**, not just open-door policies. It means building **trust**, not just offering participation.

To create a safe space, we must:

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- Listen more than we speak
- Be patient with silence
- Recognise presence as an act of bravery
- Avoid judgment and assumptions
- Ask not just *“What do you think?”* but also, *“How are you feeling being here?”*

Sometimes, our most powerful role is simply to **hold space**, to be present with compassion, not to evaluate or fix.

Reimagining Partnership

Parent-school partnerships can't thrive on formal invitations alone. We must acknowledge the **emotional labor** it takes for many parents—especially those from marginalised backgrounds- to show up and trust again.

What if every school staff member understood that **engagement isn't about availability- it's about safety and dignity?**

What if we saw quiet parents not as passive, but as people waiting for a sign that it's finally safe to speak?

Bridging With Compassion

The real work of bridging the gap between parents and schools isn't about boosting attendance or improving communication systems—it's about **repairing relationships** that were never given the chance to fully form.

It's about replacing shame with respect and fear with connection.

Let's stop asking:

“Why don't parents get involved?”

And start asking:

“What has their experience taught them about their place in the system and how can we change that?”

When we begin there, we don't just improve engagement—we begin healing.

By Steven Mollo