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Parent engagement and disaffection in child education: initial development of two multidimensional parent-report measures using qualitative methods

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Children and adolescents benefit in various ways when their parents are supportive of their education at home and work in healthy collaboration with schools and teachers. Yet, schools still often struggle to optimize parent engagement. In part, this may be because there is still little consensus on what it means for a parent to be engaged. Mostly, researchers and practitioners have defined parent engagement in terms of parent actions and practices. In this article, we broaden the discourse of parent influence on their children in behavioral terms by (1) considering how parent engagement also manifests in parents' thoughts, feelings and relationships; and (2) proposing that parent engagement should be considered in combination with parent disaffection. To this end, the first aim of this study was to use qualitative methods to understand how parents, teachers, and students conceptualize parent engagement and parent disaffection in child education. We conducted focus groups with parents ($N = 26$), teachers ($N = 23$) and students (5th–12th graders; $N = 28$), specifically probing how individuals understood the phenomena in terms of parents' thoughts, feelings, and actions. A thematic analysis of qualitative data yielded themes that mapped onto a proposed integrative multidimensional framework, although participants found it easiest to describe engagement and disaffection in behavioral terms. The second aim was to describe how qualitative information from focus groups informed the generation of preliminary item pools for two proposed parent-report scales: the *Multidimensional Measure of Parent Engagement* (MMPE) and partner *Multidimensional Measure of Parent Disaffection* (MMPD).

KEYWORDS

parent engagement, parent disaffection, qualitative, focus groups, survey development

1 Introduction

It is widely accepted, and supported by robust empirical evidence, that parents exert a major influence on their child's development, and this extends to the domain of child education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). When parents support their children's education and collaborate effectively with schools and

teachers, children are more likely to experience improved academic performance (Cui and Liu, 2025; Jeynes, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2015, 2016; Jiang et al., 2023; Wilder, 2014), elevated motivation and school engagement (Yang et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025), better social and emotional adjustment (Barger et al., 2019) and well-being (Yap and Baharudin, 2016; Lv et al., 2016, 2019). Given these well-documented benefits, education policymakers have placed considerable importance on strengthening the role of parents in supporting positive outcomes for students, as reflected, for example, in the *No Child Left Behind* Act of 2001 in the United States and *Plano 23|24 Escola+* in Portugal. However, schools still often do not value parent engagement or struggle to support it effectively (Addi-Raccah and Ainhoren, 2009; Goodall et al., 2022), and many parents are still only involved peripherally (Kent et al., 2022). This is likely because parent influence on child education is dynamic, complex, and relatively undertheorized (Goodall, 2025), while much research and many available measures still focus narrowly on parent practices (Mocho et al., 2025).

To address this issue, we examine parent engagement as a construct that extends beyond behavioural indicators of parent involvement. Specifically, we first describe how focus groups were used to capture parents', teachers', and students' perspectives on what parent engagement (and disaffection) means in everyday educational contexts. We then describe how this qualitative information informed the development of preliminary item pools for two new parent-report measures: the Multidimensional Measure of Parent Engagement (MMPE) and partner Multidimensional Measure of Parent Disaffection (MMPD).

1.1 Parent involvement and engagement

Over the last 40 years, research has examined parents' influence on children's education through constructs such as parent involvement and parent engagement. The terms 'engagement' and 'involvement' are still often used synonymously (Stefanski et al., 2016), although researchers have argued that engagement goes beyond involvement, defined as taking part in something, to capture a deeper feeling of being involved with, and a sense of ownership of, an activity (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). Thus, engagement can be understood as a broader construct that encompasses involvement: Engagement implies involvement, but involvement does not imply engagement. For example, parents may take part in a school activity mechanically, without experiencing a deeper connection to it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it has been argued that the greatest benefits for children come when parents are engaged, not merely involved, with their education (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). As such, our main interest in this article is parent engagement.

Historically, however, schools, policymakers, and researchers have mostly focused on parent involvement. Research has progressively expanded our collective understanding of the role of parents in supporting their children's education, although scholars have adopted various different perspectives on how parent involvement should be defined and measured (Epstein,

1987, 1995; Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994; Eccles and Harold, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997; Walker et al., 2005; Harris and Robinson, 2016; Jeynes, 2018). Still, common across many perspectives is the idea that parent involvement reflects parents' interactions with schools and their children to promote academic success (Hill et al., 2004). In short, parent involvement has largely been understood as a behavioral phenomenon (something that parents do) that operates in two contexts: at school and at home. School-based parent involvement typically refers to parent practices that involve direct interactions with school staff, such as school volunteering or attending parent-teacher meetings. Home-based parent involvement typically refers to school-related practices that occur in interaction with the child, usually, but not always, in the home (Pomerantz et al., 2007). However, which behaviors count as expressions of school- and home-based parent involvement remains a topic of considerable debate, with little consensus in the literature on what practices and activities parents should participate in to best support their children (O'Toole et al., 2019).

This emphasis on what parents should do risks implying that more involvement is always better. However, this assumption is not necessarily true, as illustrated by the phenomenon 'helicopter parenting', which involves excessive parental over-involvement (LeMoyne and Buchanan, 2011). To maximize benefits for children, it is also important to consider *how* parents are involved; that is, the style and quality of their interactions with schools and their children (Pomerantz et al., 2007; Moroni et al., 2015). For example, parents may feel and express joy and enthusiasm when helping their child with homework, or they may feel and express boredom or frustration. Research has demonstrated that parents' positive affect during homework supports children's motivational and emotional functioning (Pomerantz et al., 2005b). Similarly, parents may show attentive focus and engrossment when discussing school with their child, or they may show disinterest and distraction. Thus, children's outcomes may depend not only on parents' investment of physical effort and resources but also on their investment of emotional and cognitive resources. Although this broader perspective is reflected somewhat in multidimensional models of parent involvement (Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994; Grolnick, 2015), further conceptual development is needed to better distinguish parents' observable involvement practices from their subjective psychological experience of engagement.

Responding to this need, Inman et al., 2026 recently proposed an integrative model that conceptualizes parent engagement as a deeper state of involvement and ownership (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014), reflecting parents' emotional, cognitive, and physical investment in their children's education. Drawing on multidimensional theories of engagement from educational, organizational, and environmental psychology (Kahn, 1990; Fredricks and Paris, 2004; Saks, 2019; Wang et al., 2019; Moreira et al., 2021, 2022; Wong and Liem, 2022) the framework (Inman et al., 2026) conceptualizes home- and school-based parent engagement as multidimensional meta-constructs that capture parents' dedication and commitment of emotional/affective, cognitive, and physical resources to two distinct educational roles: being a co-educator of their child and being a member of the school community. Parent engagement

therefore manifests in parents' behaviors, thoughts, and affective states, which are then experienced by the child.

1.2 Extending parent engagement to parent disaffection

Within the engagement literature, and more broadly in psychological research, researchers have argued that richer, holistic models of human functioning and development require considering positive experiences in combination with negative experiences, rather than equating negative functioning as merely the absence of positive functioning (Keyes, 2005; Antaramian et al., 2010; Salmela-Aro et al., 2016). Aligned with this rationale, various theoretical frameworks of student engagement in school (Connell and Wellborn, 1991; Skinner et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2019), work engagement (Salmela-Aro et al., 2022) and engagement with sustainable development (Moreira et al., 2021) have incorporated constructs such as 'disengagement', 'disaffection' and 'burnout'. Although these constructs differ in important respects, they share the assumption that maladaptive functioning involves qualitative distinct psychological states and processes that cannot be adequately represented by low engagement alone. On the basis of such frameworks, researchers now routinely measure engagement and a negative counterpart using different scales (Wang et al., 2016; Moreira et al., 2021).

However, an equivalent multidimensional negative counterpart has not been clearly conceptualized within the literature on parent involvement or engagement. This is despite evidence that parents may have specific maladaptive interactions with school and their child's education which contribute uniquely and negatively to child outcomes beyond low engagement, for example when characterized by negative affect (Pomerantz et al., 2007), mistrust (Houri et al., 2019), or behavioral resistance (Luet, 2017). To address this gap and capture the contribution of parents' negative experiences, Inman et al. introduced the concept of parent disaffection (Inman et al., 2026). Like parent engagement, parent disaffection was conceptualized as a multidimensional meta-construct with emotional/ affective, cognitive, and behavioral components.

Conceptually, disaffection is broader than related concepts such as disengagement, burnout, and alienation. Drawing on work by Skinner et al., 2009, disengagement primarily captures reduced investment through passivity, low effort, withdrawal, or giving up, whereas disaffection also includes negative emotions, cognitive withdrawal, ritualistic participation, and active resistance. Parental burnout is likewise distinct, referring to a broader syndrome of chronic exhaustion in the parental role and emotional distancing from one's children (Mikolajczak et al., 2019), rather than specifically to parents' functioning in relation to their child's education. Alienation is encompassed within parent disaffection with the parent-as-school-community-member role, capturing a weak sense of belonging alongside negative attitudes toward the school (Hascher and Hadjar, 2018). However, disaffection with this role is broader than alienation because it also encompasses behavioral manifestations of negative investment, including perfunctory participation, avoidance, withdrawal and opposition. These constructs may therefore overlap with parent disaffection, but

none captures its full domain-specific emotional, cognitive, and behavioral range.

1.2.1 Home-based parent engagement and disaffection

We define home-based parent engagement as a positive and fulfilling psychological state experienced by parents that enables them to feel activated, exert effort, and become absorbed in their role as co-educators when interacting with their children about school and education outside the school setting. In contrast, home-based parent disaffection captures a negative psychological state, distinct from low engagement, that leads parents to feel deactivated, withdraw effort, act out, and become distracted from their role as co-educators outside school (Inman et al., 2026).

Within the home-based context, both constructs include emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components. These components draw on established multidimensional engagement frameworks (e.g., Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2019; Wong and Liem, 2022) but are integrated here and specified in relation to parents' co-educator role. Home-based emotional engagement captures parents' experience and transmission of positive activating emotions during interactions with their children, such as enjoyment, curiosity, and empathy (Pomerantz et al., 2007; Salmela-Aro and Upadaya, 2012; Skinner et al., 2009). Home-based cognitive engagement captures the dedication of mental resources through sustained attentiveness and focused concentration during interactions (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Salmela-Aro and Upadaya, 2012; Ashinoff and Abu-Akel, 2021). Home-based behavioral engagement refers to parents' intentional (or 'connative'; Reitan and Wolfson, 2000) and persistent exertion of physical effort to support their child, expressed through self-initiated behaviors that are maintained over time (Skinner et al., 2009; Wong and Liem, 2022).

In turn, the corresponding dimensions of home-based disaffection capture emotional, cognitive, and behavioral withdrawal from the co-educator role. Home-based emotional disaffection captures parents' experience and transmission of disaffected emotions during interactions, such as boredom, disinterest, frustration, and anger (Pomerantz et al., 2005a; Skinner and Pitzer, 2012). Home-based cognitive disaffection captures mental withdrawal, reflected in a lack of attentiveness and focus (Skinner et al., 1990; Skinner and Pitzer, 2012). Home-based behavioral disaffection captures interactions with the child that express physical avoidance and withdrawal of effort from the co-educator role (Brehm and Brehm, 1981; Kahn, 1990).

1.2.2 School-based parent engagement and disaffection

We define school-based parent engagement as parents' state of connection with their social role within the child's school, characterized by positive relational attachment to school staff, self-initiated cooperative participation in school-based activities, and psychological identification as members of the school community (Furlong et al., 2003). Conversely, school-based

parent disaffection refers to a state of alienation involving physical and relational disconnection from the school community. School-based parent engagement and school-based parent disaffection also each have three dimensions: relational, psychological, and participatory (Wong and Liem, 2022). Although these dimensions map partly onto the affective/emotional, cognitive, and behavioral domains of home-based engagement and disaffection, they are named differently to avoid conceptual confusion and because some indicators do not fall neatly within a single dimension. For example, school identification has both affective/emotional and cognitive components.

For school-based parent engagement, these dimensions capture relational connection, psychological identification, and participatory involvement. School-based relational (emotional) engagement captures the extent to which parents' interactions with school staff are warm, friendly, empathic, and trusting; that is, characterized by feelings of closeness and relatedness (Kahn, 1990; Yazzie-Mintz, 2007; Soane et al., 2012). School-based psychological (socio-cognitive) engagement, grounded in motivational models that present belonging as a central motivating factor (Fredricks et al., 2004), is defined as the degree to which parents identify with and give emotional and cognitive significance to being part of their child's broader school community (Allen et al., 2018; Kuttner, 2023). School-based participatory (behavioral) engagement refers to parents' intentional investment and maintenance of effort to comply with school expectations and participate cooperatively in school-based activities (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997; Walker et al., 2005).

For school-based parent disaffection, these dimensions capture relational disconnection, psychological alienation, and participatory withdrawal or resistance. School-based relational disaffection captures the extent to which parents' interactions with school staff are characterized by negative disaffected emotions, as expressed by interactions that are cold and detached or oppositional and antagonistic (Fredricks et al., 2016). School-based psychological disaffection refers to parents' perceived and felt alienation and disconnection from the school and its social environment (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004; Case, 2007). School-based participatory disaffection is defined as the extent to which parents intentionally withdraw from and avoid interactions with the school and/or are actively resistant to or defiant of school requests and activities (Brehm and Brehm, 1981; Kahn, 1990).

1.3 Parent, student and teacher conceptualizations of parent engagement

Although parent engagement has been studied extensively, little is known about whether parents, children, and school staff conceptualize this construct in the same way as one another, or in the same way as researchers (Jones and Palikara, 2023). These stakeholders may hold different understandings of what it means for parents to be engaged in education due to their distinct roles, lived experiences, and expectations. Understanding how parents, children, and teachers perceive parent engagement

is important because strategies and policies designed to strengthen home-school relationships, and thereby support child outcomes, are likely to be most effective when they are grounded in shared understandings of what engagement is. If schools promote forms of engagement that reflect researchers' assumptions and theoretical frameworks but do not align with how families, children, or teachers understand parent engagement, these initiatives may be less accessible, less relevant, or less likely to be sustained. Despite its relevance, research on how different stakeholders understand parent engagement remains limited.

In a recent case study of stakeholders' perspectives on parent engagement from one primary school in the UK, Jones and Palikara, 2023 identified a mismatch between how researchers typically conceptualize parent engagement and how school staff understood the construct. Specifically, while around 75% of school staff defined parent engagement in terms of parent participation in school events and parent-teacher relationships, almost all parents defined parent engagement in terms of home-based activities. Critically, school staff's tendency to view parent engagement primarily as participation in school-based activities suggested a mismatch with how researchers are starting to view and study engagement, that is, as a broader construct (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). Similarly, in a qualitative study by Gross et al., 2020, parents and school staff at the preschool level conceptualized parent engagement in different ways, although both groups generally tended to focus on parents' participation in various activities. From this work, Gross et al. noted that relying on visible school participation may misrepresent many families' actual investment in children's learning.

Less research has addressed how parents and teachers of older schoolchildren define and conceptualize parent engagement. However, Baker et al., 2025 found that parents of children from preschool through 12th grade also tended to define parent engagement by identifying specific activities, that is, in terms of behavioral indicators. That said, Baker et al., 2025 reported that one parent defined parent engagement as:

“parental support for education at home demonstrated by a clear commitment to putting education first, supporting child participation in homework and other learning activities, expressing an interest in school (and related activities), and responding to communication from school as well as initiating communication” (p. 10).

Thus, there was at least some indication that parents may think of parent engagement as a deeper sense of involvement, including the intentional dedication of effort (“initiating communication”) and transmission of interest (suggestive of emotional/affective and cognitive components). Notably, all these studies explored parents' views of parent engagement as a global construct and did not probe their understanding of specific expressions, such as emotional engagement or cognitive engagement, and none explored how participants defined parent disaffection.

1.4 Using stakeholder perceptions to inform scale development

Recently, Mocho et al., 2025 conducted a systematic review to understand how parent involvement and engagement have been operationalized in research, focusing on samples of parents, teachers, and children aged 6–15 years. In this review, 23 parent-report measures of parental engagement were identified across 38 studies. Of these measures, most focused primarily on quantifying behavioral indicators of parental engagement, such as helping with homework, attending school meetings, monitoring academic progress, or communicating with teachers. This behavioral emphasis in the literature risks overlooking the cognitive, affective, and relational dimensions that we argue may also be influential in shaping children's educational experiences. Notably, most scales identified in this review were reported to have limited evidence for psychometric adequacy and did not explicitly reference a theoretical model, which speaks directly to the field's continuing conceptual fragmentation.

One exception identified in Mocho et al.'s review was the Chinese version of the Parental Involvement Scale (Cheung and Pomerantz, 2011; Yu et al., 2022), which has subscales assessing cognitive involvement, behavioral involvement, and personal/affective involvement, as theorized by Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994. Nevertheless, this scale also illustrates the conceptual haziness surrounding parent involvement and engagement. Specifically, several items appear not to align clearly with their assigned dimensions. For example, the cognitive involvement scale includes the item, "I study the textbooks and tutorials on my own first in order to help my children learn them," which reflects intentional effort and action rather than a cognitive orientation *per se*, suggesting that it may align more closely with a behavioral dimension (Wong and Liem, 2022). Other items, such as "I made a schedule of watching TV for my children," illustrate a potential overgeneralization of the construct, capturing general parenting practices that may influence children's development but do not necessarily represent the specific phenomenon of parental engagement in education. Furthermore, this scale does not distinguish between home-based and school-based domains of engagement, nor does it include items that tap into negative experiences, such as parent disaffection.

Overall, although various parent-report measures of parent engagement are available in the literature, we argue that none adequately captures the full set of home- and school-based parent engagement and disaffection dimensions proposed by Inman et al. (2026). Thus, there is a need to develop a new survey. To this end, acquiring "on-the-ground" perspectives from potential respondents, that is, parents, and other relevant stakeholders on parent engagement, is a useful way to develop measurement instruments with strong content validity (Fredricks et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2016). Qualitative approaches offer a valuable means of eliciting stakeholders lived experiences and implicit definitions of a construct, thereby allowing for the identification of indicators that may be salient to a population of interest but overlooked by researchers.

1.5 The present study

The overarching objective of this article is twofold. First, we present a study in which we used qualitative methods to understand how parents, teachers, and students conceptualize parent engagement and parent disaffection in children's education. Specifically, using focus groups we explored how parents, teachers, and students describe and define engagement and disaffection in terms of how parents act, feel, and think, that is, in terms of behaviors, emotions, and cognitions. This approach allowed us to examine whether these stakeholders understand parent engagement in the same multidimensional way as proposed in our new theoretical framework. More broadly, therefore, the first objective of the study was to contribute to current understanding of the conceptualization of parent engagement and parent disaffection. Our second goal was to describe how we used qualitative insights from these focus groups to inform the development of preliminary item pools for proposed parent-report measures of parent engagement and parent disaffection in children's education: the *Multidimensional Measure of Parent Engagement* (MMPE) and its partner measure, the *Multidimensional Measure of Parent Disaffection* (MMPD).

2 Method and materials: qualitative study

2.1 Participants

2.1.1 Sample recruitment

We used a multistage purposive sampling strategy to deliberately select diverse parent, students, and teacher samples. This process ensured variability in characteristics that have empirically shown to influence parent engagement, thereby supporting the extraction of rich information (Creswell and Poth, 2017; Campbell et al., 2020).

Our objective was to strategically select and recruit schools that serve students from different geographic locations (urban vs. rural), educational levels (preschool through secondary school), and demographic backgrounds. Hence, we approached two school clusters and one stand-alone secondary school¹ from an established network of contacts within the school system to participate in the study. One institution was recruited because it is part of Portugal's Priority Educational Intervention Territories (TEIP) program, which supports public schools in disadvantaged areas. One school withdrew from the study due to difficulties in arranging focus groups, and so a fourth institution with a similar profile was recruited. Characteristics of the three participating institutions are in [Supplementary Appendix 1](#).

Within each participating institution a school psychologist served as the point-of-contact with the research team and was

¹In Portugal, most public schools operate as school clusters, integrating multiple buildings and grade levels under a single administration. Not all schools are part of a cluster.

responsible for: (1) the purposeful selection and recruitment of parents, students and teachers to ensure samples were diverse in terms of gender, age, SES, and ethnicity; (2) for obtaining signed informed consent forms from the parents of student participants and returning them to the research team; and (3) arranging the logistics of the focus groups. To support diversity while reducing gatekeeper bias, school psychologists were provided with written recruitment criteria and asked to invite participants varying in gender, age/grade level, socioeconomic background, and perceived level/type of parent–school engagement. Final participation was voluntary, and school staff were not informed of individual responses during focus groups.

2.1.2 Sample characteristics

The purposive samples of parents, teachers and students had good diversity for a range of different characteristics. More detailed descriptions of the samples are in [Supplementary Appendix 2](#). However, to summarize, the parent sample comprised 26 parents (54% mothers, 92% Portuguese nationality) with a mean age of 46.8 years (range = 35–61 years). Most (65%) of parents were married and had only biological children (80%). Most parents were employed (65%) and had an undergraduate or post-graduate degree (65%), although three parents reported not completing secondary school. Self-reported relative SES scores ranged from 2 to 8 out of 10, with a median score of 7.

The teacher sample comprised 23 female teachers of Portuguese nationality with a mean age of 52.8 years (ranging from 41 to 65 years). All but one had an undergraduate or post-graduate degree. On average they had 27.7 years of teaching experience, ranging from 15 years to over 41 years. Many were relatively new to their current school (30.4% reported being at their current school for 1 year and 52.2% reported being at their current school 5 years or less). However, several teachers had been at their institutions for much longer (maximum 35 years). The teachers taught at all education levels, ranging from 1st cycle (Grade 1 to Grade 4) all the way to secondary school level.

The student sample comprised 28 students (64% girls) from the 5th through to 12th grade (mean age = 13.9 years, ranging from 10 to 18 years)². Primary school students (1st–4th grade) were not recruited directly. Most students reported a Portuguese nationality (82.1%). In terms of family characteristics 17 students reported their parents were together, and 9 that their parents were divorced or separated. One participant reported not living with their biological parents. Student total scores for the Family Affluence Scale III ([Hartley et al., 2016](#)) ranged from 4 to 12 ($M = 8.6$), indicating individuals across the spectrum of SES.

2.2 Procedures

The same methodological approach was used for parents, teachers, and students. Specifically, we used a semi-structured

interview format within the context of focus groups ([Krueger, 2014](#); [Robinson, 2020](#)). We chose this format because it ensures some consistency across interviews while also affording interviewers and participants the flexibility to explore important arising themes in more detail. Interview guides (see [Supplementary Materials S1](#)) for the focus groups were developed by the research team, involving several rounds of revision and discussion, and then trialed in preliminary interviews with one individual from each stakeholder group (i.e., one parent, one student, and one teacher). The guides were developed with reference to an example from a similar qualitative study ([Fredricks et al., 2016](#))³. Some small adjustments to the interview guides were made based on feedback from the interviewees.

In total we conducted 13 focus groups: 5 with parents, 3 with teachers, and 5 with students. Group sizes ranged from 3 to 9 participants. Focus groups for school clusters A and B were conducted in June and July 2025 (the end of the 2024/2025 academic year). Focus groups for stand-alone school C occurred in October 2025 (start of the 2025/2026 academic year). Student focus groups were arranged so students were from similar grades/ages (e.g., 2 focus groups of secondary school students; 1 focus group of 3rd cycle students; 1 focus group of 2nd cycle students; 1 focus group mixed 2nd and 3rd cycles). Focus groups with students lasted 60–70 min, with one exception at about 15 min. Focus groups with parents and teachers lasted 70–90 min, with one exception at about 30 min. The two shorter focus groups involved fewer participants and were concluded once participants indicated they had no additional perspectives or experiences to contribute. All interviews were conducted by a member of the research team who has experience in semi-structured interviewing and facilitating focus groups with both adults and youth. The use of a single interviewer contributed to greater procedural consistency and standardization across focus groups.

The primary purpose of the focus groups, and the main interest of the present article, was to understand how various stakeholders conceptualize parent engagement and disaffection with a child's education, whether this conceptualization was consistent with theory, and what terminology they used to describe these constructs. The interview questions relevant to this primary objective were organized into the following themes: (1) What does parent engagement in their child's education mean to you? What do parents think, feel, and do when engaged?; (2) What does parent disaffection in their child's education mean to you? What do parents think, feel, and do when disaffected?; (3) What factors and contexts support parent engagement/disaffection; and 4) Does parent engagement change as children progress through school?.

Focus groups were conducted in classrooms at the schools, with participants and the interviewer sat around a large table. After providing the interviewer with a signed informed consent form, participants were asked to privately complete a short sociodemographic questionnaire (see [Supplementary Materials S2](#)). The interviewer then explained the study, discussed some

²In Portugal, this grade range corresponds to the 2nd Cycle, 3rd Cycle, and Secondary School phases of compulsory education.

³We thank Prof. Jennifer Fredricks for kindly sharing the interview guides used in [Fredricks et al. \(2016\)](#).

ground-rules for participation, and then started the audio recorder (DM-720 Digital Voice Recorder with two boundary microphones). All focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim. Transcription was conducted through repeated and careful listening to promote familiarity with the data. Transcripts were reviewed against the recordings to ensure accuracy prior to analysis.

2.3 Data analysis

To identify indicators of home- and school-based engagement and disaffection domains we followed a systematic thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Naeem et al., 2023) using a combination of inductive and deductive approaches. This hybrid approach allowed indicators to emerge directly from participants' accounts while subsequently examining how these indicators related to the proposed conceptual framework (e.g., as in Fredricks et al., 2016). The process of thematic analysis was conducted collaboratively by two members of the research team, who independently analyzed the data and subsequently met throughout the analytic process to refine the coding framework. The unit of coding was a meaning unit, defined as a segment of speech expressing a discrete idea relevant to parent engagement or disaffection. Each transcript was read in full, and all meaning units relevant to the study objectives were identified and grouped inductively to capture recurring patterns and terms. For each group of meaning units, a keyword or key phrase was assigned to capture the commonality across grouped quotations. For example, several participants used the phrase "being present", and the associated meaning units were grouped and labelled as "being present". As recommended by Naeem et al., 2023, this process of keyword assignment paves the way for subsequent code development.

Next, the keywords and phrases were used for a process of inductive coding; that is, where codes are derived from the data. While keywords were the starting point for this process, their associated quotations were also used to ensure codes captured the depth and breadth of qualitative data. In the context of the study objectives, emergent codes were representative of indicators of engagement and disaffection. Importantly, the identification of meaning units, keyword assignment, and code development were undertaken without reference to the proposed engagement framework, allowing indicators to emerge directly from participants' accounts. For each emergent code, we recorded the number of associated quotes to understand which indicators are most salient to participants.

The subsequent organization of codes into higher-order themes adopted a deductive approach grounded in our proposed parent engagement framework (Inman et al., 2026), with the process guided by an instruction manual that set out the definitions of home- and school-based engagement and disaffection dimensions. For instance, the codes "Responsive to school communication" and "Participation in School Community Activities" align with the definition of school-based participatory engagement, and so were classed as indicators of this construct. Where a code could plausibly fit more than one dimension, both researchers revisited the original meaning units, considered alternative interpretations, and reached consensus

based on the meaning expressed by participants rather than the anticipated theoretical category.

The two researchers met regularly during the coding process to compare interpretations, discuss the codes, and review their classification under themes. Disagreements occurred primarily during the initial code generation but also during the allocation of codes to higher-order themes. Differences in coding or theme allocation were resolved through discussion, returning to the original quotations and coding manual until a shared interpretation supported by the data was reached. Throughout the analysis, the researchers kept reflexive diaries to document analytical decisions, and critically examine assumptions and emerging sources of bias. Together, independent coding, iterative discussion, reflexive practices and consensus-based theme development enhanced the credibility of the analysis.

2.4 Ethics

The study was submitted to and approved by the Ethics Commission of the lead author's affiliated institution [REF: UL/CE/CIPD/2502] ensuring compliance with the ethical principles set out in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki. The qualitative study protocol was preregistered on the Open Science Framework (OSF) in June 2025 before data collection began and is accessible at doi: 10.17605/OSF.IO/FRWH2. All participants gave their informed assent/consent to participate in the study, including for focus groups to be audio recorded. All participants under 18 years old also obtained parental consent. When approached for recruitment, participants were informed that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary and their decision to participate or not would have no consequences for them at school. At the onset of the focus groups, the interview facilitator discussed ground rules for ethical participation, including confidentiality expectations.

3 Results

Tables 1 and 2 summarize the indicators (codes and associated keywords) of parent engagement and disaffection that emerged from analysis of focus group interviews conducted with parents, teachers, and students, and their organization within theoretical domains. Each indicator is presented along with a number representing the number of associated quotations. Overall, when specifically prompted to do so, participants described how parents think, feel, and act when engaged or disaffected with their children's education. Thus, when primed to think in these terms they conceptualized parent engagement and disaffection as multidimensional constructs with emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components. Moreover, participants described indicators that made a clear distinction between home- and school-based engagement/disaffection, despite this distinction not being referred to in the focus group schedules. Although participants mentioned indicators that could be classified under different domains, we noted participants found it easier to define both constructs by listing behavioral indicators, as demonstrated by the greater number of codes for the behavioral and participatory domains compared to others. In other words,

TABLE 1 Indicators of parent engagement from focus groups.

Context	Domain	Code	Indicators
Home-based engagement	Emotional engagement	Positive emotions	Caring/investment [19]; pride [1]; confidence [1]
	Cognitive engagement	Engrossed in child's educational experience	Interested [9]; are informed [6]; know what's happening [5]; school awareness [2]; want to know [2];
		Attentive presence	Mental presence [13]; attentiveness [5]; show children they are important [2];
	Behavioral engagement	Regulation of home learning context	Monitoring homework [3]; removing distractions (phone) [2]; creating a study environment [2];
		Talking about school	Ask about the school day [12]; talk about school [7]
		Performance monitoring	Can I help? [3]; reflecting on performance [3]
		Reinforcement of Learning	Effort over outcome [2]; positive reinforcement [1]
		Direct instructional support	Study/homework support [10]; home projects [9]; give explanations [3]
		Strategic academic support	Seeking external support [6]; self-study to help [1]
		Enrichment activities	Museums/zoos [1]
		Accessible/responsive support	Continued accompaniment [14]; responsibility [3]; emotional support [2]
School-based engagement	Relational engagement	Warm/positive relationships	Closeness [5]; gratitude [3]; feeling of partnership [3]; trust [2]
	Psychological engagement	Perceived school receptiveness	Perceived school receptiveness [2]
	Participatory engagement	Responsive to school communication	Responding to school communication [2]; checking emails [7]
		Working together	Contacting teachers [6]; joint problem solving [4]; seeking instructional support [4]
		Participation in school community activities	Help in class [9]; be at school [7]; attend student events [5]; extracurricular activities [2];
		Participation in formal school events	Meetings [20]; parent associations [6]

Numbers in [] represent number of associated quotes.

overt actions tended to be the most salient features of parent engagement and disaffection to parents, teachers, and students.

3.1 Indicators of parent engagement

Indicators of home-based behavioral engagement mentioned by the participants included many classic examples of home-based involvement from the literature including talking with the child about school, providing direct instructional support (e.g., homework), providing learning enrichment opportunities, and monitoring performance.

“It’s asking how school went, for example, when they get home from school, asking ‘What did you do?’, ‘What didn’t you do?’, checking if they did their homework or not, and making sure they have everything they need for school”

Participants also referred to things parents do to maximize the home environment for study, which has also been considered in the literature, albeit less commonly.

“Having knowledge of the subject matter in order to keep up, and checking whether the work environment is good, is

suitable, whether the child has their own space and time, whether the environment is conducive to studying—that is support!”

As well as describing specific actions, participants also referred to behavioral patterns that signal accessibility, availability and responsiveness to a child. Participants also described many classic behavioral indicators of school-based parent engagement from the literature, including participating in school activities, and participating in school meetings.

“Attending school presentations and meetings, I think that is ideal”

“There was even a parents’ choir and a kids’ choir. For kids who are into that kind of stuff, I think it probably brought them closer to their parents, you know? Like, they learned from their parents, and the parents learned from their child. I think it’s more...I feel like it’s another way for parents to get involved.”

Making the effort to be at school physically was also referred to, which may reflect the view that physical presence (compared to

TABLE 2 Indicators of parent disaffection from focus groups.

Context	Domain	Code	Indicators
Home-based disaffection	Emotional disaffection	Negative emotions	Anger/disappointment [1]
		Emotional detachment	Distant [3]; unmotivated [2]; apathetic [2]; despondent [1]
	Cognitive disaffection	Disattunement to the child's school experience	'Doesn't want to know' [19]; not aware/don't know [9]; result-only focus [4]; disconnected [3]; disinterested [1];
		Distracted	Unfocused/zoned out [3]; inattentive [1]
	Behavioral disaffection	Absence of guidance	No support [5]; no talking about school [3]; no encouragement to study [2]; no helping [1]; no corrective action [1]
		Give up easily	Low homework persistence [4]; lack of patience [1]
		Helicopter parenting	Excessive pressure [5]; controlling [3]; overprotection [2]; smothering [2]; imposed choices [1]
		Punishment	Punishment [2]
School-based disaffection	Relational disaffection	Emotional Reactivity	Defensive/indignation [2]
		Intrusive	Excessive monitoring [3]; classroom intrusion [2]; pressuring [3]; concern limited to child's treatment [2]
		Adversarial	Aggression [4]; complaining [3]; disrespect [1]; dishonesty [1]
		Interpersonal distance	Distant [3]
	Psychological disaffection	Alienation	Distrusting the school [6]; feeling ignored [2]; sense of opposition [1];
	Participatory disaffection	Non-participation	Don't attend meetings [15]; not participating in school-organized activities [5]; lack of proactivity; [5] doing the minimum [3]; ignoring school recommendations [2]; participating only to avoid penalties [1]
		Neglect of duties	Lateness [3]; don't justify child absences [2]; don't take child to school [2]; don't complete school paperwork [2]
		Non-communicative	Not responding to emails [5]; lack of communication [2]; not answering phone calls [1]

Numbers in [] represent number of associated quotes.

online presence) is an indicator of greater participatory engagement.

“But I think getting involved is part of it too, coming to the school and getting to know the teachers, I think that’s good as well....and actually meeting the person in person.”

Consistent with conceptualizations of emotional engagement from the academic literature, indicators of home-based emotional engagement noted by the participants were positive emotional/affective experiences, mostly often feelings of caring and emotional investment in the child’s education, but also specific emotions such as pride and confidence.

“What we already mentioned about support, and also pride at the same time, I think that is part of it too.”

Similarly, as indicators of school-based relational engagement, participants referred to relationships with teachers characterized by positive emotions such as feeling close, trust, gratitude, and in partnership, and indicators of collaborative parent-teacher relationships as expressed through communication.

“You just have to automatically trust the teacher a bit. The teacher is also responsible for part of your child’s education, and vice versa. There has to be cooperation between the parent, the school, and the teacher.”

Participants described indicators of home-based cognitive engagement that matched conceptualizations of cognitive engagement from the literature, including engrossment in the child’s academic life and full attentive presence and focus during parent-child interactions.

“...the involvement has to be felt, genuine, in small, even simple gestures—asking how the day went, but actually paying attention to the answer. And not tuning out. I think that is fundamental.”

Finally, relatively few indicators of school-based psychological engagement were identified, although one participant described finding it rewarding when the school was perceived as open and receptive to parents.

“I always felt a lot of openness to do so [to communicate], and I was always very well received, very welcomed. I always got answers, whether they were good or not so good.”

3.2 Indicators of parent disaffection

Table 2 shows indicators of parent disaffection that emerged from analysis of focus group interviews. As indicators of home-based behavioral disaffection, participants gave some examples that reflect the absence of engagement such as not providing support, not talking about school and not helping with homework.

“For me, it’s those cases of parents who basically just come to drop the kids off at school, they [the children] stay at school for as long as possible and then they come to pick them up, and then at home they don’t say a word”

Participants also suggested that an indicator of disaffection is a lack of willingness to invest effort in helping their child with study, with parents easily giving up and referring their children back to teachers.

“Ok, kiddo, forget it, just ask your teacher tomorrow’. And I think if we say this once, twice, three times, they’ll eventually stop asking us altogether and we won’t even care, we won’t even ask, ‘Hey, what about that math problem...?’”

Indicators of school-based participatory disaffection mostly exemplified an absence of participatory engagement such as not attending meetings, not responding to school communications, and not taking the child to school on time.

“They don’t show interest, they don’t go to meetings, they miss what is requested of them—even those activities where the teachers keeps asking for the parents’ collaboration, and then the day comes and only one or two collaborate. And this right here shows that detachment on the part of the parents.”

That said, some participants gave examples that captured lack of effort while still doing some expected behaviors, capturing ideas such as doing the bare minimum, mechanistic behavior, and lack of proactivity or initiative:

“They [parents] only went to school when I told them to; they never went on their own initiative”

Participants also referred to behavioral patterns that would not be expected simply with the mere absence of behavioral engagement, including various that were reflective of helicopter parenting such as exerting high pressure for good academic performance and being controlling, as well as punishment of poor performance.

“...and I know there are parents who suffocate their children. ‘You have to get an Excellent’... And if they don’t get an ‘Excellent’, they go straight to the teacher to talk—why did one get a ‘Good’ and the other get an ‘Excellent’...”

Regarding home-based emotional disaffection, participants mostly referred to low arousal negative emotions as indicators of

emotional detachment such as feeling unmotivated, distant, and indifferent, which aligns with the core emotions expected of disengagement.

“...indifference or lack of motivation regarding their children’s schooling”

However, one participant also referred to feelings of anger and frustration, suggesting alignment with conceptualizations that incorporate both withdrawal and additional disaffected emotions.

“It has to be a bit of a middle ground; they can’t be completely oblivious, but being too demanding isn’t the best solution in the world either. Whenever I got a bad grade and my parents got upset and punished me—now I just don’t tell them the grades I get anymore”

For school-based relational disaffection, participants referred to parent behaviors that capture parent-to-teacher coercion (a negative relational dynamic) including intrusive and boundary-breaking behaviors, and adversarial acts such as being aggressive and complaining. Two participants referred to emotional reactivity as indicators of relational disaffection.

“And the mother who started arguing with the teacher at a party, in a very negative, very aggressive, very overbearing way... and the mother, who was so small, turned to me and said: ‘I talk about whatever I want, wherever I want, whenever I want, however I want, whenever I want.’ I said, ‘Calm down,’ [and she said] ‘I won’t calm down!’ ... We didn’t even know what she wanted to say. She just thought that teacher was against her daughter. ‘What do you have against my daughter?’ And that kind of involvement is very bad.”

Participants described two main types of indicators of home-based cognitive disaffection, namely mental disattunement from their child’s educational experience and being inattentive while helping their children. Indicators of mental disattunement included lack of awareness, disinterest, and lack of cognitive investment in the process and daily mechanics of being co-educator of a child despite expecting good results:

“It sounds like parents who are completely checked out from their kids and school, who at the end of the day only care about end-year grades and ignore everything else that happened during the year”

Finally, for school-based psychological disaffection indicators aligned with conceptualizations of alienation from the academic literature including distrust of the school and feeling ignored or not heard by the school.

“What I said, what that father said, what that mother said, what an almost entire group said—sometimes even in the Parents’ General Assembly with the board—falls, to use the expression, as they say, on deaf ears.”

4 Survey development

The second objective of this article is to describe how we used qualitative information gained from the focus groups with parents, students, and teachers to develop preliminary item pools for parent-report measures of parent engagement and parent disaffection in children's education. We decided to develop preliminary item pools for two scales because engagement and disaffection are theoretically distinct constructs (Moreira et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019), and to afford researchers and practitioners flexibility to measure the constructs separately if desired.

An initial pool of candidate items was constructed through a multi-step procedure that combined researcher input with support from a large language model (LLM). In this study, the LLM (GPT-4o) was used before formal human expert review and content-validity assessment solely to facilitate divergent item generation. The use of LLMs at the item-generation stage of scale development has been increasingly described as an acceptable way to broaden the range of candidate items while preserving clear construct boundaries (Brickman et al., 2025). Recent studies also suggest that, when paired with expert evaluation, LLM-assisted item writing may strengthen content validity and help minimize researcher bias (Brickman et al., 2025). First, a standardized prompt was created (see [Supplementary Materials S3](#)) which requested the generation of 30 candidate scale items based on: (1) a definition of the target construct (Inman et al., 2026); and (2) the associated codes that emerged from the thematic analysis (Tables 1, 2). The prompt further specified the intended scale instructions and response options, and specified that items should be presented as statements from the parent perspective. There were no other specific instructions, such as to avoid negatively worded items.

The standardized prompt was then applied to each domain of engagement and disaffection (i.e., 12 times) to generate approximately 360 items in English. Two members of the research team (RI and CS) then translated the generated items into European Portuguese, making linguistic adaptations where necessary to preserve the intended construct meaning while ensuring natural language use and consistency with terminology used in the Portuguese educational context. During this preliminary screening, the researchers reviewed each item using their expert judgement to determine whether it adequately reflected the intended construct and was appropriate for the target population. This qualitative review did not follow a predefined evaluation framework but was intended to identify and remove items that were clearly redundant, ambiguous or overly abstract, or that did not adequately represent the intended construct. This process resulted in a preliminary pool of 275 European Portuguese candidate items. All decisions regarding item retention, modification, construct alignment, translation, and final selection were made by members of the research team. No item generated by the LLM was retained without human review and revision.

The preliminary pool of 275 items then underwent a two-stage formal content validity assessment. In the first stage, an initial systematic content validity assessment was conducted by a third member of the research team (expert on educational psychology: SM) and an independent researcher with expertise in

psychometric research and scale development. During this process, the assessors rated each item for relevance to its intended construct (definitions provided to assessors) using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not relevant*) to 4 (*very relevant*) (Yusoff, 2019). The third member of the research team also performed an independent detailed qualitative evaluation of item clarity and redundancy and provided suggestions for item reformulation. Relevance ratings were converted into an item-level Content Validity Index (I-CVI) by dividing the number of assessors who judged an item as relevant (score of 3 or 4) by the total number of assessors. A score of 1 indicated that both assessors considered the item relevant or very relevant. Based on the calculated I-CVI scores (retaining items with a score of 1) and the qualitative feedback, the initial pool was refined and reduced to 96 items: 8 candidate items for each of the 12 proposed dimensions across the 2 measures.

In the second stage of formal content validity assessment, the 96 selected candidate items underwent external expert review, followed by cognitive pretesting. External expert review was conducted by three researchers external to the project who have expertise in psychometric analysis and scale development, family dynamics (including family engagement), and educational psychology. These experts were provided with definitions for each of the proposed domains and asked to judge the relevance using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not relevant) to 4 (very relevant). As before, relevance ratings were converted into an item-level Content Validity Index (I-CVI). Experts were also invited to provide comments and suggestions for alternative wording. The experts raised several issues, including item redundancy and the possibility that some items captured broader parental burnout rather than the specific state of parent emotional disaffection with their child's education. Guided by the recommendations of Yusoff, 2019, our aim was to exclude items where the I-CVI value suggests expert disagreement on relevance. To complement the feedback from experts, we also cognitively pre-tested the 96 items with a small sample of 6 parents using a think-aloud approach. Feedback from experts and the cognitive pretests were used by the research team to further reduce and refine the preliminary item pools, resulting in two sets of 30 items (5 proposed items per subscale). The final lists of items are in [Supplementary Appendices 3, 4](#).

5 Discussion

Research findings accumulated over several decades suggest that children tend to benefit academically and developmentally when their parents are engaged in their education (e.g., Jeynes, 2005c, 2007, 2015, 2017). Historically, parent engagement has mostly been defined and measured in terms of parent practices—as involvement or participation—although across studies there is little consensus on what practices count as indicators of engagement (O'Toole et al., 2019). As a result, researchers and practitioners can find an abundance of behavior-focused measures (Mocho et al., 2025) that quantify how often parents perform certain actions (e.g., “how often do you talk to your child about school” and “how often do you attend meetings at school”). Unfortunately, when studies do not share a common definition or measure for a construct it can be challenging to

compare findings. This lack of definitional and measurement consistency may help explain why associations between parent engagement and child outcomes have not always been consistent across studies (Boonk et al., 2018).

Recent work has increasingly argued that parent engagement should be understood as more than a collection of school-based activities or involvement practices (Goodall, 2022), yet research into parent engagement as a complex psychological phenomenon is still only emerging (Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Goodall and Montgomery, 2014; Moroni et al., 2015). There is a need to address under-theorization about the meaning and nature of parent engagement (Goodall, 2025) and to this end Inman et al. (2026) proposed an integrative framework in which parent engagement and parent disaffection are conceptualized as multidimensional constructs. The goal of this article was to present the first stages of developing new theoretically-grounded measures that capture these proposed constructs. Guided by prior works (Fredricks et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2016), we sought to strengthen the content validity and thus potential utility of the proposed measures by using parents', teachers', and schoolchildren's' perceptions to inform item generation. By conducting focus groups with these stakeholder groups, we were able to: (1) evaluate whether their conceptualizations of parent engagement and disaffection matched those in the literature, including from within our proposed framework; (2) identify the indicators of these constructs that are most salient to these groups; and (3) make use of the language used by stakeholders to enhance the content validity of items. Overall, the qualitative findings were broadly consistent with key assumptions of our proposed framework and provided qualitative evidence that these assumptions were meaningful to stakeholders in child education. However, given the design and objectives of this study, whether these proposed dimensions represent empirically distinct constructs remains a question for subsequent quantitative validation.

First, it was evident that stakeholders viewed the role of parents as something that occurs in two contexts. A long-held distinction in parent involvement and engagement research is between home- and school-based indicators, with most behavior-focused frameworks and their associated measures distinguishing between parent practices that occur at the school (such as attending meetings, helping in class) and those that occur outside of school (mostly, but not necessarily at home, such as helping with homework) (Epstein, 1987; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997). In our focus groups, stakeholders were asked how they understood parent engagement and parent disaffection in children's education, with prompts to consider how these constructs are expressed in parents' thoughts, feelings, and actions, but without explicit prompts about home- vs. school-based expressions (or in relation to the parent-as-coeducator vs. parent-as-school-community-member roles). Nonetheless, broadly consistent with the distinction commonly made in academic literature, and indeed with the integrative framework proposed by (Inman et al., 2026), the analysis revealed sets of indicators that could readily be classified as home- and school-based. This spontaneous distinction therefore supports assessing parent engagement and disaffection across both contexts rather than as a unitary construct.

Second, when asked, stakeholders were able to describe indicators of both engagement and disaffection. Researchers have started measuring engagement and disaffection with separate scales on the basis that they are distinct constructs (Wang et al., 2016; Moreira et al., 2021, 2022). This approach contrasts with the classic conceptualization of disaffection as the absence of engagement, which implies that only one scale would be necessary. Informed by the more recent distinct-construct perspective, our proposed integrative model hypothesizes that parent engagement and parent disaffection are not conceptual opposites, with parent disaffection dependent on the presence of maladaptive thoughts, feelings, and behavior (i.e., states and processes) not present in the mere lack of engagement (Inman et al., 2026). Consistent with the findings of similar studies (Fredricks et al., 2016), our qualitative analysis revealed indicators of disaffection that aligned with both interpretations. For example, we identified indicators that expressed absence of engagement such as not attending school meetings (vs. attending school meetings) and inattentiveness when helping the child (vs. attentiveness). However, there were other indicators of disaffection that are not easily interpreted as opposites of an engagement indicator. For example, parent failures to comply with basic responsibilities such as bringing the child to school late or not justifying absences were mentioned as indicators of parent disaffection, yet parent compliance with these basic expectations were not referred to as indicators of engagement. Additionally, while parent provision of enrichment activities (e.g., going to museums) was referred to as an indicator of home-based engagement (something that goes beyond basic requirements), non-provision of enrichment activities was not mentioned as an indicator of disaffection. Overall, these findings suggest that the stakeholders understood disaffection as involving an absence of engagement combined with specific other features. This raises the possibility that parent engagement and parent disaffection, despite being distinct constructs, may be strongly negatively associated and may rarely co-occur (see Larsen et al., 2017), although this hypothesis requires direct empirical testing. If supported by future quantitative research, distinguishing parent engagement from parent disaffection could have important practical implications. For example, it may imply that school strategies or policies designed to promote parent engagement should be different to those used to reduce disaffection (as is often implied in the context of work engagement vs. burnout; Leiter and Maslach, 2010; Goering et al., 2017). Prior to this, researchers will need to determine empirically the unique contributions of engagement and disaffection to different academic and developmental outcomes.

Finally, the thematic analysis identified indicators that could be interpreted within the multidimensional conceptualizations of parent engagement and parent disaffection in children's education as hypothesized by our integrative framework. When specifically probed, stakeholders described indicators that could be interpreted as behavioral/participatory, emotional/relational, and cognitive/psychological. Providing preliminary support for our proposed model, many of the observed indicators overlap with conceptualizations of engagement from other domains. For example, some indicators of emotional engagement (caring) and disaffection (apathetic), as well as cognitive disaffection (unfocused/zoned out) and participatory disaffection (not

participating) overlapped with those identified by [Fredricks et al., 2016](#) in their semi-structured interviews with stakeholders on the conceptualization of student engagement with math and science. That said, in our study we also identified some indicators similar to Fredricks et al. but classified them differently. For example, while Fredricks et al. considered their code “focused/concentrating” as an indicator of behavioral engagement, we classified our code ‘attentiveness’ as an indicator of cognitive engagement. This discrepancy is consistent with broader difficulties in the engagement literature in distinguishing cognitive from behavioral indicators ([Wong and Liem, 2022](#)). However, we classified attentiveness as cognitive because it reflected a state of absorbed awareness, rather than the observable behavioral act of directing effort. It is worth noting that although stakeholders described indicators across domains, it was evident that behavioral indicators were the most salient and readily described. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that while parents, teachers and students did attribute specific internal experiences to the phenomenon of parent engagement, behavioral indicators appeared to dominate participants’ descriptions. Nonetheless, from a practical standpoint these findings imply that parent behavioral participation alone may provide an incomplete representation of how parents engage with their children’s education. If supported by future quantitative validation, measuring behavioral, affective/emotional, and cognitive dimensions in research may help explain inconsistencies in previous research linking parent engagement with child outcomes ([Boonk et al., 2018](#)). Furthermore, in terms of intervention and school policy design, the findings suggest that interventions that focus solely on increasing parent participation may not be the most effective in promoting parent engagement. Effective interventions may therefore need to target not only what parents do, but also how they think and feel about their involvement.

In sum, there is a need for a richer characterization of parent engagement that goes beyond behavioral indicators. To this end, we proposed that home- and school-based parent engagement and disaffection can be understood as multidimensional constructs with behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components. In this article, thematic analysis of focus groups with parents, teachers, and students yielded findings that were broadly consistent with this conceptualization. Given the absence of measures explicitly designed to assess these proposed multidimensional constructs, we used qualitative results to inform the development of initial item pools two new parent-report instruments ([Supplementary Appendices 3, 4](#)). We hope that this article, and the two measures derived from it, may help broaden the discourse on the role of parents in children’s education by refocusing attention on how parents are when they interact with schools and with their children, not just on what they do. Future person-centered studies could examine whether parents show distinct engagement–disaffection profiles across home- and school-based domains.

5.1 Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the study used purposive sampling within

three Portuguese school institutions. These findings therefore cannot be assumed to be representative of the wider Portuguese population, or of populations outside of Portugal. Although some of the identified themes from the analysis may reflect common features of parent engagement, their applicability to other educational and cultural contexts may be shaped by differences in educational systems, policies and cultural expectations regarding parent engagement.

Second, participants were recruited through school-based points of contact, which supported access and sample diversity but may also have shaped who was invited or willing to participate. It is possible that these school personnel unintentionally recruited parents, teachers, and students who were more cooperative, communicative, or positively engaged with school. As such, the sample may underrepresent stakeholders who are more disaffected with school, which may have limited the range of perspectives represented in the focus groups.

Third, the teacher sample was composed entirely of women, and the student sample included only students from Grade 5 onward; therefore, the perspectives of male teachers and younger children were not directly represented. Fourth, because focus groups rely on group interaction, some participants may have shaped or constrained others’ responses. Fifth, because interview prompts explicitly asked participants to consider what parents think, feel, and do, the multidimensional structure of responses should be interpreted as partly elicited by the interview design.

Sixth, perspectives of parents, teachers, and students were combined within a single thematic structure. This approach supported the identification of indicators for item generation but may have obscured meaningful differences in how stakeholder groups understand parent engagement and disaffection (but see [Jones and Palikara, 2023](#) for insights into such differences). For richer insights, future research should compare perspectives of parents, teachers, and students more explicitly.

Finally, we emphasize that this article does not include a quantitative psychometric evaluation of the item pools developed. Rather, the article offers a detailed description of the initial stage of instrument development. Accordingly, no conclusions can be drawn regarding item performance, factor structure, internal reliability consistency, test-retest reliability, measurement invariance, or validity. As such, on the basis of this article alone, these item pools should not be treated as validated instruments. Quantitative studies are now required to determine the psychometric adequacy of the items and the proposed dimensional structures. Consistent with the iterative nature of instrument development, subsequent analyses may indicate a need to revise, remove, or add items before final versions of the instruments can be established.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Comissão de Ética para a Investigação da Universidade Lusíada. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

Author contributions

RI: Supervision, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Formal analysis. CS: Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Methodology. TF: Writing – review & editing, Investigation. SM: Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Methodology, Funding acquisition.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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