Parents and teachers talking in primary schools

by **Jackie Laluvein** (laluvein@talk21.com)

Contextualisation

The roles of parents and teachers in the education of children remain the focus of much debate and discussion both in the general press and academic literature. Such debates would benefit from evidence derived from clear observational data rather than uncorroborated anecdotal accounts. Little empirical work has been conducted which attends to the individual interactions and interventions which characterize parent and teacher encounters. More specifically, little empirical work has been undertaken which explores parental roles and agency within problematic (or potentially problematic) situations. This area remains largely under-theorised in academic literature.

Introduction

Substantively, my research explores the complex interrelation of factors which has, traditionally, positioned parents and teachers as, respectively, "powerless / disempowered" and "powerful / empowered". This apparent dichotomy is explored within a "problem" discourse, that of the identification of learning difficulties. It is set against the background of approximately one and three quarter million pupils currently on the Special Educational Needs register in England and Wales, a figure which is continuing to rise (Times Educational Supplement, 6/7/2001 p.35). An alternative, (and perhaps more forward-looking) view might be that parents and teachers form a duality with both seeking to address the needs of particular children whilst occupying different positions and offering different perspectives.

My perspective is grounded in personal practitioner experience as an independent educational advisor with a foot in many camps! I teach children experiencing a range of difficulties in school whilst acting as a mediator for the children, their parents/carers, teachers, schools and other agencies. The

research foregrounds the voices of "concerned" parents, who exercise agency on behalf of their individual children, alongside those of teachers. Thus my approach differs from the substantial body of research and literature available on special educational needs and home school links, much of which tends to begin within the school and then extends outwards to include the family.

The research uses semi-structured interviews within an interpretive, qualitative paradigm. I am currently undertaking two studies which aim to investigate and illuminate the personal accounts, individual experiences and actions of parents and teachers in (potentially) problematic situations. My research design begins with parental experiences and explores the nature of the concerns parents have about their children's difficulties in school. This is located within the relationship between parenting and schooling. The second stage explores the processes (e.g. parent/teacher dialogues) and procedures (e.g. tests and assessments) that both parents and teachers employ to make sense of children's difficulties. The third stage considers the motivation for, and nature of parental agency alongside that of the teacher/school.

Parents are key agents in the education of their children, with access to knowledge and information from a variety of alternative arenas beyond the confines of the school. Examples of these include private assessments from teachers and Educational Psychologists, voluntary associations, parent support groups, doctors, libraries, the Internet, private tutoring, colleagues at work, family members and friends. Potentially problematic situations may arise when parents seek and use such additional advice, information or expertise. Some parents are prepared to challenge, and if necessary come into conflict with teacher/school authority. In so doing, they engage in defending their status as "good" parents, and confirm and utilise their parental rights and responsibilities. In seeking advice and information external to the schools, parents embark upon a journey, a process of empowerment through knowledge. (The term "empowerment" is used here in the sense of the taking of greater control over circumstances and situations). This raises the possibility of a shift in parental attitudes away from deference in respect of "professional" knowledge.

Literature

There is a substantial body of literature relating to home/school links, much of which is characterised by research into "successful" models of parental involvement in schools (Wolfendale, 1983; Griffiths and Hamilton, 1984; Topping and Wolfendale, 1985; Branston and Provis, 1986; Griffiths and Hamilton, 1987; Atkin and Bastiani, 1988; Bastiani, 1988; Solity and Raybould, 1988; Topping, 1988; Wolfendale, 1988; Wolfendale, 1989; Merttens and Vass, 1990; Wolfendale, 1992a). Much of the literature draws upon local small-scale projects which begin within the school and then permeate outwards to include the family. The implicit expectation of involvement however, could signify a desire by professionals to exert control, rather than furthering the goal of egalitarianism (Crozier, 1998b). A failure to recognise the heterogeneity of parents can lead to teachers ignoring differences, for example, of social class factors, gender relations, ethnicity and power relationships, and constructing strategies for parental involvement from a "one size fits all" perspective. Not surprisingly therefore, much of the literature resembles "how-to" manuals, aimed at teachers 'purporting to inform them on the management of their interactions with parents' (Vincent, 1997, pp.271-272). Furthermore, much of the literature since the 1981 Education Act, embodies a tacit assumption of 'certain shared priorities', - an expectation that parents and professionals operate within a 'mutual understanding' of each other, and that this mutuality will result in effective partnerships (Sandow, Stafford and Stafford, 1987).

Some emerging themes

Attempts to theorise successful home/school partnerships articulate four dimensions: rights, equality, reciprocity and empowerment (Wolfendale, 1983; Pugh and De'Ath, 1989; Wolfendale, 1992b). It is the conceptual space between equality and reciprocity which provides the structure for the design and method of my empirical work. Several themes are beginning to emerge from the data which suggest that this is indeed a complex and sensitive area to research. Here I refer, in an as yet unrefined manner, to two of these themes. The first relates to understandings of professionalism and raises questions as to the degree of consonance to be found between the "expectations" of both teachers and parents to each other and the education system. The second queries the status and accessibility of the different kinds of knowledge or information which are

relayed between teachers and parents. Both are linked and subject to differing levels of conceptualisations which draw upon and influence the practices of parents and teachers in (potentially) problematic situations

As a model for effective consensual partnerships, the traditional view of professionalism which privileged the status, autonomy and authority of those who have access to a (supposedly) exclusive and officially accredited knowledge base can appear untenable. Such a model can serve to embroil teachers in undemocratic webs of power which, in turn, serve only to distance them from parents and others (Ginsburg, 1997 p.8). That the relationship between parents and teachers is underpinned by power is a recurring theme suggested throughout the literature. This discourse describes power as something which is owned or wielded by certain groups who are generally favoured in decision-making within a context of domination and subordination. It is this model which has traditionally positioned parents and teachers as, respectively, "powerless / disempowered" and "powerful / empowered", generating tensions, not least for those teachers who are also parents!

Numerous educational change initiatives and a system dominated by the standards agenda, affect the context in which teachers work and, therefore, their relationships with parents. A prescribed standardised curriculum, in conjunction with regimes of constant testing and assessment, has effected a shift in the public perception of teachers as professionals with accredited expertise. A much voiced discourse of equal opportunities, increased focus on children's and parents' rights and the explosion of the information highway theoretically encourage and facilitate the processes whereby parents (amongst others) can question professional decisions or assumptions relating to their child's education.

Collaborative and participative frameworks are predicated upon co-agency, equality and a sharing of knowledge and information. This framework adopts a different model to the traditional model of professionalism referred to above, dependant as it is upon a 'power with' (as against a "power over") philosophy (Ginsburg, 1997 p.8). The status of the different kinds of knowledge or information, (examples of which include intuition, judgement and expertise) which are relayed between teachers and parents surfaces as a key issue in the data. That tension is generated at the interface of these different discourses is also evidenced in the data.

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Theoretical framework

I see my research/work as heuristic and exploratory, in that I am concerned with ways of finding things out and solving problems. The conceptual framework I draw upon, "the lens through which I view my project", is adopted, (or possibly adapted), via a dialogue with Foucaudian literature. This conceptual device is not intended to describe or explain "the facts" but to suggest possible explanations, or eliminate others (Bullock and Trombley, 1999).

Foucault's (1977) analysis of power and knowledge in institutions is useful in understanding communication between parents and teachers and provides a philosophical/theoretical framework for my research. Firstly, it acknowledges that although teachers hold positions of power, authority and responsibility, they are subject to political and social conflict in the workplace. Secondly, Foucault posits that power is exercised in a multiplicity of relationships including everyday relations across the institutional/individual divide. Therefore, it has direct application to my area of research.

Foucault defines power as something which is exercised rather than possessed, 'a mutual and indefinite "blackmail", which is not necessarily negative nor indicative of actions against the interests of others, yet may result in a modification of their actions. The understanding of power as something that is exercised rather than possessed presents a new dimension to teacher/parents relationships. It opens up the possibility of a whole range of productive interventions, responses and reactions, for example opportunities for 'expertise trading' (MacLure and Walker, 1999), and co-agency. This philosophic stance is however problematic as it raises further complex questions relating to the relationship between discursive practices and the production of truth and knowledge.

Research notes

This paper draws upon my work to date. Since the data collection is ongoing, no analysis or raw data is offered. Instead, these research notes reflect strands drawn from themes emerging from the data and my current thinking. I welcome any contributions to the debate.

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