

Research Paper

Parent / carer / child / teacher relationships in a special needs context – a phenomenological perspective

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Contextualisation

My research explores the relationships between the parent/carers of children with special educational needs and their teachers. The section of analysis detailed in this paper draws upon the interviews given by the mother as parent (P) and class teacher (T) of an 11 year old boy described as having 'emotional and behavioural difficulties'. Using a phenomenological perspective, microsystems and/or environments are described in terms of how they are perceived or experienced by the participants.

The analysis is viewed through two lenses: the sociocultural view of development proposed by Bronfenbrenner's *Ecology of Human Development* (1979), in which an ecological approach is taken to the analysis of human relationships, and Wenger's work on *Communities of Practice* (1998) which presents a theory of learning as a process of social participation.

Abstract: *Parent-teacher relationships operate at different points along a continuum of engagement involving two or more participants engaged in common, complementary or independent undertakings. My research has a particular focus upon the (often problematic) relationships between the parent/carers of children with special educational needs and their teachers. In this paper, the theories of both Wenger and Bronfenbrenner are discussed and utilised to reflect individuals existing within layers of relationships and influences. The paper highlights the way in which a parent, teacher and child, concurrently involved in more than one community or microsystem at work and at home, are subject to the influence of different ecosystems. The analysis of dyadic interviews is used to demonstrate that both context and setting can be instrumental in explicating parent-teacher relationships. The final section of the paper demonstrates that a workable definition of 'what matters and what doesn't matter' cannot be presumed to be shared by parents and teachers. Negotiation of meaning is an integral part of the informal 'communities of practice' formed when people pursue a shared enterprise over time. 'Communities of practice', in Wenger's terms, or 'joint activity dyads', in Bronfenbrenner's terms, are emergent structures resulting from collective learning with both developmental and transformative potential for all involved in the education of children.*

“The lunatics have taken over the asylum”

In the study which is presented here, 11 year-old Billy is described by his school as having 'emotional and behavioural difficulties' (EBD). As I began to analyse this dyad, which is one of a set of 10 dyads, I became aware of some less well developed spaces within the 'community of practice' theory. Wenger's work on 'multi-membership' for example, does not elaborate upon the impact that different settings and contexts may have upon practice and participation and the emergence or otherwise of a 'community of practice'. For both Billy's mother and his teacher, family circumstances dominate the interviews. Billy's teacher, assuming that I am interested in researching 'good' models of partnership, establishes from the outset that, from her perspective, Billy's home situation and circumstances are key determinants in their relationship. She distances herself and the school from any (implied) problematics in the relationship with Billy and his mother with these words:

'I don't think they blame school in any way. I mean the thing is school seems almost secondary to all this, this is why this is such a bad child to look at. I mean the relationship between the parents and the school is so secondary to the relationship between each other, I don't think she would blame school at all, because I can't see how she would, but she would just blame her husband and he would blame her...I think...(T).¹

Billy is a child of divorced parents with a split family life. In that respect, Billy is typical of an increasing number of children in schools today who are the product of broken homes. Billington (2000, pp 2-3) refers to the 'pathologizing' or 'blaming' culture, which produces social arenas in which children suffer the consequences of their difference, a situation which Billy's mother refers to:

My children's education has been compromised through the circumstances we've been in for the past five years, but it's also been compromised through...the lack of understanding...that divorce and...the difficulties involved with that, bring on. (P).

The development of a child is, according to Bronfenbrenner (1979), most greatly influenced by the bi-directional dyads, or two-person system, of mother-child, father-child and mother-father. Divorce, the break up of the family and the change of roles implicit within the breakdown of a family is one example of bi-directional relationships and interactions across and between systems. Billy and his immediate family have coped with many traumatic experiences, with little if any support from the wider family:

'I've got my mum and my dad's an alcoholic and I don't know where he is. I've got a brother who's useless. For the past five years I've probably done everything and anything by myself' (P). Billy's mother describes ongoing, unresolved tensions: *'Living with somebody and then divorcing them and still five years on, still be arguing with them and still being called an f-ing whatever in front of my house and in front of my children is grossly unacceptable ..my human rights and the human rights for my children is affected and I just loathe the man who does it. I just treat him with absolute contempt' (P).*

In the case therefore of Billy, his parents and his teachers, taking the 'community of practice' as the primary, or only, unit of analysis seems not to offer sufficient purchase to do justice to the data. As a result I view this section of analysis through two lenses rather than one, marrying Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach to the analysis of human relationships with Wenger's work on the 'community of practice'. Whilst for Wenger the primary unit of analysis is neither the individual, nor the institution but the informal community of practice formed when people pursue a shared enterprise over time, for Bronfenbrenner, the primary units of analysis are settings analysed in terms of their structure. Wenger does not directly address or incorporate Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, perhaps because it has less direct application within the workplace which provides the setting for the main part of his theory, than it might have in a different context. Neither does he systematically describe and analyse a variety of contexts, either how they interconnect nor the processes through which structures and linkages can affect the development of a 'community of practice'.

My analysis borrows the concept of the 'community of practice' and explores its application in relation to the relationships between the parent/carers of children experiencing difficulties, and their teachers. As the interviews about Billy demonstrate, both context and setting can

¹ Quotes that are taken from transcript data are shown in *italic* both in the text and as separate larger quotes. Quotations from published sources are shown in normal print. The author's representation of transcribed data maintains punctuation style used in the original transcription.

be instrumental in explicating parent-teacher relationships. Sandow (1994), refers to 'the maintenance of equilibrium' within both human and ecological ecosystems. A maintenance of equilibrium by definition is always emergent since it involves 'changes, shifts and swings of emphasis' as the human ecosystem changes over time and at all levels within the system (Sandow, 1994, p 149). This, in Bronfenbrenner's terms is the 'chronosystem' which relates to patternings of environmental events and transitions throughout life.

'Communities of practice'

The application of Wenger's work is not limited to the workplace, but extends to other types of settings where learning takes place, for example, the home, the school, the street and the playground (p 225). The common linkage is a definition of learning described in terms of change. Change, that is, which is configured socially in terms of practices and communities which encourage opportunities for participation, belonging, the negotiation of meaning, and identity formation (p 226). To construct and design a conceptual architecture for a 'community of practice' means, according to Wenger, addressing four dimensions expressed as dualities: participation/reification; the designed and the emergent; the local and the global and identification/negotiability (p 232). These are not dualities which represent a choice of positions between two poles. Rather it is the space between the poles which creates a site where attention can be drawn to the need for addressing inherent tensions. In other words, the site represents an arena where the diverse knowledge abilities to be found in a constellation of practices can productively combine, co-ordinate, connect and reconfigure themselves, proffering an identity of participation. This has an obvious relevance to my own enquiry into (the sometimes problematic) parent-teacher relationships which occur within primary schools.

One of the important roles of informal and formal communities of practice is the emergence of sites for meaningful forms of membership, empowering forms of ownership of meaning, and ultimately, identity work which is the vehicle that carries experiences from one context to another. Without making such opportunities for learning available, institutional settings may continue to reproduce external communities and economies of meanings, offering restricted versions of, and opportunities for, participation and engagement.

Economies of meaning

Economies of meaning, in the context of my research, could refer to many different artefacts and occurrences. An example of artefacts might be the assessments utilised by educational psychologists. The tests used to generate the reports on children were designed by specialists who give them meaning in the context of their own practice. Teachers and parents however (as is seen elsewhere in the data), often have to produce their own meanings of the reports as they incorporate them into their practice. In the same way, events and occurrences in primary schools which may have meaning to teachers in their own practice, can become imbued or invested with local meanings by children and parents, as the extract below demonstrates. The knowledge that such economies of meaning may have little currency in the broader scheme of things often leaves them unvoiced (that is outside of the opportunities offered by a willing listener or perhaps, an interested researcher!):

Billy's Year 6 teacher didn't like him,...she looked on him as if he was just a naughty, disobedient, unruly child, he would never be picked to do anything nice at, sort of, school productions at all. No nothing,... he was the back end of a cow for the school pantomime, it's that that sort of reflects on his low self-esteem and everything. But then I made the cow costume and it was the best ever cow costume going.... So...I built his self-esteem out of that...the back end of the cow! (P).

Billy's mother attributes a local meaning to his role in the school pantomime which, in Wenger's terms, is, 'part of a broader 'economy of meaning' in which different meanings are produced in different locations and compete for the definition of certain events, actions, or artifacts' (p 199). An economy of meaning therefore, reflects at one and the same time, a plurality of perspectives involved in the negotiation of meaning, and asymmetry. Certain meanings achieve special statuses which tacitly endorse status, although this position is not necessarily an uncontested one. Thus:

'...while an economy of meaning does reflect relations of legitimacy and power, it also captures the inherent fluidity of these relations, which are themselves shaped through the negotiation of meaning' (p 200).

Bronfenbrenner's 'Ecology of Human Development'

Bronfenbrenner offers a sociocultural view of development, constructed around five environmental systems, which work as 'a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p 3). Whereas Wenger takes the informal communities of practice formed when people pursue a shared enterprise over time as the primary unit of analysis, Bronfenbrenner focuses on environmental systems and the analysis of settings in terms of their structure. His thesis, which in turn builds upon the work of Lewin and others, resurfaces in Wenger's (later) work on communities of practice. Although Wenger does not reference either Bronfenbrenner or Lewin many parallels can be drawn across the constructs even when couched in different terminology. Bronfenbrenner's 'context for development' for example, is not dissimilar in essence to Wenger's 'community of practice', the importance of joint participation and communication are common to both. Bronfenbrenner however takes account of 'aspects of the environment beyond the immediate situation containing the setting'. This is important because it becomes more possible to draw wider conclusions about the structural features of society which influence (the inappropriate) behaviour of children such as Billy, (Garner, 1994, p 109). Linking environment and behaviour, as is demonstrated in the two extracts below, has implications for relationships between parents, teachers and children, and therefore, their joint practice:

It's outside the classroom really and his language and his attitude towards other people. [...] It's all based on...the reaction he gets at home, and the fact that his parents let him play them off against each other, they have no contact between themselves, Billy gets what he wants. So, he expects it at school, if he treats us the way he treats his Mum, particularly, which has come from his Dad, then he'll get what he wants. [...] It's his character traits, but you can see where they've come from, unfortunately. He's a product of both of his parents. (T).

And:

(There was) a particularly painful time [...] Billy learnt how to abuse a women and that's what he did. He's seen his father hit me and Billy even hits me [...] Billy behaves exactly like his father a spoilt, nasty, horrible little brat that if he doesn't get his own way, will just create merry Hell. And that's how his father behaves. Billy's seen too much, far too much. But I can't change that. [...] We've never behaved like a normal family, whatever a normal family is [...] There was always arguments, there was always conflict, there was always, an atmosphere. As much as I tried to still carry on with a normal...sort of, day to day life, it was always very difficult and I was always very strained and stressed. (P).

This section of analysis continues to reflect the micro-sociological approach I have taken to relations within the classroom and between home and school. As such, these studies occupy

a position which reflects the tensions to be found at the interface of micro and macro theoretical paradigms.

For Bronfenbrenner, the capacity of a setting, for example the home or school, to function as what he calls 'a context for development' (which I equate here with Wenger's 'community of practice'), depends upon the social interconnections between settings. Included in this is what he refers to as 'intersetting knowledge' which is information which exists in one setting about the other. The most important mesosystem function of social networks is unintended, they serve as channels for transmitting information or attitudes about one setting to the other, ie, the 'grapevine'. In Billy's case, the 'grapevine' is clearly in evidence:

'I think it's quite open around here. People come in and tell me what happened the night before in the street and all the rest of it. (T)

It mitigates against the establishment of a 'community of practice':

'...we've become, the local soap opera for...people who quote themselves as being friends ...and I've had enough and I don't wish the children or myself to be victims of this any longer' (P),

bringing into sharp relief the affect that settings outside the school or classroom can play in the establishing of reciprocal relations. The impact and effect of intersetting knowledge can appear overwhelming to a vulnerable family such as Billy's. Relocation, and the benefit of experience:

'I know what's good and what's bad and what works and what doesn't work, because I've been round the houses so many times' now offers the best opportunity for a fresh start: 'the slate will be wiped completely clean.'[...] What I'm hoping is that when we do relocate and settle down I'll then be able to find something (counselling) for him there, that nobody will know about other than me and him. And he can at last...get rid of his scary monsters. Because that's what has happened; the kids and I have all had these, sort of, big scary monsters that we're different and we don't fit in'. (P).

Bronfenbrenner's approach, suggesting as it does that human experience is multilayered, offers additional clarity to Wenger's less well developed work on 'multi-membership', although the two are not incompatible. Both reflect the way that individuals exist within layers of relationships and influences. Individuals may be involved in more than one community or microsystem at the same time, for example, at work and at home, and thus be subjected to the influence of different ecosystems. Bronfenbrenner calls the 'microsystem' those relationships, activities, roles, and influences which are closest to the individual, in the immediate environment, for example, relationships within the family. Each family may contain more than one microsystem of relationships, and the subsequent interactions will change the individuals directly involved. The second layer, the 'mesosystem' comprises microsystems which interact, for example, home and school. Mismatches in the linkages across multiple contexts may create difficulties or advantages for individuals. The third layer is the 'exosystem' which comprises environments or networks of external relationships and roles which may be indirectly influential, for example, the extended family, a significant other or the workplace. The whole is contained within the 'macrosystem', comprising shared beliefs, rules, values and practices, in other words, the cultural and social structures of groups of people. A fifth layer, the 'chronosystem', which was included at a later date, relates to patternings of environmental events and transitions throughout life.

Billy

Billy's teacher describes him:

'At the start of Year four he was a very mixed up little boy, very angry, took it out on everyone. Into Year six, he's hardened and become very spiteful, and nasty'.

Both his mother and teacher agree that Billy, at times, can be 'difficult':

You can either communicate with Billy, or you can't communicate with Billy and if it's a day or if it's an hour, or if it's a few moments when he's in his non-communicating mode, you haven't got a hope in Hell of getting anywhere.
(P)

He wants to learn sometimes, but if he doesn't there's nothing you're gonna do to convince him, that he needs to know this. (T)

Billy is making progress within the National Curriculum yet his teacher remains ambivalent about him:

'At the end of his SATs he got two fours and a five...which would assume he wasn't special needs, but he was. He managed to get there, but his English mark was just a four, so in real sort of terms he's only a level three still at the end of Year six' (T). Billy's teacher struggles to convey his difficulties: *'He's never had any...any sort of lead towards a statement, because he's never been...that poor academically or that awful in class. It's outside the classroom really, and his language and his attitude towards other people'.* (T)

The school trip in Year 6 is almost a non-starter for Billy due to his teachers' low expectations of him *'we were worried about taking him in case he did one of his famous running off tricks and we said we just wouldn't...'*. In the event, the trip was unproblematic and again, his teacher demonstrates her ambivalence about him, saying firstly *'He found it difficult'* and then *'He was all right actually, he was fine, he didn't shout at anyone, he was quite calm. So...he was okay'.*

Billy's mother believes her son has educational difficulties that are being overlooked or subsumed by assumptions:

'It was put at various parents evenings that, perhaps he's not getting enough sleep and...he doesn't know where he stands with you and his father and it was more than that. But she (the class teacher) couldn't ever look beyond that. We're boxed, divorced, broken family, Billy's seen as somebody out of that box. Dysfunctional family. Broken family. Broken home'. (P)

Billy's mother wants Billy to be viewed by his teachers as an individual with the potential to overcome and succeed:

'He is different from other children. My child is not normal. It's that I've come to terms with and I don't want him to have a label, he's intelligent and he's got the capabilities that far outweigh what he demonstrates now'. (P)

Billy's teacher confirms that the aims of a Year 6 teacher *'are towards the end of the year and their SATs and their academic work'* (T). This preoccupation with SATs appears

somewhat at variance with Billy's mother's aspirations of what an appropriate curriculum and education for Billy might encompass and offer:

'I think the teachers viewed his difficulties as he was just...a naughty, undisciplined child. I viewed his difficulties as yes, he was occasionally naughty and undisciplined, but...eighty per-cent of the time it was not his fault. It was the dysfunction that he has. [...] My children don't go to school to learn anymore, they've gone to school to become a statistic that makes the school look good in league tables. (P)

And:

I've asked him to be tested I was told he wasn't bad enough. You have to be really bad to get help. Everything has to be rated on how bad they are, and if they don't measure to a certain bad scenario then they're not bad enough. What happens to these children that are...in the middle? (P)

And:

They don't go to school to learn anymore, they go to school to be ...a number. I want my children to learn about things. But it seems these days that, 'well if that's not in the National Curriculum, we really can't talk about that, because we have to talk about water three times in a year'. I think the whole thing has let children down...they're like sausage meat, they're just forced through the system and hopefully they'll come out...jumbo sized chippolatta or party size. I don't want my children to be part of that. They just become... part of the system and I think they just feel sometimes overawed with the system. It's sort of...the lunatics have taken over the asylum, really. (P)²

Billy's mother has always recognised that her son's behaviour was 'extreme at time'. She sought help consistently from many sources beginning with the nursery school:

'I started with the teachers and the deputy head teachers,...my GP who's sort of a family friend as well as our GP, and anybody that would really listen, health visitors...anybody like that'. (P)

Teachers tended to respond with the familiar response 'don't worry, he'll grow out of it'. From when Billy is five, his mother had 'one-to-ones' with the deputy head on a regular basis:

² These thoughts are echoed by many. Philip Pullman, for example, recently wrote 'Education is suffused with the *wrong emotion*'. He develops this with an eloquent reference to 'the glowing, radioactive core at the heart of the engine that drives the whole thing: the National Curriculum and the SATs. [...] But they have to do it – day in, day out, hour after hour, this wretched system nags and pesters and buzzes at them, like a great bluebottle laden with pestilence. And then all the children have to do a test; and that's when things get worse [...] The danger of tests and league tables and so on is that they demand clear, unequivocal, one-dimensional results. [...] There is no human purpose in this incessant, frenzied testing at all. The children who are supposed to be at the heart of the educational process are turned into little twitching cells of response, like the nerve in the leg of Galvani's famous frog. That's all they have to do: to twitch or kick appropriately. Nothing else matters. [...] All we want is the little kicking twitching frog's legs. If enough of them kick *this* box, then the school will go up in the league tables, to universal applause – what a good school! [...] If too many little twitching frogs' legs kick *that* box, then the school will go down, to universal condemnation: useless teachers, feeble leadership; name them and shame them. Testing and league tables are a coarse way of dealing with learning, but they're not only coarse; they're a stupid way of assessing human achievement, but they're not only stupid; they're a cruel way of dealing with children...' (Pullman, 2003).

'I had been saying all along 'there's something not...quite right, there's something amiss', '...he needs additional help, I need additional help'. Whilst the deputy head 'was genuinely concerned and always showed a great amount of support and understanding'. (P)

Relationships with individual teachers varied over the years. The support that was sought for Billy was finally offered, but only, apparently, as part of a package:

'The bargain was that Billy would have that care and assistance.....if myself and my ex-husband would then have complementary counselling, which we did, until my ex-husband walked out, "he wasn't gonna listen to any more f-ing rubbish" and that was it'.

Marrying two theories

The accounts of Billy's teacher and mother usefully provide a space for teasing out the sometimes unpredictable interconnections which run between accounts and which I link to the theories of Wenger and Bronfenbrenner. Bronfenbrenner's principle of interconnectedness, 'the capacity of a setting, home, school or work to work effectively as a context for development depends on the existence and nature of social interconnections between settings' is, I believe, well supported above with evidence of environmental events and conditions outside the immediate setting, which influence behaviour within that setting.

Equally well illustrated are what Bronfenbrenner calls 'ecological transitions', those events which occur throughout the life span, resulting in (or from) changes in role or setting, or both. In Billy's case, changes within the structure of the family resulting from divorce, produce second order effects as his mother becomes the head of the family, with a reduced financial situation, and needing to find a more remunerative job. In the following extract the articulation between Bronfenbrenner's ecological transitions and Wenger's 'community of practice' come together:

I believe the attitude towards me and the children changed..., when I was fortunate enough to be home, even when I was working shifts, I would still commit to doing things at school to go and help with cookery [...] I was one of the nice mums then, that went along and helped. And then when I couldn't do that because I had financial ...things to meet, we then became categorised. We weren't seen as so important and integral. I was very committed and would help at all the jumbles and do the PTA stuff, and do everything I could and then I couldn't because of financial constraints on me. (P)

Here Billy's mother is describing how her participation in school events was forced to change as a result of altered circumstances, or Bronfenbrenner's 'ecological transitions'. Wenger uses the term 'participation' to refer to both the process of taking part, and to the relations with others that reflect this process. Participation in this sense suggests both action and connection, encompassing membership in social communities and active involvement in social enterprises (p 55). Billy's mother description of how, for her, an experience of participation became an experience of non-participation and/or marginalisation, reflects how boundaries of communities can be delineated, not simply as demarcations of 'in' or 'out' but as part of a complex social landscape. Her previous engagement in shared, mutual activities with the school fail to generate any sense of joint commitment, resulting in a disjointed perception of membership which affects her sense of identity. Relationships to community of practices involve both participation and non-participation, and it is the combination of the two which shapes identities. According to Wenger, modes of belonging are constitutive of identity:

We not only produce our identities through the practices we engage in, but we also define ourselves through practices we do not engage in. Our identities are constituted not only by what we are but also by what we are not. (p 164)

Thus, identification is both participative (being 'seen as important and integral' is part of a process of 'identifying with' something or someone), and reificative (the description 'one of the nice mums' is a reificative characterisation).

In drawing this section of my analysis to a close, I refer again to the 'community of practice' theory. Wenger speaks of 'the process of colonizing learning, of claiming a territory, of deciding what matters, and of defining success and failure' as contested terrains which can differentially privilege the various perspectives of specific communities (p 269). As sometimes happens in research, an act of serendipity can provide an unexpected opportunity to gain further understanding and insight. For her degree dissertation eight years ago, Billy's teacher had undertaken research relating to parental involvement in the classroom. This provided us both with common ground for discussion, and an opportunity for me to explore how the contested terrains that Wenger refers to may become incorporated into, or influence, this teacher's practice. The research was carried out across two schools. In the first school parents '*thought they ran the school*', in the second school:

'the parents thought they had no influence and yet really their involvement was very similar. (In this school there are) parents who think they run the school, but I think it's probably the same again. Really they don't, they're given more responsibilities but they're not important responsibilities. I don't think anyone ever sits down and thinks about it, it's just certain things you don't mention to the parents were exactly the same in both places, the things that they don't get involved in are exactly the same in both places. I don't know if I agreed with it, but it was what I found, that it was almost the same'. (T)

Billy's teacher describes a model of partnership that she came across as a student teacher and considers its application in respect of her current relationship to Billy and his parents:

I like...I can't remember what it's called...I studied, I did all this. I like the idea of the school being the middle, but the parents coming in and out all the way round So you've got the school as the core for their educational needs first of all, and then the parents coming in and out, but the school being the core of it. So...you can try to work away from that in a situation; so home is out here somewhere and this is school and this is where they're secure hopefully and I think it's to some extent that's what Billy's been like. School has been quite secure and it has been quite stable, and it's everything else that he can't cope with all the way round. [...] There have been occasions where I felt I've been marriage guidance counsellor and nothing to do with educational support or anything like that, but I'd rather it had been 'school is school' and try to separate the outside, what's actually going on, but have lots of contact with parents. With most children that works, because really what's going on outside isn't that different, but in this case it's so different and so difficult from outside school.

It is difficult for the teacher to put this model into practice in Billy's case when she allows her reading and interpretation of the situation to influence her practice to such a degree:

'I put a much stronger weighting on the way that his parents treated him than they did [...] Although both say they're supportive, they're not at all supportive of one another which makes it pointless to say something'. (T)

Who decides what matters?

Billy's teacher is, whether consciously or unconsciously, involved in defining 'what matters and what doesn't matter':

'The things that parents worry about are completely different to the things I worry about, and all the personal friendships and all those sorts of things seem secondary; unless they're a real problem they're secondary to me'. (T)

The Year 6 holiday, which for many families will be the first occasion that they have been separated for any length of time, provides a multitude of learning opportunities for all involved. Preparations for the week proffer an opportunity for schools, parents and children to work together as a community. The project provides a space for learning to be mutual and collective, a process of social participation where boundaries can be crossed through joint engagement in practice. The teacher refers to the instructional structure and pedagogical structure of the school trip as she views it whilst making assumptions about the viewpoints of parents whose natural concerns will extend beyond the mechanics of information transmission:

With the school trip, parents were worried about what they'd eat and where they'd sleep and all the homely things, and I'm worried about what they'd learn. And I was trying to say 'well, this is our aims for what they're gonna learn in this week' and the parents don't give a stuff what we're gonna do when we get there as long as they're gonna eat properly and go to bed and have a nice warm bed to go to. They're not worried about what work they do. Could of said 'well, we're gonna do nothing all week and they're just gonna play on the beach' and they would have been quite happy with that. (T)

Wenger refers to the two-way interaction of experience and competence as crucial to the evolution of practice, and crucial therefore for the enhancement of individual and collective learning. The school trip project has the potential for the crossing of boundaries, the experiencing of different forms of engagement, different enterprises with different definitions of what matters, and different repertoires (p 140). Engaging with parents in a shared practice can involve the constant fine tuning of the experience and competence jointly available, however the potential reward lies in the transformation of new insights into 'knowledge', the creation of a learning community.

Schools, as institutions, incorporate two sources of structure, the designed structure of the institution and the emergent structure of practice. When the two meet, tensions can occur. Thus:

Institutions define roles, qualifications and the distribution of authority – but unless institutional roles can find realisation as identities in practice, they are unlikely to connect with the conduct of everyday affairs. (p 244)

And:

Institutions provide a repertoire of procedures, contracts, rules, processes and policies – but communities must incorporate these institutional artefacts into their practice in order to decide in specific situations what they mean in practice, when to comply with them and when to ignore them (*ibid*, p 245).

Where Wenger does address education and the classroom directly, he does so with a focus upon teaching and learning between teacher and student. Thus, for example, he addresses the codification, reification, proceduralisation and decontextualisation of knowledge.

Reifications, in the form of a curriculum or a textbook, represent what is referred to as 'an intermediary stage between practices and learners' (p 264). If the delivery of knowledge ignores actual practice, it can discourage negotiation in the sense of ownership of meaning. At the same time it can serve to accentuate instructional structures and pedagogical authority as sites which actively discourage negotiation. Thus Wenger highlights the danger that school practices can become self-contained, ceasing 'to point anywhere beyond themselves. School learning is just learning school' (p 267).

Practice, according to Wenger, 'is about meaning as an experience of everyday life' (p 52). Everyday life for Billy and his family has been fraught with difficulties which they seek to overcome. The final word on the parent-teacher relationship falls to Billy's mother:

'In the end I've got too many battles to fight. I never had any real cause for complain, ...but there were points when I felt I should have stood my ground but I just have too many fights on hand'. (P)

Billy and his family relocated within a few months of these interviews and have now started a new life elsewhere.

Conclusion

I have used the analysis of dyadic interviews to demonstrate that both context and setting can be instrumental in explicating parent-teacher relationships. Learning understood as a process of social participation requires that a space needs to be made available for negotiation of meaning. In this paper, for example, the definition of 'what matters and what doesn't matter' cannot be presumed to be shared by both mother and teacher. Negotiation of meaning is an integral part of the informal 'communities of practice' formed when people pursue a shared enterprise over time. 'Communities of practice', in Wenger's terms, or 'joint activity dyads', in Bronfenbrenner's terms, are emergent structures resulting from collective learning with both developmental and transformative potential for all involved in education and learning.

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