

The definitive version of this article is published and available online as:
Todd ES, Higgins S, Powerlessness in professional and parent relationships 1998,
British Journal of Sociology of Education, 19(2) 227-236
<http://www.informaworld.com/openurl?genre=article&issn=0142-5692&volume=19&issue=2&spage=227>

Powerlessness: Professionals and Parents in Partnership

OR

Powerlessness in Professional and Parent Partnerships

ELIZABETH S TODD AND STEVE HIGGINS

Department of Education, Newcastle University

ABSTRACT

Power is both implicit and explicit in relationships between parents and professional teachers or other educators even in situations where both parties have a common goal in supporting the education of a child or children. We feel that in much previous work the notion of power has either been absent or undertheorised. In this paper we discuss some of the ways in which the structuring of home-school relations around power leads to the difficulties and complexities in such relations. In addition we suggest some implications (and limitations) for the notion of partnership itself. We have written elsewhere (Todd et al. 1998 forthcoming) about the complexity of the ideas contained in partnership as a means to school improvement. In this article we look in particular at the notion of powerlessness as a way of understanding much of what happens between school and parents. In particular we challenge the dominant dichotomy of parents as powerless and professionals as powerful. We suggest that understanding both the prominence of the dichotomy and the effects on home-school

relations can help to explain the failure of many attempts to improve parental involvement in schools. We discuss the implications of this as a way forward to developing more successful home-school relations.

Introduction

This paper draws upon evidence from two different research projects. One was an evaluation of the Educational Achievement Strategy (EAS), the other a case study of a child whose special educational needs were being assessed.

- The Educational Achievement Strategy (EAS) was designed to be "an exciting and innovative project of strategic importance to the economic recovery" of an area in the North East of England (Easen et. al 1996). The specific inner city area suffers from a variety of social and economic difficulties which are seen as contributing to and reinforcing educational underachievement. The EAS involved 21 primary and nursery schools and one secondary school. It was launched in October 1994 to run for three years. One of the main themes of the project was to develop parental involvement as a means to improving pupil attainment. Teachers and parents were interviewed for their perceptions about parent partnership.
- The case study involved interviews of all those involved in the formal assessment, leading to a statement, of one child's special educational needs. David is a seven year old boy attending a local primary school. The interviews tried to find out how each participant had experienced the assessment process, and in particular, how they had experienced partnership and where in the assessment they had seen power to be located. Participants disagree widely about how to define David's difficulties. His head teacher and class teacher see him as a behaviour problem, probably with emotional difficulties, but his mother, Mrs. Green, se his problems primarily as a

learning difficulty, in particular problems with writing, and frustration due to being a particularly able child.

Evidence from parental involvement in such diverse educational contexts has enabled us to explore power issues in greater complexity than has been possible before. Evidence from the EAS has allowed explorations of a wide range of ways parents and schools interact. The case study is of a different nature since the context for parent-school communication now come under statutory guise, and the focus is on a particular child, and is within a 'problem' discourse. Until there is a 'problem', many parents have little direct contact with teachers. Examining how everyone perceives contact during such situations can be a barometer of the attitudes of parents and teachers to each other. Special needs assessments can therefore provide a lens through which to examine parent-school relations.

Equality?

Much current discussion of partnership has assumed that some degree of equality should be involved in partnership. Roles of each in parent partnership are often referred using a 'different but equal' discourse. This has the effect of obscuring other notions, firstly that partnership, in its other uses outside education, does not imply equality, merely joint endeavour. It is meaningful to talk about the senior partner in a firm of solicitors or of a doctor in a general practice. It is also possible to talk about a more experienced partner in sport, at tennis or golf, for instance. The notion of equality might be a connotation or implication of the term 'partnership' but it is clearly not a requirement.

We suggest that the partnership between parents and professionals involved in the education of the parents' child or children can never be an equal one. Teachers take steps to maintain their sense of their own professionalism and resist challenges to their authority (Armstrong, Galloway and Tomlinson, 19???) A discourse of equality in partnership obscures such power relations by talking as if they do not exist.

Parent versus Professional

Parents and professionals occupy different positions in relation to children. The parent has a much greater stake in the partnership than the professional. They have a longer term commitment to the child than the professional, who in the case of a class teacher, is in *loco parentis* for less than a third of the child's waking life over the course of just one year. Parents have a much greater affective involvement in their love and aspirations for their children. The professional has a 'professional' role to play. It is claimed that they will usually have a greater volume of knowledge about children in similar (professional) contexts, or a knowledge that is different in kind (Mittler 1979, Hornby 1989), but if you try to define the knowledge of parents and that of professionals, the list will contain very similar items, making problematic statements about knowledge difference. Claims can perhaps more reliably be made about differences in the number of children parents and professionals have responsibility for rather than the nature of knowledge or skills.

However, it is the positioning of parents and professional in the systems children are involved in that renders their perspectives very different, and the perspectives of professionals very different from each other. The difference in this respect between parents and professionals is encapsulated by the following quote from the parent in our special needs case study:

“they say we're all on the same side and it's only Danny's interests that we're thinking of, but the way I think of Danny's interests and the way school think of him, there's like, an ocean apart, isn't there?..... I want what's right for him exclusively. They want what's right for him in a context”

Furthermore, despite greater commitment claimed for parents, the social construction of parents' role renders them with less power in their dealings with teachers (David et al. 1993, Vincent 1996):

“It is partly because caregiving activities themselves are boundless and because the work of caregiving is situated in these complex personal relationships, that the dimensions of the labour of caregiving can remain unseen’. (Rutman, p92, 1996)

Deficit and Powerlessness

The discourse underlying most constructions of parent-school relations in the current literature is one of powerlessness of parents (Macpherson 1993, Vincent 1996). There are two main ways in which this powerlessness is expressed. One is in seeing home-school relations primarily from the school perspective, a one-way view of parental involvement. The other goes a step further and imputes pathology, or, at the very least some kind of deficit, on the part of the parent.

In this section the ‘one way’ and ‘deficit’ perspectives are identified in both the EAS project and the case study, with unsatisfactory consequences for home-school relations. We do not attempt any comprehensive discussion of

the various conceptions of power. Our theorising focuses on developing the concept of partnership further by challenging the discourse of parent/powerless and professional/powerful. We consider, with reference to the case studies, implications of the finding that professionals and parents are, in different ways, both powerful and powerless.

Educational Achievement Strategy : A School-eyed View of Home School Relations

'Deficit' was explicit in the EAS project since an adult/ child cycle of educational deprivation encapsulates the model underlying the project.

Figure 1 The 'Cycle of Underachievement' Model from the EAS

It is perhaps not surprising, if parents are constructed with less power in home-school relations, that teachers are found to view such relationships almost entirely from the their own and the schools' point of view, with little understanding that this was the case, or that there was anything problematic in such a situation. Such one-sidedness is reflected in the literature on home-school relations (France, Topping and Revell, 1993, Sandow, 1994) with most devoted to looking at ways parents can assist teachers in teachers role as perceived by teachers themselves and noted by Border and Merttens (1995). Lareau (1989) draws attention to Bourdieu's concept of cutlural capital, the cultural resources of the home:

"This perspective emphasizes the importance of the structure of the school and of family life and the dispositions of individuals (what Bordieu calls 'habitus') in understanding the different levels of parent participation in schooling. The standards of the school are not neutral; their requests for parent involvement may be laden with the cultural experiences of intellectual and economic elites."

Lareau, 1989, p8

The EAS project took place in an area of economic deprivation where there were almost certainly many discontinuities in the cultural capital of teacher and parents.

There were many instances in which parental involvement was conceptualised form the point of view of the teacher. For example, parental

involvement was seen mostly in terms of parents helping with fund-raising, as extra helpers in Key Stage 1 classrooms, in supporting a home-reading programme and in helping to support the teacher when there were discipline problems. At the extreme teachers questioned the value of involving parents at all. For example, in one school a year 6 teacher held the following view:

"Parental involvement is impossible, children need to get on with it, children don't need parents there. Parents come up especially when there are questions about the next school."

Aspects of power are also implicit in statements from teachers about how they perceived the relationship. In particular that the relationship is one-way (teacher to parent) and teachers acknowledge what they wish to get from the partnership. This comment from a teacher was particularly pertinent:

"Most parents feel confident about fund-raising... less confident about giving to the curriculum, we need to find out what they want [in terms of courses].. .so they have an idea how we work. They can be so useful if trained, can allow teachers to give others quality learning."

Teachers, of course, have a complex job. The additional responsibility of developing partnership with parents with a class of over 30 children is unrealistic and leads to coping strategies which reinforce the divide. Even if there is some idea that parents might contribute their own ideas, teachers are not sure how to achieve this:

"My priorities are my class. The role is one of co-ordination, its not me. We want the fund-raising to come from them not me."

"We were told the ideas [for parent courses] must come from the parents themselves... You need to get the parents together who want to get together and then find out what they want to do. But its difficult to get them together for no reason in order to find out what courses they might want. They need to know there's a reason to come in."

"Its very difficult in this area, parents don't feel comfortable about school. Parents want to meet during school time, but the three of us all have classes."

Interesting insights into positioning of parents by EAS schools were found in the use of space within schools by parents. There have always been anecdotal tales about teachers' views on parents using the staff room. In this project there were considerable differences of opinion about effective ways to use the parents' room. It was either not used at all or was used considerably but in ways that had, at best, only a tenuous relationship to the issue of parental support for children's learning - for example, as a TV room or by an old people's group. In one school a teacher commented that they used to have a parents' room but it was "used wrongly" (the parents smoked in it), and no one wanted to go in it. This respondent went on to comment:

"We don't want to get back to that. What we want is a happy medium so that its not just a room that they go in, its got to have a purpose, it must be structured."

A common theme amongst both parents and teachers was the difficulty of crossing the threshold. Teachers obviously find it difficult to initiate contact with parents. As one parent said:

"It's always the same faces on the trips, they know you so they ask you."

One head teacher commented

"It's alright once you can get them [parents] coming in. Once you get them through the door."

This was in contrast to a discussion which was almost incidental to one of the interviews in which three of the parents had been involved in working with a number of agencies to plan and raise funds for the redevelopment of the school grounds. In this project many of the ideas and much of the initiative had seemed to come from the parents themselves working directly with the children and liaising with staff. They had been involved in making presentations to businesses, radio and TV interviews and writing a final report. This project seemed to have involved them in a genuine partnership with pupils, teachers, local businesses and voluntary organisations. The enthusiasm with which the parents related their experience was in contrast with the positive but tentative experiences of supporting children's learning. Indeed it could be argued that their tentativeness in this area supported the teacher's hegemony and that their behaviour was implicit collusion with the teacher's use of power. For the teachers, it was 'safe' to allow parents control of an area outside school, but not to influence any of the main concerns of teaching.

As the project progressed some EAS personnel expressed frustration, and the parent project worker left the project, due to schools' lack of understanding of the problems caused by seeing parental support for children's learning solely from their own perspective. Indeed, research had earlier been commissioned into community views on barriers to educational attainment for children living in the local area. There was little evidence that this report, based on the views of 160 parents, had informed EAS practice in schools. Such a one-sided view was seen to prevent any effective parental support for children's learning. Teachers need to make meaningful links with children's experiences at home so this experience can be used in developing pupils' knowledge and understanding in the context of school learning.

“The issue for achievement is that there may be no real continuity between children's familiarity with reading, writing or number in these everyday, functional contexts and the way in which they are introduced to these learning as an 'educational task'. The challenge is to develop ways in which both teachers and parents can see that they have complimentary but contributive roles in the process of building this 'learning community' ”

(Easen et al. (1996) page 10)

It would not be true to say that EAS parents were void of power in their school involvement, but that their power received no recognition. Parents were interested in education, views had been expressed to researchers about their aspirations, they had even said something about the kind of involvement wanted (for some, a room to meet and smoke), but this was rendered invisible and unacceptable since it was culturally inconsistent with

teacher's understanding of parent involvement and constructions of the parents as powerless.

A Case Study in Special Needs: A Multiplicity of Power Relations

In the special needs case study, roles, aims and power vary to such an extent as to render facile any easy mutuality in relationships between participants in the assessment process, particularly those of the parent and the educational professionals. Analysis of interviews in this research for participants' perceptions of influence and responsibility show that power is not unitary: it is not the case that parents, or even David, are in any simple way 'the powerless'. All participants experienced power and powerlessness in different ways.

Mrs. Green perceived her role primarily as advocate for David, and relatively powerless. She sought, if there was a label for David, for it to be the 'right one' and for him not to be seen as a behaviour problem. For Mrs. Green the school held the most power since they were the one's who set the assessment process in motion. They held the ultimate veto, the power to exclude David from school. David had already been excluded once and had been told that the next incident would mean permanent exclusion. She felt a lack of status in meetings and relied heavily on her friend and named person, Diane, to increase her power. However, Mrs. Green's situation was not in a simple way one of powerlessness:

“I don't think I was powerlessness in the situation, and I mean, I think, but there were times when I felt totally powerlessness, and there was, I think, I had to put an awful lot of effort in not to become powerless. “

One of the activities that gave her more power was in gathering information outside the school, initially from the clinical psychologist and then from the educational psychologist. The major aspect of their involvement which empowered her was not, as might be assumed in the objective discourse of the assessment, test results demonstrating high ability, but in the fact that they like David:

“for a start she liked him, that was the first thing...”

Mrs. Green went to great lengths to maintain a relationship with the school, to be even handed, and to negotiate the label she insisted upon.

The statementing panel was seen by the head teacher as holding the most power since ‘they’ decide whether or not to award the statement. In her power, of exclusion, was also her powerlessness, since she felt driven to consider the only options open to her. Giving reason why the LEA could not provide extra resources in school prior to a formal assessment on David:

“Because basically the case didn't either seem serious enough, or there wasn't enough money. At one stage I was on the point of considering exclusion, to actually make them act, but fortunately it didn't come to that”

The class teacher felt very remote from the statementing process, powerless within it, and feels the awarding of resources is hit and miss, depending on available provision when the case is considered. The LEA was seen as having most power, again due to their ability to decide whether or not to give any help. Like the head teacher, he too felt frustrated, powerless, due to the time it had taken to secure any help for David.

The special needs teacher felt she has a pivotal role in the assessment process, due to her long experience as a teacher and due to the high regard with which she knew her advice was held by the statementing panel. She also felt in a relatively powerful position due to her location outside the classroom:

“everyone has their own perspective, don't they, on a child with a difficulty, and if you're the class teacher and you've got this all day, every day, and, you know, it just becomes a huge obstacle in the way, and if you're coming at it, sort of, sideways.....You have a better chance, maybe to see what's behind it, and maybe to have some ideas, you know of how to help.”

The LEA's psychology service was seen by the special needs teacher as having most power, to decide whether a statutory assessment went ahead and through the use of their non-subjective assessment.

The educational psychologist sees her role in terms of facilitating intervention which will work positively for the child, as 'clearing up contaminating things', set views, defensiveness and blame, in order to make a 'fertile ground for change'. She felt power resided with whoever had pushed hardest for an assessment to go ahead, in this case the school. She could see that people might think the EP had the most power, since they were often seen as the gatekeeper of resources, but new procedures following the 1993 Education act meant educational psychologist no longer decided even whether to start an assessment. However, the fact that no decision to assess could be made without an educational psychologist's report meant, she reflected, that educational psychologist's must have some power.

The acting-principal EP did not feel she had power. She thought the regulations and the assessment itself had power. All she did was apply the regulations to consider, with her panel (which included head teachers and a medical officer) whether there was a case for resource provision.

“I just don't see the whole thing as a system of power. You know, it, all right, the statement panel makes the decision, but I actually think the statement power has very little power.

.....Because although we make the decisions, there are a limited range of options anyway that you can offer. If a case has been made, we haven't got the power just to say, well, we don't feel like allocating any more money this month because the budget's gone through the roof, because the regulations say that, if these needs are identified, then something's got to be done about them. “

An analysis of perceptions of power of participants in David's special needs statementing process challenges any easy dichotomy of parents as powerless and professionals as powerful. The head teacher feels forced to threaten exclusion due to the lack of support she feels from the local education authority. She feels powerless and alone. However, Mrs Green perceives the head's actions as denoting the most power in the system, since she can reject her child. The Head's and the class teacher's insistence on a behavioural label and refusal to accept a learning difficulty or to relate his difficulties to his 'ability', can be seen as an attempt to maintain their professional identity (Armstrong, Galloway and Tomlinson, 1993, p400). Teachers can maintain their sense of themselves as skilled professionals if they are able to have challenging pupils legitimately identified as the responsibility of others and if they can 'redefine their role in terms of the skills associated with teaching "normal" children' (Armstrong, Galloway and Tomlinson 1993, p400).

Legitimate rejection of the child can happen if David 'has behavioural difficulties', but is far harder to sustain if he 'is a bright child with learning difficulties'. Similarly, there was talk by interviewees of the blame Mrs. Green must feel if her son is classed as emotionally disturbed. However, a gifted child with writing difficulties is quite clearly the school's responsibility. Concern to maintain one's own personal or professional sense of oneself, self esteem, and to avoid blame can account for many of one's 'powerful' actions. Essentially, to avoid feeling powerless.

Power, Powerlessness and Blame

Defensive power seeking, to reduce blame, reduce powerlessness, and maintain one's sense of self, can account for both the dominance of the deficit view of home-school relations, and the failure of parental involvement to have a major impact on schools.

Research by Woodhead (1976), Topping and Wolfendale (1985) and Pugh (1994) has suggested that unilateral attempts at parent training can either alienate parents who feel patronised or permanently damage their confidence. David et al. (1993) warn specifically of

“direct links with nineteenth century philanthropy, when middle class women went in to working class homes to show the right way of being and doing” (p150).

Schools can be seen as “arenas in which the tension and conflicts of social division are of central importance” (Wilson and Wyn 1993 p. 6) where embattled teachers must defend their professionalism and sometimes do so

by erecting barriers between themselves and parents (Hannon 1995). Others have reviewed the changing nature of home-school relations (e.g. Bastiani 1987; MacPherson 1993), the mismatch of rhetoric, ideology and practice (e.g. Vincent and Tomlinson 1997) and put forward arguments that partnership is a tool to maintain professional control (Cowburn 1986; Vincent and Tomlinson 1997) in the face of powerlessness and frustration. A long overdue shift in the culture of blame, either of teachers or of parents, in recognition of the complexities in any human situation, could go a long way to make home-school relations less defensive and more effective. Professionals also need less stake in a fixed view of themselves and their role to allow a shifting mutuality between parents and teachers.

References

ARMSTRONG, D., GALLOWAY, . and TOMLINSON, S. The Assessment of Special Educational Needs and the Proletarianisation of Professionals. *British Journal of Sociology*, 14, 4, 399-408.

BASTIANI, J. (Ed) (1987) *Parents and teachers 1 Perspectives on Home School Relations* (Windsor, NFER-Nelson)

BORDER, R. AND MERTTENS, R. (1993) "Parental Partnership: Comfort or Conflict?" in Merttens, R. and Vass, J. (eds.) (1993) *Partnerships in Maths : Parents and Schools* (London, Falmer Press)

COWBURN, W. (1986) *Class Ideology and Community Education* London: Crook Helm

DAVID, M., EDWARDS, R., HUGHES, M. AND RIBBENS, J. (1993) *Mothers and Education: Inside Out* (London, Macmillan)

EASEN, P., FORD, K., HIGGINS, S., TODD, L. AND WOOTTEN, M. (1996) *The Educational Achievement Strategy: An Evaluation Of The First Eighteen Months Of Operation Of The Project In The West End Of Newcastle Upon Tyne* (Department of Education, Newcastle University, July 1996)

FRANCE, L., TOPPING, K. AND REVELL, F. (1993) Parent-tutored Cued Spelling. *Support for Learning*, 8, 1, 11-15.

GALLOWAY, D., ARMSTRONG, D. AND TOMLINSON, S (1994) *the assessment of special educational needs. Whose problem?* (London, Longman)

HANNON, P. (1995) *Literacy, Home and School* (London, Falmer)

HEATH, S. Differences in Home and School Questions in Schindler ,G. (1982) *Doing the Ethnography of Schooling*

HORNBY, G. (1989) A Model for Parent Participation. *British Journal of Special Education*, 16, 161-162.

LAREAU, A. (1989) HOME ADVANTAGE. Social class and parental intervention in elementary education. London, Falmer press.

MACPHERSON, A. (1993) Parent-Professional partnership: A review and discussion of issues. *Early Childhood Development and Care* , 86 pp 61-67

MITTLER, P. (1979) Patterns Of Partnership Between Parents And Professionals. *Teacher Training*, 17, 4, 111-116.

PUGH, G. (1994) *Confident Parents, Confident Children*. (MacMillan)

RUTMAN, D. (1996) Caregiving as woman's work: Woman's Experiences of Powerfulness and Powerlessness as Caregivers. *Qualitative Health Research*, 6, 1, 90-111

SANDOW, S. (Ed) (1994) *Whose Special Need? Some Perceptions of Special Educational Needs*. (London, Paul Chapman)

TODD, L., HIGGINS, S., EASEN, P., FORD, K. AND WOOTTEN, M. (1998) (forthcoming) The Role of Partnership with Parents in Improving Education for Pupils. *School Improvement and School Effectiveness*

TOPPING, K. AND WOLFENDALE, S. (1985) *Parental Involvement in Children's Reading*. (Crook Helm)

VINCENT, C. (1996) *Parents and Teachers. Power and Participation*. (London, Falmer Press)

VINCENT, C AND TOMLINSON, S. (1997) Home-School Relationships: 'the swarming of disciplinary mechanisms'? *British Educational Research Journal* 23, 3.

WILSON, B .AND WYN, J. Educational Inequality and Cultural Conflict in Angus L (Ed) (1993) *Education, Inequality and Social Identity* (London, Falmer)

WOODHEAD, M. (1976) *Intervening in Disadvantage* (London, Macmillan)