

Mothers, gender and inclusion in the context of home-school relations

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The last twenty years have seen the proliferation of policies calling for the development of home-school relations and home-school partnerships, for it is argued that it is important for the educational success of all children that parents and professionals share aims, values and responsibilities. The dominant discourse around home-school relations refers to 'parents' as partners, maintaining that their voices are important and should be heard along with those of professionals. This is also held to be the case where children are categorized as 'having special educational needs' and a number of policies require that 'parents' are consulted wherever possible. However, this paper maintains that, despite this rhetoric, there is a boundary between home and school; between the professional, public space of school and the private, personal space of home, which reflects the power relations between public professionals and private parents. It maintains that the use of the gender neutral term 'parent' masks the gendered reality of 'parenting', making it easier for professionals to marginalize the individual voices of personal experience. The paper draws on research that suggests that the term 'parent' hides the fact that mothers are the ones generally perceived as having responsibility for their children and their relationship with school. It contends that the use of the term 'parent', in de-gendering the contribution of the mother, negates the voice of personal experience and prioritizes the professional and expert voice. The lack of experiential knowledge is seen as especially important when children and their families are perceived as 'different'; for example, disabled children and children labelled as having special educational needs (SEN).

The corollary to this argument is, of course, that while the term 'parent' negates the voices of mothers, it also

negates the voices of fathers, despite research that strongly suggests the importance of their different but significant contribution in the lives of their children.

Key words: mothers, home-school links, inclusion.

Introduction

This paper maintains that, within policy rhetoric, the term 'parent' masks the different gender experiences, knowledge and roles of mothers and fathers, drawing them under an umbrella term which may ultimately result in their exclusion from real partnership and involvement in their children's first and profound experiences of life beyond the private domain of home: the experience of school. It is argued that, although seemingly gender neutral, the use of the word 'parent' is implicitly understood to mean mother (David, 1993; Wilkinson, 2000). Retaining the neutrality of the term 'parent' makes it easier for professionals to not seek or listen to the individual, personal voices and experiences of mothers.

The paper then focuses on the mothers of children who are perceived as 'different', those children labelled as having special educational needs, and considers the importance of the mothers' experiential knowledge in relation to their children, and the need to include the mother's voice. The paper concludes by drawing attention to the need to also recognize fathers' perspectives and to acknowledge the importance of their contribution, a different one from the mothers' perhaps, but no less significant in the children's lives. Only by unpicking and gendering the term 'parent' can these two perspectives be fully recognized, understood and drawn upon to inform developments in both policy and practice.

The article is underpinned by a belief in social inclusion and the view that one way of moving towards a more equitable system is to 'maximise the participation of all young people in mainstream schools' (Allan, 2003, p. 1). There is certainly a growing acceptance that schools must change; that they

must 'attend to the exclusionary pressures within institutions' and 'must address the complexities of including all pupils and pathologise themselves as the source of exclusion and failure, rather than the young people within them' (ibid.). Allan argues (drawing on the work of Derrida and Biesta), that we need to challenge moves towards certainty and to understand the importance of the role of uncertainty and misunderstanding 'within educational processes and to allow much of what we think we know to be unravelled' (Allan, 2003, p. 1).

In this paper it is argued that there is a tension between the public and professional space of school and the private, personal space of home; a dichotomous boundary which is evident in the policy rhetoric around home-school relations and home-school partnerships. This tension reflects the differing ontological perspectives of parents and professionals in relation to what counts as knowledge and whose voice can be heard. Powerful discourses constructing professional, 'expert' knowledge remove difference within groups, homogenising and generalising lived experience and thereby excluding these voices of experience, in this instance, the mother's voice. Arguing from a perspective of 'the personal is political' (Morris, 1992b), the paper takes a feminist approach to the importance of experiential evidence in relation to disability and learning difficulty (see Morris, 1991, 1992a, 1993, 1995, 1996; Crow, 1996; Thomas, 1999), and draws on their argument that there are 'very sound reasons for taking the experiential seriously' (Thomas, 1999, pp. 3–4).

Discourse and the home-school boundary

Dorothy Smith (1987) has argued that capitalism changed the nature of social relations by prioritizing the public rather than the private domain; separating the worlds of work and home and placing men firmly in the former and women in the latter. Smith maintains that this resulted in a transference of 'knowledge, judgement and will' from:

individuals to the governing processes of capitalist enterprise. . . . Skills and knowledge embedded in relations among particular persons have been displaced by externalised forms of formal organisation or discourse mediated by texts.

(Smith, 1987, p. 5)

Smith argues that this separation of public and private life, of the personal from the professional, of experiential knowledge from the 'knowledge of experts', has resulted in the creation of discourses by professionals. It effectively silences the voices of women even in what were perceived to be traditional areas of concern for women, such as motherhood, child care, care of the sick and elderly and teaching, creating a boundary between professionals and mothers. Such powerful influences are not easy for 'silenced' voices to counter and it is argued that the transference of knowledge is one way only (Cole, 2004).

Discourses are developed from the assumptions of dominant groups using the definitions and language of the 'powerful'. They are 'about what can be said and thought' and 'about who can speak, when and where and with what authority' (Ball, 1994, p. 21). Authority in relation to dominant discourses emanates from 'elite groups' such as government circles, the media, and academia. Such discourses suggest a commonality of experience that may be very different from the lived experience. One such discourse emerging from recent government documents appears to present parents as a homogenous group with shared experiences of schools. It assumes that parenting is middle class, ungendered and shared (David, 1993). This article argues that it is important to challenge and 'gender' this discourse.

Home-school relations

The first experiences of school are the child's first real introduction to life outside the home and parents soon come to see school as the 'public setting' in their children's lives (Ribbens McCarthy, 2000). The terms 'home-school relations' and 'home-school partnerships' are both used in relation to crossing the 'boundary' between home and school but there are considerable differences in meaning between the terms 'relations' and 'partnerships', which reflect power issues, among other things. The definition of partnership offered by Pugh, Aplin, De'Ath and Moxon (1987, p. 5) would seem to be a useful way of conceptualizing both for the purposes of this article:

A working relationship that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate. This implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills and decision making and accountability.

Research, however, suggests that parents are not seen as partners or even as consumers but as supporters or, in worst case scenarios, as problems, and that despite the rhetoric of home-school relations the divide between home and school remains (Ouston and Hood, 2000). Ribbens McCarthy (2000, p. 7) maintains that such divides or boundaries usually belong to areas of 'ambiguity, tension and danger'. The social setting of school, representing as it does the division between public and private, professional and personal can be perceived as a 'contested domain', where parent and child meet teacher and expert (David, 1993).

Over the last two decades, relations between home and school have been brought into a more formal, public arena with the introduction of policies designed to improve home-school partnerships, but it appears that the division remains (Ribbens McCarthy, 2000). The complexity of the issues may be one reason for the continuing divide, for despite the home-school relations discourse of powerful professionals and powerless parents (Vincent, 1996), power relations are not so easily explained. There needs to be greater understanding of the issues relating to power/lessness if there are to be significant improvements in

home-school relations (Todd and Higgins, 1998). Power relations are clearly important (Hood, 2001), but despite the discourse constructing parents as a homogeneous group (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002) who support the school without question (Vincent, 1996), it is clear that the issues are more complex than this. Hanafin and Lynch suggest there are two strands of home-school relations: one which is 'explicitly classed', derived from a cultural deficit model aimed at working class parents who are perceived as 'on the periphery'; while the other strand sees parental involvement as an important influence on children's learning, emanating from a belief that 'positive home-school partnership' is related to school effectiveness (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002, pp. 34-35).

The complexity is increased by the apparent difference in aims between parents and professionals, and it seems that these sources of contention go deep whoever the parents are. Twenty years ago Swann (1987) was arguing that partnership between parents and professionals was only possible if they had shared aims instead of parents being seen as 'resources' in their children's education, who are expected to follow the goals of professionals. While there remains an assumption that parents and professionals have similar 'knowledge' and that they are 'on the same side', i.e., that of the child, their positioning in the system renders their perspectives and persona as very different. While parents want what is 'right for the child exclusively', professionals want 'what is right for him in a context' (Todd and Higgins, 1998, p. 229). Such a discrepancy may move into even greater focus when the child is perceived as 'being different', as having special educational needs (Cole, 2004; Wilkinson, 2000).

Home-school relations and 'special' educational needs

In 1978 The Warnock Report (DES, 1978) recognized the importance of parental experience and the co-operation between home and school:

Parents can be effective partners only if professionals take notice of what they say and of how they express their needs and treat their contribution as intrinsically important.

(DES, 1978, p. 151)

The importance of partnership is incorporated within the original Code of Practice:

Children's progress will be diminished if their parents are not seen as equal partners in the educational process with unique knowledge and information to impart.

Professional help can seldom be wholly effective unless it builds upon parent's capacity to be involved and unless professionals take account of what they say and treat their views and anxieties as intrinsically important.

(DfEE, 1994, pp. 2, 28)

The importance of relations between home and school is still recognized in many government policy documents; for example, the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice (2001: 12 section 2.2) states:

Parents hold key information and have a critical role to play in their children's education. They have unique strengths, knowledge and experience to contribute to the shared view of the child's needs and the best way of supporting them. It is therefore essential that all professionals (schools, LEAs, and other agencies) actively seek to work with parents and value the contribution they make. The work of professionals can be more effective when parents are involved and account is taken of their wishes, feelings and perspectives on their children's development. This is particularly so when a child has special educational needs. All parents of children with special educational needs should be treated as partners.

The Code continues (section 2.3):

These partnerships can be challenging, requiring positive attitudes by all, and in some circumstances additional support and encouragement for parents.

Government policy requires that the voices of parents and (now) children be heard within the processes of special educational needs, e.g., within professional reviews and assessment, choice of placement and, of course, Statementing (e.g., DfES, 2001). Yet, it is not easy for many parents to take on the 'experts' as 'equals', especially where there may be a fundamental difference in values and beliefs. Parents may feel they start from an unequal position, given the language and power of professional discourses. Even the term 'special educational needs', with its host of 'special' and quasi medical professionals, assessments and diagnoses is increasingly perceived as discriminatory and exclusionary, labelling some children and their families as 'different' (Corbett, 1996; Read, 2000; Cole, 2004). The whole notion of 'difference' is problematic because, as Peters states:

difference is always perceived in relation to some implicit norm. It perpetuates the illusion that individuals are measured from some universal standard of objective authority.

(Peters, 1996, p. 231)

The creation of 'norms' by experts inevitably raises the potential for existence of 'non-norms', 'abnormal'ities in society, difference constructed through oppositions or dichotomies. Dichotomous ontologies of inclusion and segregation, of 'normality' and 'difference', where difference is viewed as deviance, support the construction of disability and learning difficulties as personal tragedy, private grief, a negative experience rendering the individual as powerless and needy (Barton, 1996; Oliver, 1996). Where such divisions exist, as in the case of special educational needs, the knowledge of the professional is given more credence than the 'knowledge' of the individual, thus negating individual experience.

Categorization, as in the different labels of SEN, increases the potential for divisions between professionals and parents at a time when partnership and the sharing of 'knowledge' would appear to be so important. Professionals claim power through the possession of a 'specialised body of knowledge and skills' achieved after a period of prolonged training (Dale, 1996, p. 5). Dale notes:

Although frequent rhetoric has been made of the immense importance of parenting, minimum practical recognition has been given to the validity and usefulness of their expertise and experiences. The unpaid and unlimited hours of parenting contrast with the professional's role where there is remuneration for specific hours of employment.

(*ibid.*)

The titles given to professionals reflect this claim to 'special' knowledge (e.g., Special Educational Needs Coordinator, Educational Psychologist, etc.), making it even harder for parents to offer their own experiential knowledge as significant. So, despite the rhetoric of policy and legislation, it is the professionals as 'experts' who command influence and power through the recognition of this professional expertise (Wilkinson, 2000; Cole, 2004; Crace, 2005).

Partnership is clearly not easy to achieve and there is an 'inherent possibility' of such relationships 'becoming fractured and prone to conflict' (Dale, 1996, p. 305). It was suggested earlier that home-school relations are already complicated by a number of factors, including the different aims of parents and professionals. Within existing SEN policies, legislation and 'expectations' there is even greater potential for difference. Dale states that the reasons for this are complex and include: competition for resources; greater expectations of parents and a difference between these and professional achievements; increasing legal powers of parents; lack of empathy; and, perhaps most notably, poor communication skills and a 'refusal to share power' on the part of many professionals. SEN professional interests, values, ethics and pressures may differ from those of their clients and even those of other professionals. Armstrong (1995, p. 148) goes so far as to suggest that professionals may take decisions that 'sit uneasily with an ethic of professional service governed solely by the interests of the child'. Dale also recognizes the significance of the division and competition between professionals themselves. Recent legislation (e.g., DfES, 2003), seeks to promote interdisciplinary and inter-service provision for the benefit of the child, but the jury is still out as to how well this is working in practice. It would appear that foremost among the guidelines for effective team work with families should be the sharing of the same philosophy and aims, which includes 'valuing working with children, parents and families in partnership' (Dale, 1996, p. 302). However, many professionals claim the position of 'objective authority', placing themselves on the public, expert side of the home-school boundary. By referring to 'parents' as a single homogenous group, they negate the complexity within the term and consequently the diversity of lived experience, thus silencing individual voices.

Models of disability and SEN

The claim to 'objectivity' by professionals is supported by discourses that construct difference. Discourses in relation to SEN have emerged from models of disability and from outside education. It may seem hard to imagine now, but it is only since 1970 that children were not confined in long-stay hospitals, their lives controlled by the Department of Health and with no right to education. Such children were constructed and pathologized through the language of deviance, deficit and educational 'subnormality'. The Warnock Report (DES, 1978), although in some ways a change in direction, was still based on a discourse of individual needs rather than rights and entitlements, unlike the 1982 work of Tomlinson, in which she argued that SEN and disability were social constructions; the deficit lying with society rather than the individual. In so doing, Tomlinson offered the first real challenge to the medical model of disability and learning difficulty which was to be taken up by others such as Allan (1999, 2003), Armstrong, (1995, 2003), Tomlinson (2001), Armstrong and Barton (1999), and Oliver (1996). While there are now generally accepted to be three main theoretical approaches to SEN and disability, the medical model, the social construction model and the interactional model, offering a 'middle way' (Skidmore, 1996), it would appear that the medical model still dominates. The overall approach remains one of 'treatment' and 'persuasion' as to what 'is in the best interests of the patient' (Fulcher, 1999, p. 27). Medical and quasi medical professionals often play an important part in the education of children perceived as different, and in efforts to 'normalize' them. The whole Statementing process perpetuates the medical model, although School Action and School Action Plus (along with Early Years Action and Action Plus) (DfES, 2001) appear to support more school based interventions.

While, as discussed earlier, policy documentation supports the involvement of 'parents' in this process (DES, 1988; DfEE, 1997, 1998; DfES, 2001), for many 'parents' the reality is that they feel unable to challenge professional opinion (Bagley and Woods, 1998; Hanafin and Lynch, 2002), despite increased levels of support for them. According to some sources, the continuation of the medical model reinforces the notion that children categorized as having SEN are of less value than other, 'normal' children (Murray and Penman, 2000; Read, 2000). Mothers in my own research noted that the birth of a child with Down's Syndrome, or the labelling of a child as having learning difficulties, may be regarded by professionals as a personal tragedy, an occasion for sympathy (Cole, 2004). However, such research (e.g., Read, 2000; Roll-Peterson, 2001; Cole, 2004) suggests that while there may be differences in the upbringing of disabled children and non-disabled children, there are also many commonalities in both the patterns of mothering and the ways of seeing mothers.

Much of what has been written over the years since 1970 about children labelled as having special educational needs,

disability and/or learning difficulties has been from an analytical, psychological perspective (Roll-Peterson, 2001), written by ‘experts’ ‘about’ the children and their families. Parents, or more usually mothers, could be regarded as being too protective and indecisive (Cantwell, Baker and Rutter, 1978, pp. 3–4), or, if they could ‘cope’, mothers could be accused of ‘well-disguised rejection’ and ‘over-normalisation’ (Read, 2000). Whatever their response, mothers were perceived by professionals as going through different stages, including ‘denial, isolation, reaction formation, projection and regression’, and if they didn’t they were perceived as ‘dysfunctional’ (Roll-Peterson, 2001, p. 2)! Today, SEN is perceived more as a commodity by government, professionals and even parents in the struggle to gain resources amid an increasingly competitive state system, and it is not easy for parents to challenge such professionals, who serve as gatekeepers to important areas of funding and access to educational provision, be it mainstream or special. Ribbens McCarthy (2000, p. 11) argues that the values of the professionals

on the public side of the boundary, are manifested in very powerful social practices, including the dominance of the ‘psy’ public discourses and ideas about ‘child development’ that underpin the work of schools.

(Rose, 1990; Burman, 1994)

She maintains that

in order to understand what is going on between mothers and schools we have to recognise this boundary and the various associated and extensive differences in terms of the values and concerns that are relevant on each side.

(Ribbens McCarthy, 2000, p. 11)

The use of the word ‘mother’ here, rather than ‘parent’, is significant, and the paper now explores how the term ‘parent’ masks the very gendered nature of the responsibility for education and schooling in children’s lives (David, 1993, 1998; Ribbens McCarthy, 2000; Wilkinson, 2000; Hanafin and Lynch, 2002; Cole, 2004), and considers how this negates the importance of the role and, therefore, the important experiences of mothers of children labelled as having SEN.

Gendering the term ‘parents’: mothers

The public discourse on motherhood places the female mother in the domestic and private domain, and the male father in the public, ‘professional’ sphere. Yet, the responsibilities of motherhood are growing as it moves from:

appearing to be an intimate, private and personal responsibility to being performed as a public and profoundly political responsibility at all levels within education, including the academy.

(David, 2000b, p. 13)

Mothers’ responsibilities in relation to education and school are increasing (*ibid.*) amid the ‘massive social transformations in family life, through economic and social changes on an increasingly global scale over the last fifty years’ (David, 2000a, p. 11). Recognition is being given to the fact that mothers are ‘pre-eminently responsible for their children’s upbringing and education’. They

assume the main responsibility for all aspects of child care, including education whether they are lone mothers, working class or middle class, employed or at home. They invest resources and time, just as official and normative discourses would have us believe.

(David, 1998, p. 1)

It is acknowledged that there are important differences in relation to class and family background (David, 2000a, 2000b; Wilkinson, 2000; Hanafin and Lynch, 2002; Vincent and Ball, 2006) and David also maintains there are ‘major differences’ between mothers and fathers in their involvement with their children’s school life. She argues that, ‘Mothers are far more routinely and regularly involved in education than fathers and they are severely constrained from other activities by these obligations’ (David 2000b, p. 12). These changes are not reflected in the policy or literature of home–school relations. Despite the increasing gendered responsibility in relation to children and schools, the use of the term ‘parent’ in the home–school literature disguises the nature of the responsibility, and the fact that this responsibility, as David notes, affects women’s roles in other areas of their lives.

However, it appears that the changing nature of motherhood is not about women taking more responsibility in their own and their children’s lives, but about responsibility being taken *for* them, reflecting a ‘medicalization’ of mothers and all aspects of motherhood through increasing control by medical and quasi medical experts of the processes of child-birth and child rearing. This medical expert model reduces the experiences of mothers and renders them powerless. The control of our culture by experts is nothing new, for, as Smith argues, most people in our society

Do not participate in the making of culture. The forms of thought and images we use do not arise directly or spontaneously out of people’s everyday lived relationships. Rather they are the product of specialists occupying influential positions in the ideological apparatus (the educational system, communications, etc.). Our culture does not arise spontaneously; it is manufactured.

(1987, p. 19)

Powerful discourses construct mothers in many different ways, but rarely as sources of knowledge and experience in relation to their children, especially once they are in the public sphere. Oakley suggested in 1986 that the dominant groups defining mothers consisted of men and, increasingly, medical experts, and twenty or more years appear to have made little difference. Even before their children are born,

mothers are subjected to 'advice' and almost regulation from a range of professionals, including the media (see Williams, 2007).

Discourses constructing mothers abound in literature (e.g., the self-sacrificing saintly carer in the house; the selfish over indulgent woman; and the sinister all possessing monster [Kaplan, 1992]). The discourse of care idealizes mothers as carers and nurturers, conceptualizing women as strong in the face of adversity, emotionally resilient (Mirza, 1993; Blackmore, 1999). During the 1970s and 1980s, women were expected to be successful in a number of roles such as wife, mother, businesswoman, community worker, daughter, and leaders in all areas of life as well, as role models for other women, and all without complaint! They were criticized if they put family before their work, but by the end of the twentieth century, single mothers in particular were perceived as major contributors in the downfall of traditional family values.

Becoming a mother is described by many women as a life-changing experience, a key life event that, along with death, 'influences the ways in which we make sense of the world' (Sikes, 1997, p. 1). Sikes notes that 'having children fundamentally changed the way I saw and experienced the world. My priorities shifted, my values altered'. I felt the same (Cole, 2004), and I am sure many other mothers share this view. Yet the legacy of Freud has played an important part in constructing the discourses around mothers (see Mitchell, 1975; Sayers, 1986, 1991a,b; Chodorow, 1989; Sheldon, 1994), and much of what was written about mothers and mothering in the 1960s and 1970s came from a psychoanalytic perspective which then passed into 'common' literature as self evident 'truths' (Read, 2000). While mothering is often presented in the literature as an altruistic, 'labour of love' (Glenn, 1994), issues of power are very important, for mothering affects the power relations between the genders, races, economic and political groups and therefore mothering 'cannot escape being an arena of political struggle' (*ibid.*, p. 17). Of course, it is important to avoid notions of 'universality' when considering 'mothering' and what mothers do, for it is a 'socially constructed set of activities and relationships' (Glenn, Chang and Forcey, 1994, p. ix), which can be 'produced and regulated, correct and incorrect, normal and abnormal' (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989, p. 30). Any construction of some mothers as 'fit' inevitably constructs others as 'unfit', a concept that very much depends on the cultural, social and historical context (Glenn, 1994, p. 20). The dominant model of motherhood prioritizes the white, Anglo-American, middle class model dating back to the nineteenth century, when production was moved out of the home into factories (see Smith, 1987). Although work has been done more recently in relation to class and mothering (Reay, 1995; 2005; Vincent and Ball, 2006), policy documents not only ignore the gendered nature of parenting, but also race and class differences, presenting parents as an homogeneous group as noted earlier.

The role of mothers and the nature of their work are often taken for granted in the studies on parenting in general. Gaskell and McLaren (1987, p. 27) note how often

traditional family-school linkage is taken from the point of view of the educators. It is approached from the standpoint of those who work within the educational system, not from that of mothers. It does not ask how women's work is shaped by schools; how child rearing is related to educational pedagogy; how both teaching and mothering are affected by changing educational resources; or how gender affects the work of teachers and mothers.

Mothers, special educational needs and professionals

For mothers of children labelled as 'different', home-school relations can be even more difficult. Wilkinson writes:

Those [mothers] who attempted to influence the professionals found themselves in a position of disadvantage since the professionals had prior knowledge of available resources and places in schools and special units and therefore the possible outcomes. The agenda was set for and by professionals, who were themselves locked into market constraints. Mothers needed the cultural resources (Bourdieu, 1984) to be able to speak at meetings, to make their points known, especially if they were in disagreement. This was particularly difficult as 'parents it seems are not perceived as being experts' (Cornwall, 1987, p. 50). The professionals perceived the mothers' knowledge as 'private' knowledge based on their domestic experience and therefore not as relevant or important as their own 'expert' knowledge. The mothers had to convince the professionals of their ability and knowledge before they could play a more active role.

(Wilkinson, 2000, p. 279)

Even where mothers have the cultural resources, it is not always easy to draw on them, in the face of determined professionals with different agendas. My own research (Cole, 2004) with mothers of children labelled as having special educational needs, and who are also teachers in the same area, supports this view. Even though the mothers were themselves professional educators working in some aspect of special educational needs, when they were in the role of mother they noted their frustration and sense of helplessness when dealing with other professionals in relation to their own children. Other professionals saw them primarily as mothers and often ignored their considerable individual 'dual' experience. For their part, the mothers often felt that they had to 'hold back' as mothers and not use their professional experience as it would upset the professionals working with their children. One of the mothers, Truda, noted in relation to her own PhD qualifications and professional experience that other parents should not have to

'know what I know to get a good education for their children. I am always conscious of not raising my situation because I don't want it to look like an example kind of thing' (Cole, 2004, p. 137). She went on to tell of one occasion when the professionals did not listen to her about the complexities of her adopted son, John. John had to take the bus to school everyday, but the professionals

'didn't listen to the fact that I said you just don't assume that this kid's gonna get off the bus and follow your little line in here, up here, go over here in a building. I mean you could just say to another kid to make sure that John goes in the same direction and get help if he doesn't. So he's in a basement room somewhere, they don't know where he is at. An hour into the day and they haven't called us.'

Many of the mothers in the research were seeking mainstream placements for their children and the cooperation of many professionals was brought into question. Indeed, even those seeking special school placements, where this was not the professional recommendation, found less cooperation than they had hoped. There were clearly different agendas, aims and values at play, and they were left feeling helpless on a number of occasions, despite their knowledge of the 'system'. This unequal power relationship between mothers and professionals has come starkly into focus over the last twenty years, amid changing economic and social conditions and ideologies. A period of financial restraint was accompanied by a developing demand for social justice, equality, equity and inclusion. In the struggle that followed for the inclusion of all children into mainstream schools, professionals and mothers have sometimes found themselves on opposite sides of the home-school boundary.

And so . . .

I have discussed in this paper how dominant discourses suggest that there is a single, collective parent voice, and how that masks complexities, contradictions and tensions, negates personal experience, and prioritizes the professional expert voice, ensuring the dominance of the medical model of SEN and disability. Through the use of 'special' structures (e.g., Statementing and funding), and processes (e.g., assessment and diagnosis), professionals retain their power, space and status within special education. Priority is given to 'objective' knowledge and professional experience while the emotional labour and unpaid care and experience of mothers remains undervalued and underestimated by many professionals. The mother-teachers in my research were all very clear in their belief that the boundaries between home and school needed to be blurred and that mothers and professionals needed to share their experiences and knowledge. These experiences suggest that a greater acknowledgement of mothers' personal experience by professionals might offer insights into some of the existing complexities and tensions and get beyond the current policy rhetoric of home-school relations. Their voices and

experiences might inform the ways in which 'difference' is constructed, as well as what counts as inclusion (Cole, 2005); and perhaps challenge professionals' assumptions and constructions of children 'with' SEN, their mothers and their families. Research clearly shows that mothers can be agents for their children, interpreting the world for them, both protecting and promoting them (Read, 2000; Wilkinson, 2000; Cole, 2004). Such research also indicates that this is often carried out within a hostile environment and the language often reflects a bitter battle rather than a working partnership. Mothers talk of the 'battle', 'fight', 'struggle' and even 'war', 'more reminiscent of carnage than care' (Cole, 2004, p. 189), when what they are really referring to are their encounters with professionals in relation to their children's education and well being.

I began by saying that this paper was underpinned by beliefs in social justice and equity. I believe that we should be moving towards an education system that can and does meet the requirements of all children within mainstream provision. I acknowledge that we have some way to go yet. I also began by arguing that we had to set aside certainty and embrace uncertainty if we are to move into a different terrain. This means accepting that we will have differences. It is inevitable that there are different perspectives on, and values within, ideologies of inclusion and notions of 'special educational needs' even between mothers and mothers, and professionals and professionals, as well as between mothers and professionals. Yet, if progress is to be made at all in the inclusion of all children, we have to blur the boundaries of home and school and create spaces where we can discuss and differ but develop our ideas. Dismissing parents as 'parents', I suggest, closes down the opportunity to create such a space because it de-genders and de-personalizes those who 'care' at home.

There is a corollary to my argument here. Reference to 'parents', while it negates the role of the mother, negates that of the father as well. While mothers may ignore the fact that the term parent refers to them and still come into school, fathers may be less likely to become involved with their children's schooling (Lloyd, O'Brien and Lewis, 2003); indeed, such evidence suggests that fathers are unlikely to assume it means them or go along to 'parents' events unless specifically targeted. If the role of women as mothers has changed within society, the corollary would appear to be that the role of men as fathers has also undergone considerable change during the past thirty or so years. Gendering the term 'parent' allows for discussion around fathers and fathering in the twenty-first century and all that that means. The voices of men need to be heard, for the small but growing body of research (e.g., Sullivan, 2003; Garner, 2005) suggests that fathers want to be involved with their children as more than just the breadwinners, and that their role is immensely important whether their children 'have' special educational needs or not (Flouri and Buchanan, 2001, 2004; Fletcher and Daly, 2002; Flouri, Buchanan and Bream, 2002; Flouri, 2005). This is clearly an area that needs more exploration and research. The term 'parent' in the home-school literature does such debate no good service.

So, while the term parent may be convenient, a catch-all term, a gender neutral one which appears to make no assumptions about who is parenting and avoiding assumptions about the main carer of young children, it may also be responsible for retaining the separation of the spaces of home and school, reinforcing discourses which construct the separation of mother as ‘carer’ and father as ‘provider’, thus avoiding complexity and diversity by not acknowledging the importance of and possible differences in the roles of mothers and fathers within different families. It may also encourage the division between professionals as ‘experts’ and parents as ‘supporters’ or even ‘problems’.

I noted in my research about mother–teachers, my belief in, and respect for, the learned experience and knowledge that mothers gain over the years, caring for, listening to, working with and observing their children. I will conclude with a quote by Kate, a SENCO, with two children, one of whom has cystic fibrosis:

‘Just being a mother is the hardest job I’ve ever done, definitely. And I admire the mums who deal with lots of different difficulties.’

One of my concerns in the current educational context, where there appear to be tensions and contradictions of policy that clearly impact on children perceived as different, is that children will be the unwitting victims of policies and professionals (see Crace, 2005). Unpicking the term ‘parent’ and listening to mothers and, of course, fathers, might offer a ‘different’, more collaborative and sure way forward to real partnership.

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