The home-school interface for behaviour: A conceptual framework for co-constructing reality

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Abstract

Partnership with parents in schools is increasingly recognised as contributing towards optimal outcomes for children. Parents/carers of children deemed to present a behavioural difficulty are, however a marginalised group within the education system. These families are often the subject of discourses that seek to attribute a level of blame rather than identify complexities of need and potential resources forcollaboration.

Parents and teachers have different constructs of their respective roles in school and of children and their behaviour. Discourse within schools and taken up by individual teachers determines how behaviour is interpreted and how children and their families are positioned within the power relations inherent in communications and decision-making.

This paper outlines a predominantly qualitative research project based in grounded theory and a constructivist epistemology, exploring the home-school interface for behaviour and in particular the school-based experiences of parents/carers. Data was gathered in two group interviews, 77 questionnaires, and 19 semi-structured interviews with families. The specific focus was on factors perceived as facilitating or inhibiting a collaborative 'partnership' and parents' views on what was 'supportive' or not in their interactions with schools.

Differences were interactive, circular and accumulative. Differences for parents were the quality of relationships with both the school and their child, and feelings of confidence and efficacy in their parental role. For the student differences included the parent-child relationship, attitude to school and the facilitation of learning. More positive outcomes were evident where teachers attempted to co-construct a shared reality with parents. The study has contributed to an analysis of the constituents of 'partnership' and the development of a theory-practice framework for home-school collaboration.

Introduction

In theory, parents in the UK have an increased say in education. The Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) strongly emphasises the importance of partnership with families of children with special educational needs (SEN). In practice this implies a certain kind of relationship, which is hard to establish and maintain. 'Partnership' denotes mutual understanding and respect, shared aims and objectives, a consensual approach and equality of power as well as knowledge and skill. Dale (1996) points to disillusionment following the 1981 Education Act when the practice of 'partnership' was consigned to rhetoric. She suggests that imple-

mentation is based on an assumption of co-operation between parents and professionals that does not reflect real life encounters.

Although Wolfendale and Cook (1997) found a generally high level of parental satisfaction with Parent Partnership Services, Todd (2003) found little awareness of the need to negotiate the meaning of partnership and the political implications for decision-making largely ignored. The 'rights' adversarial model also discriminates against those who do not have the knowledge or resources to challenge decisions made on their behalf (Wright 1999). Effecting partnership practices at the school level is particularly problematic (Gascoigne, 1995; Vincent, 1996; Beveridge, 1997; Mallett, 1997).

Intervention to meet student needs is inevitably balanced by the management needs of teachers (Miller, 1996) and with behavioural SEN the management issue often becomes paramount. Gray (1997) writes of the worrying and growing separation of emotional and behavioural difficulties from consideration of SEN issues in general. He points out that difficult behaviour poses a particular challenge to adults in undermining their sense of personal and professional effectiveness. Teachers who are subjected to a loss of agency may respond with negativity. Whereas many are quick to berate themselves for their perceived failure to 'cope', others seek an external rationale for the difficulties: either the personality of the student or their home life (Miller, 2003).

The ultimate management strategy is removal of the child from the school. The Advisory Centre for Education in the UK have identified concerns that new guidance on exclusion changes the emphasis away from the interests of the child and increases the discretionary power invested in the head teacher in ways which "…*add to heads' already draconian powers and reduce parents' rights to challenge school decisions*" (ACE, 2004). The UK government appears to be reinforcing the 'responsibility' discourse in relation to parents rather than exploring ways to foster collaboration.

Working with parents of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties

Whereas pupils with learning, sensory and physical needs may be positioned as the victims of fate or inequality, the discourse in schools around behaviour often positions children within deficit models of 'mad', 'bad' or 'sad' (Laws, 2001). If experiences are the 'badness' or 'sadness' to which children are responding/adjusting the 'logical' conclusion is that it must be their backgrounds – their families – who are at the root of their difficulties. This potentially positions families as 'inadequate' at best and 'abusive' or 'uncaring' at worst (McDonald & Thomas, 2003). Such a discourse dictates what is possible by way of constructing anything resembling partnership. Hood (1999) confirms that where there is concern about behaviour in school, models of parents as 'problems' are more likely to dominate than those of 'partners' or 'consumers'.

Fifteen years ago, the Elton report (DfES, 1989) focused on parental involvement as a mechanism for improving relationships between home and school as a means of dealing with disruptive behaviour. Schools were encouraged to take active steps to break down barriers between schools and families. The potential for difficult interactions between teachers and

parents concerning pupil behaviour, however, is well documented in the research literature, which continues to raise the implications that definition, attribution and responsibility have for home school collaboration.

Definitions: One of the major findings of the Isle of Wight study (Rutter *et al.*, 1970) was differences in the definition of problem behaviour. These findings have been replicated by subsequent research. Connor (1996) found parents expressing concern that their perception of a problem became secondary to the professionals' view. MacLure and Walker (1999) investigated 184 regular parent teacher consultations and found that, even at the earliest stage of concern, teachers maintained control over problem definition and would rarely acknowledge difficulties unless first expressed by them.

Attribution: Despite the emphasis on an interactive model enshrined in UK education law and special needs guidance, 'within child, medical models' of difficulty continue to operate in schools (Upton & Cooper, 1990; Cefai, 1995; Miller, 1996). School staff, although more aware of the dangers involved in individual labelling, often believe that behaviour manifesting itself in school is rooted in problems at home. Families, on the other hand, often feel that if only their children were taught properly all would be well (Dowling, 1994). Miller *et al*. (2002) found that parents considered 'teacher unfairness' a significant factor but also that teachers and parents may concur over certain aspects of home background.

Responsibility for action: MacLure and Walker (1999) found that parents were expected to take action over problems raised by teachers but often had difficulty securing undertakings from teachers to act. Connor (1998) found that school inaction was an issue for many parents who felt that nothing had been done in school prior to the involvement of an external agent. Cefai (1995) describes initial school actions taken by teachers that are overwhelmingly focused on punishment and sanctions. Parents became involved when these early strategies did not work, rather than when the concern was first raised. A few teachers and parents found that informal and positive home school interaction had beneficial outcomes but over half the parents in this study voiced complaints about the procedures put in place to involve them, describing them as 'inappropriate', embarrassing' and 'disconcerting'.

Perceived parental apathy: Bridges (1987) investigated the views of parents who rarely came to school and found that instead of apathy about their children there was a range of practical and confidence issues that made it more difficult for them to attend. The most recurring theme was the dread that parents felt about entering school, mostly related to their own childhood experiences.

Models of Home-School Collaboration

With these differences in perception, expectations and priorities it is unsurprising that trust is difficult to establish. The complex potential for conflicting agendas at the home-school interface is illustrated in Figure 1 overleaf. Meetings which begin with a negatively charged emotional content based on the constructs of the individuals involved do not augur well for listening and early mutual understanding (Bridges, 1987; Miller, 1994). There are now a number of models for working with parents derived from an interactive, systemic perspective. They are intended to address some of the entrenched difficulties that permeate home-

	PARENTS' CONSTRUCTS	*TEACHERS' CONSTRUCTS*
BEHAVIOUR	Part of the child Reasons 'Mischievous'	A problem Disruptive 'Naughty'
RESPONSE	Meeting needs Defending	Management Protecting self/others
SCHOOLS	Should focus on learning – my child's learning	Should focus on teaching – not have to deal with behaviour problems
ROLE OF THE TEACHER	To care for the whole child To keep discipline To be professional at all times	To impart knowledge – to pupils who want to learn Not to be a social worker or counsellor
ROLE OF THE PARENT	To protect and defend their child Ensure needs are met	To take responsibility for their child's behaviour

Figure 1. Potential differences in parent/teacher constructs

school liaison about pupil behaviour and move away from the linear causation model that underlies attributions. These models usually describe methods of consultation by external agents that focus on the interactions between home and school in order to develop intervention on behalf of the child.

Joint systems theory focuses on the relationship and communication between different systems within which a problem is maintained (Dowling & Osborne, 1994). The approach asserts that all views contribute to understanding. Interventions are based on a 'reframing' in which a range of possibilities for conceptualisation of both problem and resolution are explored.

Solution-focused family-school consultation assumes that change is inevitable and that individuals have the resources to resolve their difficulties. The change agent's role is to co-construct solutions that fit with the constraints of the situation (Kral, 1992). The consultant changes the context from one that focuses on problems to one that focuses on the resources that clients already have for resolving their difficulties. Both teachers and parents explore how they are already attempting to solve the problem rather than viewing the problem as always staying the same.

The contextual systems model (Pianta & Walsh, 1996) is based on the premise that relationship systems exist between the child-family and schooling systems regardless of their

quality or the nature of the contact. All parents influence their child's attitude towards school and consequently their educational experiences. Similarly schools make judgements and have expectations about pupils. This theoretical model focuses on the inter-relationships between individuals in both systems as fundamental to positive development for the child, interventions being a secondary rather than primary feature.

Family-school climate building (Weiss & Edwards, 1992) involved a team of educators and clinicians in establishing a collaborative climate for family-school relations. This included classroom family orientations, parent-teacher-child conferences and family-school problem-solving meetings, specifically including the child. Parent participation rose and parents rated conferences as extremely useful in helping them understand school concerns, having school staff understand their concerns and improving relationships, attitudes and practice.

The research process

There is acknowledgement in the research (e.g. Dowling & Taylor, 1989; Miller, 2003) that the most difficult part of a consultant's work is dismantling the negativity that may have arisen before their involvement. Issues of personality, teacher skills, school ethos and communication appear to be relevant as well as differences in definition and attribution.

Teachers generally want parents to be involved. Parents, despite their fears and practical issues, usually want to try and support their children. What needs to happen in school to facilitate a mutually supportive partnership when difficulties arise? Good practice does take place. What do parents see as good practice and what discourages them from constructive dialogue with schools? This study was designed to build on the above models to determine some of the conceptual underpinnings for collaboration and where possible to distil these into recommendations for more effective practices.

This research was aimed primarily at eliciting the views of parents on factors at the home school interface in relation to their children's behaviour. It explored what was seen as helpful or not helpful or made things worse. The intention was to throw light on perspectives, concerns, feelings and priorities that must be considered in developing a partnership model for good practice. This meant looking not only at experiences themselves but also at influences on constructs which determined parents' sense of agency within the prevailing discourses.

Data collection

The research took place in a large London borough. The experiences under discussion, however, had occurred over a wider geographical area, both within and outside of the metropolitan area.

The study began with a group interview of individuals who worked with parents in the school setting. This included behaviour support teachers, educational psychologists, education welfare officers and special educational needs co-ordinators. This exploratory interview data informed a questionnaire which was sent to 320 families on the educational psychology database where a behavioural concern had been identified. Seventy-seven ques-

tionnaires were returned, a response rate of just under 25 per cent. Responses were confidential but parents/carers were asked to identify themselves if they were willing to be interviewed. A total of 19 interviews took place, with some de-selection to ensure that respondents had no previous professional history with the researcher and to balance ethnicity to reflect the area. All families spoke English either as their first language or because they were long term UK residents. For this reason a second interview group was later convened with members of the local parent support team who represented the major ethnic groups within the borough. The semi-structured interviews were predominantly with the child's mother but in several cases other family members were present. One interviewee was the child's carer. The semi-structured interview developed from a solution focused rating scale, which asked parents to identify on a scale of one to ten their most supportive and least supportive experiences. Probes explored why issues were important, expectations, affective responses, actions and outcomes for both the parent and the child.

Group interview analysis and summary

Both interview groups took an interactive perspective on behavioural difficulties but Group One were more focused on school policies and structures whereas Group Two (the parent support team) made a strong case for schools to take the backgrounds and needs of families more into account. They were particularly critical of what they perceived to be negativity on the part of schools and lack of action on behalf of children: "*no parent who has a child with behaviour problems has good relationships with teachers in schools*". Both groups acknowledged how parental constructs of education, schools and teachers were a powerful determinant in their interactions with schools "*Schools need to be aware that bad experiences … can affect relationships and attitude towards anyone in authority … there needs to be understanding that parents may be defensive at first*". In some communities, however, teachers are revered and their perceptions unquestioned – sometimes leading to the child having no advocate and/or being punished in both systems.

Both groups were aware of factors contributing to vulnerability and marginalisation of families, such as lack of familiarity with the education system. This is exacerbated when behavioural difficulties occur. Both groups commented on the need for structures to facilitate two way information and support: "*If within the LEA we are stating the principle of partnership and equality with parents, this needs to be manifest in schools.*" It was stressed how important it is for parents/carers to be involved early when concerns about children are first raised. Parents' perceptions of difficulties need to be given credence. They need individuals in school who will listen without apportioning blame.

Questionnaire data analysis

Some elements of the questionnaires ascertained factual information and were pre-coded. Open-ended questions were post-coded with some collations. The analysis identified basic information and also determined issues on which interviews would build. These included the following.

The need for early, supportive intervention
There were several factors arising from the questionnaire that again indicated the need for

early identification and support for parents. The most powerful of these is the age at which someone other than the parents first raises concerns about the child's behaviour. 46 per cent were at age four or below. There is a second surge of concern at 11 years (see Figure 2). 70 per cent of parents were also concerned before the school approached them. 23 per cent of parents, however, had no concerns about their children at an early age. In over 50 per cent of cases the focus child was the eldest or only child in the family. Issues of parent confidence feature in the interviews and inexperienced parents may be unsure how best to manage their child's behaviour.

Early discussions in school

43 per cent of parents/carers were satisfied about the way concerns had been raised and 40 per cent were not. Parents valued positive action based discussion (26 per cent) but also a forum for sharing their concerns (23 per cent). Few parents found discussions helpful in understanding their child or were reassured that something was being done (13 per cent for both). Nearly one in five parents did not find early discussion helpful in any way. 20 per cent wanted to discuss positive ideas for their children and the same percentage simply wanted to be taken seriously. 18 per cent wanted teachers not to jump to conclusions about their child and not attribute blame to the family. The need for a non-judgmental stance was strong feature of the interviews.

Parent/carer attributions

38 per cent of attributions for pupil behaviour were family related such as exposure to violence, 22 per cent were school related and 34 per cent 'within child' factors. 63 per cent of respondents said their child now had learning difficulties but only 30 per cent considered that learning was an issue prior to the identification of the behaviour. Although 27 per cent of parents/carers mentioned direct issues of loss for their child only 16 per cent attributed the difficult behaviour to rejection and/or loss.

What is helpful?

23 per cent of parents/carers stressed positive action for their child as most helpful and 29 per cent cited a positive sharing relationship with home and school working together. 66 per cent felt that they were able to participate fully in meetings with 26 per cent not. Only 41 per cent knew, however, what was in their child's individual education plan and 39 per cent felt they had an active role. These were not always the same respondents. The importance of commitment and caring by teachers was mentioned by 17 per cent and was also stressed in the interviews, as did listening to parents (14 per cent). 14 per cent of parents had found nothing helpful in their interactions with schools.

Interview data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and entered into the NUD*IST computer program which allows for rigour in indexing, searching and theorizing from qualitative data (Di Gregoria, 1999). The grounded theory principles of induction meant that data collection, reflection and analysis were interdependent in order to generate and enrich the emergent themes detailed below. Each phase of the research informed the development of the theo-

retical framework and indicated further avenues for exploration and confirmation. For instance as the issue of 'listening' emerged as a strong theme this was explored in greater depth to elicit related meanings for participants. The data was analysed thematically with connections emerging to establish a conceptual structure of the influences on home-school interaction. This in effect became a theory-practice model of factors in the co-constructing of reality that underpin the possibilities for constructive dialogue.

There do not have to be major differences between home and school in the way student behaviour is conceptualised for this to be problematic yet within a collaborative framework differences can be minimised. Differences in attribution and perception can either be ameliorated or exacerbated by the messages that families receive about their 'place' within the system. This is often communicated by a particular teacher but also has roots in the discourses prevalent in the school. Constructs of behaviour and positioning of parents impact on all aspects of home-school communication, the ability of teachers to take account of family contexts and the ways in which teachers mirror or complement perceived parental roles.

Definition and attribution

Discourses in school about children are powerful. In this study these ranged from the blanket negativity – "*… everyone telling me how bad my son is*" – to inclusive and non pathological discourse: "*the discussion went well because the teacher said we had a few children like that and they settle down*". Only one family specifically said that they had never felt blamed in school for their child's behaviour, either directly or indirectly. Some had taken up that subjectivity for themselves: "*it must be me*". Many parents either offered no explanation for their child's behaviour themselves or indicated that the reasons were complex. Although school factors were cited as exacerbating difficulties most were not seen as the impetus for the initial behaviour but as compounding and exacerbating rather than mediating difficult experiences for the child. There was a common interpretation that because needs are not met in the classroom or inappropriate demands are made then behaviour deteriorates.

There were those who had a clear idea of their child's difficulties but were unable to find anyone to listen: "*I did explain to them how S. had stopped seeing his mum and how this had a big impact on him.*" This child had been asked to leave two pre-school settings. Although over a third of the families interviewed acknowledged that they had experienced significant loss, interviewees tended to downplay this as related to their child's behaviour. As many children do experience and express strong feelings around loss (Dowling & Barnes, 2000) this issue requires greater awareness and further exploration.

Power and partnership

Schools and individual teachers give strong messages about what they expect from parents. This is not always consistent. Some parents show a great concern for their child – "*often it boils down to who writes the strongest letter*"– but risk being positioned as a nuisance: "*I felt that the school wanted me to stop pestering them.*" Other parents feel intimidated: "*You go into her office and you feel you are back at school; she'd make you feel inferior to her.*" Professional families in this study were especially aware of the power imbalance in schools and tended to be compliant rather than assertive: "*We were terrified he'd be excluded, so our job really was*

to make sure the school felt we were working with them." Other research confirms that this 'co-operative' stance is indeed likely to achieve more successful outcomes for children (Lloyd Bennett, 2002). This has implications for social justice and equity. Some parents felt that schools used threat implicitly or explicitly: "*It was never 'we are expelling him' but 'before we do, we think it would be better if you found somewhere else'.*"

Where schools communicated that parents must take full responsibility for their child's behaviour they felt both blamed and unsupported. It was often unclear what was expected of them or what they were being asked was beyond their capabilities: "*They expected me to work miracles and I couldn't do it.*" Where teachers gave the impression that this was a shared endeavour and approached parents for their parental expertise the outcomes had positive ripple effects.

Communication, context and parental role

The ethos of the school and the ways in which individual teachers position children with difficulty and their parents determines how the power dynamics are played out in practice.

Communication: Communication processes are part of the discourse themselves. The words that are used on letters home for instance can set up barriers or invite participation. Parents spoke about the messages they received about school priorities, expectations and lack of resources. This was not only from teachers but also from support and administration staff and included time issues, special needs support, the needs of other children, the demands on teachers and the school's reputation. Some schools, however, gave overt messages of an inclusive ethos that often emanated from strong leadership.

The way parents are approached matters. An informal and private conversation enables parents to feel that they are on a more equal footing. Formal meetings where parents are outnumbered by education professionals, who speak in a language they can barely understand about a system with which they are often unfamiliar, are edged out of any participatory decision making. Even when asked their opinion they may be unable to understand the implications and be silenced by lack of full and accessible information.

Earlier research has shown that negativity can be pervasive in schools (Beresford & Hardie, 1996). Consistent negative messages about a child are very distressing for parents, for pupils and for the parent-child relationship. This study shows that both negativity and the opposite pole of positive discussion and action have far reaching implications for home-school liaison.

Which aspects of communications do facilitate more positive interactions? The interpersonal skills of teachers are central. In this study parents defined effective listening as:

♦ Finding out parents' views of their child, not just their behaviour

♦ Not fighting for disparate versions of the child to be accepted

♦ Not making assumptions and jumping to conclusions

♦ Not being judgmental

♦ Asking parents what matters and is important to them and their child

♦ Asking parents what ideas they have, what works for them

♦ On-going communication

♦ Taking family contexts into account

♦ Having flexibility within the system to meet needs

♦ Making decisions together

♦ Taking action on the basis of joint decisions

♦ Being positive – positive actions/positive words

♦ Regular review and celebration of joint endeavours.

Parents/carers valued transparency which meant they did not find themselves suddenly faced with the unexpected and also a light-hearted approach so long as this did not undermine their concerns being taken seriously.

Parental contexts

Taking parental contexts into account appears crucial for continued and effective interaction between both systems. These can be divided into the history, culture and experiences that determine parental constructs and the current issues that impact on the possibilities for action. The expectations that parents have of their role, of the school and of teachers impact on their feelings, especially of confidence and these colour the interactions that take place. In this study this included a mother who had not learnt to read and was given a report in a meeting. There were also parents who had found it difficult to re-position teachers as fallible: "*I thought that what the teacher said must be right – they were teachers after all.*"

A thread throughout the interviews highlighted the need for flexibility and understanding of the demands on parents' lives. This was particularly pertinent where families were asked to remove children from school on a regular basis: "*If my boss knew how much time I'd spent running backwards and forwards, I'd never have kept my job, never.*" Parents who wanted to be seen as supportive sometimes found it hard to meet the expectations of others because their own situation had not been considered: "*I don't feel the school understands that when we go for a review (father) has to take a day off, we take the baby, we have to arrange child-care for the other children – it is a hell of a lot to put in for an hour.*"

In loco parentis

An unexpected finding from this study was parents' various constructions of their parental

role and which aspect they took up as a priority focus. This had a major impact on their dialogue with teachers in that they appeared to be seeking a mirror image 'in loco parentis' in the school. For the most part this priority was what parents might identify as parental love – accepting and caring for the whole child, acknowledging strengths as well as difficulties: "*They tried to understand him, that was the most important thing for me.*" Issues of power imbalance became more acute when the teachers positioned the child negatively. This invariably resulted in parents defending themselves or their child: "*I said no … you are not labelling him at such a young age.*" Some families acknowledged that they had been very angry in school when they had interpreted teacher attitudes towards their child as unfair or even unprofessional. The role of a parent as protector or defender is one that schools would do well to take on board and acknowledge as a positive starting point for dialogue.

The parental role as a facilitator or monitor of their child's learning looked for encouragement and action in school. A concern expressed by many was the overriding focus on behavioural management rather than meeting the child's learning needs. A different teacher, however, sometimes set changes into a positive spiral for everyone: "*I feel so relaxed now, it's all helping L. and not going against him.*" Another thread through the interviews was that good communications and relationships with parents were all very well but that this needed to be translated into action: "*He needed some help really, some positives.*"

The parental role in socialisation and discipline has several potential outcomes. Parents do not always understand why schools cannot 'control' their child if they can: "*There are lots of things he can do at school that he cannot do here, I won't have it.*" Sometimes this is because disciplinary methods used in families are unlawful in school and at other times pupils manifest distress and/or difficulty in schools rather than at home. This is not uncommon in issues of loss in the family. Where parents strongly emphasise their disciplinarian role over their caring role – and especially where teachers are seen as always right – schools may inadvertently leave the child with no advocate.

Discussion

The changes identified in this study were interactive, circular and accumulative. Where teachers attempt to 'co-construct reality' with parents, and really listen to constructions of their child within a framework of meeting needs rather than controlling behaviour, where there is a sharing of the responsibility "*working together to help him*" rather than an attribution of blame, then this provides a starting point for an upward spiral of change. Parents' confidence in their role increases and this invariably has benefits for their relationship with their child: "*I'm getting to learn little things now and I'm starting to get involved.*" The opposite entrenches difficulties at all levels: "*Your feelings of failure, there's lots of times that's happened to me*", "*I was crying everywhere and I didn't know what to do really.*" Parents who see their child happier in school are likely to feel better about themselves and less weighed down.

In many instances in this study more positive interactions with families also led to the perception of more positive outcomes for students. These outcomes were also accumulative and circular in raised self-esteem, inability to manipulate home school differences, improved relationships at school and with parents at home. For some pupils attendance improved and for many learning attainments increased. In this study negativity, blame and inaction were seen as entrenching and exacerbating difficulties.

Behaviour has a more complex agenda than other SEN. Billington (2001) talks about the practices in education and psychology which separate and exclude children by 'trapping them within pathologised sub-groups' (p.21). Parents are also positioned by the socio-political framework surrounding students who do not conform to the expected norms for behaviour and the ways in which certain groups are situated within the culture of schools. Parents are also potentially marginalised by lack of knowledge, articulation, confidence and support. Even where there is good practice the power remains with the school: *"They are allowing me to be more involved … I'm allowed to be an equal."*

Families are left with few options. The more aware react with high levels of compliance for fear their child will be rejected – they acknowledge and accept the position of powerlessness to take up the position of 'helpful'. Other parents opt out because they cannot face being labelled as inadequate or incompetent – they acknowledge and accept the position of powerlessness and take up the position of 'uncaring' though this might not be their subjective reality. Parents who are angry and 'fighting' for their child or for their rights struggle against their lack of power and are therefore likely to be positioned as 'difficult' themselves.

Conclusion

The interactions and relationship between teachers and parents either positions parents as partners in the process or limits their active involvement. As this research confirms, it is the definition of partnership as sharing a common concern and joint resolution which is important, not simply the involvement of parents to do what the school requests or even to carry out often undefined tasks which will make the 'problem' go away.

Acknowledging that constructs of reality for all the individuals in this interaction will inevitably be different, the aim of home school liaison needs in the first instance to find ways of co-constructing a reality, which both empowers parents and supports teachers.

> *"To communicate … some degree of consensual knowledge must be assumed between participants for social interaction and communication to take place"* (Augustinos & Walker, 1995)

The conceptual framework that evolved during this study highlights the dual strands that underpin the ability of schools to work effectively with families in addressing their mutual concerns. One is related to how this parent population is constructed and the other to how students are constructed in relation to their challenging behaviour. It is the teacher/school who positions parents as having complementary knowledge, who provides full and accessible information, listens to parents' concerns and perspectives, is aware of the contextual issues for families, and positions the child as a person rather than a problem – communicating that this is a shared endeavour rather than one in which parents have to take full responsibility – is most able to work effectively with families. Where discussions lead to positive actions for the child parents are not only relieved but also have opportunities to learn good practice for themselves. Sharing the load also has the potential of providing the emotional support to underpin the effectiveness of that good practice. Further research would do well to explore the perspectives of teachers, the potential advantages to them of this framework and what might be helpful/necessary for its establishment.

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