

TEACHER THINKING AND BELIEFS: PARENT-TEACHER PARTNERSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

The participation by parents in the schooling of their children has long been recognised as an important factor in children's education. Although the concept of parent participation has received strong support in Australian educational writing since the 1970's there still appears to be a prevailing national ambivalence about its widespread implementation. Although major barriers to such participation have been categorised as the lack of a legal framework particularly in NSW; the structures and processes of schooling which emphasise teachers and their work; and the attitudes, past experiences and current work practices of parents; arguably, the most important factor is the manner in which teachers perceive their own roles and construct their thinking about teaching especially in relation to working with parents in classrooms.

This paper reports on an investigation of the manner in which the constructions of teaching by teachers in the three different NSW school contexts suggest certain attitudes towards parent participation.

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Introduction

This paper reports on the first stage of data analysis from doctoral research currently underway into the manner in which the constructions of teaching by teachers in the three different NSW school contexts suggest certain attitudes towards parent participation. The study examines one factor that may facilitate or inhibit PP in schools and classrooms, that of the manner in which teachers construct their thinking and how this affects their teaching practice in relation to parent participation.

The study deals with parent participation in decision making related to curriculum and teaching in the classroom. While there have been a number of studies dealing with parent participation in schools (e.g., Andrews, 1980; Deer, 1980), a search of the literature reveals only very few studies of such participation in the classroom. There is some evidence (Atkin et.al., 1988; Newport, 1988) to suggest that teachers regard decisions dealing with classroom practice as the province of teachers alone. The same research suggests that such a view is part of a wider ideology of teacher professionalism (Macklin,

1981).

It appears that many teachers are using professionalism, albeit often implicitly, to resist local accountability and the need to be responsive to parent perceptions. It has been suggested (Soliman,1992;Atkin et.al,1988) that strong sets of beliefs associated with teacher "professionalism" act as a basis for important distinctions between "teachers" and "non teachers". For the purposes of the present study, beliefs are defined as a predisposition to respond to a person, object or issue in some preferred manner (Rokeach,1970). The image of the teacher as a family and community responsive professional sits rather uncomfortably with the commonly held view of the professional as having autonomy and control over the content of his/her work, possessing expertise in a generalised body of knowledge and specialised skills (Soliman,1992;Epstein,1990). Such beliefs imply that parents, because they don't have the necessary "professional" background would be unable to participate in activities related to curriculum or teaching/ learning (Lieberman and Miller,1984).

Much of the thinking and practice in the field of home/school relations is characterised by a number of unchallenged assumptions about professional knowledge and authority (Macleod, 1989;Atkin et.al, 1988). Principally it appears important in examining the whole issue of parent participation to deconstruct teachers' beliefs and perceptions as they relate to their work, and its professionalism.

Recent research evidence suggests that there is generally very little parent participation in the classroom (Hartley & Owen,1986). There appear to be many factors explaining why such participation is difficult to achieve. Some concern the attitudes and perceptions of parents and the physical

restraints upon their available time and resources (Atkin et.al.,1988;Bettington & Groundwater-Smith,1985). Some appear to be related to the beliefs and practices of teachers and school executives(Hartley & Owen,1986), others because of the organizational structures of schools.

It has become increasingly apparent that teachers' beliefs and thinking about their work, what they think about and how they think affects what they then do in classrooms(Clandinin,1986). While there have been a number of studies investigating reasons for the lack of parent participation in classrooms (Bettington & Groundwater-Smith, 1985;Andrews,1982) there has been none that has focused upon the relationship between teacher thinking and parent participation. It is the thesis of

this investigation that the manner in which individual teachers construct their teaching reality as well as the beliefs that inform such constructions, may well facilitate or inhibit the willingness of these teachers to work with parents in their classrooms. In particular it is suggested that the manner in which teachers construct their concepts of, and beliefs about 'teacher' and 'teaching', may well be extremely important in relation to whether those same teachers facilitate or prevent parents working in the classroom.

Outline of the study

As already established parent participation is not unique to Australia. In addition various versions of participation in schools and classrooms have developed in UK, USA AND NZ. The present study however, focused upon schools in NSW, Australia. Although parent participation occurs both in primary and high schools, the study was confined to primary schools only in NSW. This is because the schooling experience of the researcher has been in such schools and thus she has a high degree of familiarity with the primary school context. There is also evidence to suggest parent participation may be more easily and effectively achieved with younger children (Allen, 1991).

The study focused on three schools from different education contexts. The rationale behind such a selection lies in research (e.g., Smith & Lovat, 1991; Deer, 1980) that suggests that teacher beliefs and teacher thinking are affected by the school context in which teachers work. Schools and school contexts may be regarded as cultural sites in which the school as an organization and its mores, rituals and practices and the beliefs and values underpinning them are both drawn from, and influence, the beliefs and perceptions of those who belong to it (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A study such as the one proposed must penetrate the manner in which the school culture of each site is constructed and shaped if teachers' beliefs and practices regarding parent participation are to be deconstructed and understood.

The culture of each school is also significantly affected by the wider external organizational context and the practices within this context. Thus the individual culture of a school

in the NSW state system is influenced by the wider organizational culture of the NSW Department of School Education. Because of the importance of such external influences the present study investigated three separate schools each operating within a different external organizational culture. The first is a state school, the

second a school within the catholic system and the third an independent school which is not part of any system. Such a research structure provides the opportunity to investigate not only the influence of each school's culture upon the beliefs and practices of teachers in that school regarding parent participation but also the influence of the wider organizational culture and context upon the manner in which teacher beliefs and practices regarding parent participation are constructed.

The study is exploratory. It employs the methodology of in-depth interview as part of a case study approach (Smith & Hope,1992). The study attempts to enter the worlds of the teachers and to describe these worlds from the teachers' viewpoint: to understand the basis of teachers' teaching reality and the constructions of meaning that give substance to this reality (Woods,1986). It attempts to establish if there is a relationship between teacher thinking and parent participation and the components of such a relationship. Such a study requires methodologies which permit the researcher to enter the perceived realities of the teachers and to investigate the meanings which they attach to these realities.

The main method of data collection consisted of in-depth, unstructured ethnographic-type interviews (Woods,1986). Each teacher was interviewed on 4-5 occasions for approximately 30 minutes on each occasion over a time period of four terms. This provided a sequence of intensive interview contact with each teacher when issues raised in previous sessions could be revisited and further negotiated. All interview data was then transcribed to facilitate analysis and to provide the opportunity to negotiate any misunderstandings of meaning by the researcher (Smith, 1987). For the purposes of the present paper only the main themes emerging from the interview data will be discussed.

The issues of reliability and validity are difficult and complex in qualitative research. The researcher is aware of this and has attempted to take every precaution to attain reasonable levels of reliability and validity. Consequently five other means of data collection were employed. These were used to achieve triangulation (Woods,1986) with interview data, and are briefly outlined in the paragraphs below.

The second means of data collection was to observe lessons/activities of the teacher that involved parents working in the school or classroom. The data from these observations provided stimuli to discuss teacher thinking and beliefs about parent participation in the school and classroom. In particular, they stimulated discussion about

differences between statements from teachers' interviews about parent participation and any practices perceived by the researcher and/or the teacher to be disjunctive with such statements.

The third means of data collection involved each study teacher completing a concept map or "ordered semantic tree". Authors of this report argued that this concept mapping technique can provide a concrete drawing which can reflect abstract memory structures. Although Phillips (1992,1986) and others have been highly critical of this assumption, however, recent research (Butcher,1991) has shown that such a method could provide valuable insights into teachers thought processes.

The fourth basis for corroboration and triangulation was the collection of written documents and school policies from each school context. These are still being content analysed.

The final means of triangulation resulted from interviewing the principals and some parents in the study schools. The three principals were interviewed initially at the beginning of the study and then at the end where they were asked to comment on the summary of the main themes emerging from the analysis of the interview data. Parents, because they expressed reluctance to have their interviews tape recorded, were interviewed informally during classroom observations.

The type of research described above generates large amounts of complex data. Thus a key problem was the number of cases to be studied. The number of study teachers chosen was a balance between the constraints of the research programme and sufficient cases to provide the potential for the recognition of patterns and common factors from which theory generation can begin. Considering the amount of data that is generated using such a methodology, twelve cases were chosen as the practical number for this study. The twelve teachers who were interviewed included male and female teachers, those who had taught for less than five years and those who had taught for more than five years as well as those who taught in the lower grades and those who taught in the upper grades, of the three primary schools. Although there is no suggestion that the teachers in the investigation are representative, criteria such as gender, teaching experience and age of children taught are included as factors that other research (Butcher,1991) suggested may have an influence on teacher thinking and beliefs.

Main Research Questions

While the study does not depend upon the testing of traditionally formulated hypotheses, it is based upon a number of assumptions about the likely relationship between teacher beliefs and teacher and classroom practice related to parent participation. These assumptions can be formulated as a series of research questions that provide a focus for the investigation, its purpose and the methods of data collection and analysis. These questions can be formulated as follows:

- What are the components/dimensions of the study teachers' belief systems especially those related to the constructs of 'teacher' and 'teaching'?
- Can patterns be identified in the belief systems and constructs that are common to all study teachers?
- Can differences in the belief systems and constructs between teachers whose classroom practice is characterised by a high level of parent participation and those who have low levels of parent participation be identified?
- How do these components/dimensions relate to an ideology of 'teacher-as-professional' and what impact does this ideology have upon practices in relation to parent participation in classrooms?
- Can differences in the constructs of teachers teaching in different school and system contexts be identified?
- What relationships can be identified between study teacher belief systems and constructs and teacher practice in relation to parent participation?
- What are the implications from the study and its results for more effective implementation of parent participation in schools ?
- What implications from the study and its findings are there for further research into effective change related to parent participation and for improving the quality of teacher preparation programs in relation to encouraging more effective parent participation in schools and classrooms ?

Results

The major themes of teacher talk were identified. These

included those that revealed beliefs about 'teachers' and 'teaching' and the implications from these for beliefs about parent participation and teacher practices associated with parent participation. While the analysis of all data is not yet complete, findings relating to the main themes of study teachers' interviews may be grouped in five broad areas. These are:

- 1) statements relating to parents
- 2) statements relating to students/children
- 3) statements relating to teachers
- 4) statements relating to school
- 5) statements relating to teacher professionalism

Although it is not possible to discuss each of these areas in detail within the confines of this paper, the main themes of

each area are briefly presented. The area of teacher professionalism, because of its apparent significance is discussed in some detail.

Statements relating to parents

In relation to study teacher statements dealing with parents there were three main subthemes identified. These included:

- i) parents own experience of schooling
- ii) factors influencing the manner in which parent participation occurs; and
- iii) reasons for parents' participation

i) parents' own experience of schooling

Study teachers stated that parents' own school experience was important in setting their expectations of what should be happening in classrooms with their own children. For example:

"Parents may teach in the same way they were taught"

This concern related to study teachers' perceptions of parents not understanding the current practices and processes of schooling but believing that schools were, and should be, the same as when they were at school. Such concern about parents teaching in the way they were taught is interesting given the evidence that maybe the most important factor in how beginning teachers teach is the way they were taught themselves. Study teachers however, stated that the same influence for parents was not a positive factor.

Another concern was that parents don't understand modern day teaching and are critical of teachers and teaching methods.

Providing them with greater access to schools and classrooms provides more opportunity for them to criticize for example:

"Providing more access by parents to classrooms will result in more criticism about teachers and schools".

In addition to the influence of past experience of teaching on parents, study teachers stated that this experience was limited. For example:

"Because parents don't see the whole thing, see teaching as an outsider not as an insider they could never really understand what being a teacher is really like or how stressful it can be, and can often misinterpret what is going on".

thus study teachers suggested it would be impossible for parents to understand the demands of being a teacher.

ii) factors influencing the manner in which parent participation occurs

Factors perceived by study teachers as influencing parents participating in the classroom included parents own work, parents not feeling comfortable in participating, and only participating with their own children:

"Parents working prevent them from participating in classrooms particularly as children get older."

"Parents don't feel comfortable working in classrooms."

"Many only want to work with their own children and other children are left out."

iii) reasons that parents participate

The main reasons provided by study teachers for parent participation was to support teachers in their work rather than to satisfy parent needs such as raising parents self-esteem and developing the relationship with their child. Sample statements of these conclusions included:

"Parents participate because they feel they should.. feel guilty if they don't.... want to check up on what the teacher is doing and make sure their child is getting attention.... baby their children."

"Parent participation really panders to the whims of parents in that children are better off without them..."

teachers don't really need them....they don't contribute much to formal instructional type of teacher and they take up teacher's time that could be spent teaching the children....they criticise, make judgements and spread gossip."

Clearly the reasons perceived by study teachers for parents engaging in parent participation had little to do with supporting their children's learning and much to do with policing teachers' work. These perceptions are not a useful beginning to the collaborative relationships essential for effective parent participation.

Statements about students/children

Two main subthemes emerged from the analysis of study teacher statements in relation to children. These were statements relating to the age of the children and their dependency. The following statements describe impacts of parent participation on children/students:

i) statements relating to the age of the children

The most important factor in study teachers' statements regarding the age of the children was the difference between the importance of parent participation for K-2 children and the unimportance of parent participation for primary age children. For example:

"For little children (K-2) parent participation in classrooms is OK....parents usually aren't working and the parent-child relationship is important".

"For older children it is not so important....parents are usually working, and the subject matter is more difficult for parents to understand....childrens' privacy may be

invaded and their behaviour will be more disruptive".

Statements by study teachers revealed belief that parent participation with younger children is mainly built around providing a supportive relationship between parent and child whereas participation with older children tends to be built around the expertise of the parent rather than the parent/child relationship.

ii) statements relating to childrens' dependency

Study teachers expressed concern that having parents participating in the classroom not only prolongs childrens' dependency on parents, for example:

"Having parents in the classroom keeps children more dependent",

but if parents use different methods to teachers(for example in teaching reading) children become confused.

Statements relating to school

The major theme to emerge from statements relating to the school focused on the role of the school in regard to the responsibility of the school in preparing parents for participation in the classroom and school and promoting effective parent participation. For example:

"The school should provide a welcoming climate and inservice opportunities for parents to learn about the school, what is happening and their role in classrooms...
...parent time should be organized as effectively as possible".

Thus study teachers stated clearly that the school had a very important responsibility ensuring that parent participation was effective.

Statements relating to teachers

In analysing study teacher statements dealing with teachers, two subthemes emerged relating to factors that facilitate or are necessary when teachers employ parent participation in the classroom and those inhibiting such participation. Factors that prevent teachers using parent participation in classrooms include the lack of experience, maturity, confidence and self knowledge which means that teachers feel unsure of themselves and their decisions which they are not able to justify to parents. They are worried about making a fool of themselves. Other factors preventing parent participation included:

*Being a beginning teacher.

*Lack of communication resolution skills.

*Fear of difficult parents.

*Fear of being criticised.

*Belief that parents spread gossip.

*Belief that parents are more trouble than they are worth.

*Belief that some parents want to take over.

*Belief that they are on display to parents.

*Lack of time to properly inservice parents.

*Lack of support from principal and/or executive.

*The legal framework in NSW that does not compel parent participation.

Factors that were perceived to facilitate or are necessary for effective parent participation included careful planning, organizing and communicating about the role parents are going to take. For example:

"Effective parent participation depends upon thorough briefing and debriefing of the parents before and after lessons".

"Teachers need support from school executives, and from parents".

"If teachers are parents themselves then they have a more accepting/positive approach to parent participation".

One other factor which was recognised as either facilitating or inhibiting parent participation include the prior experience that a teacher has had with parents re parent participation in the classroom. This is an important factor in how teachers then think about parents participating in the school and the classroom.

Statements of study teachers included concern that teachers haven't been very effective in educating parents about what is happening in schools and the role of parents in school and classroom. All study teachers agreed that the best way to prepare teachers is to provide good examples of teachers working with parents in the classroom, i.e. through experience rather than any pre-service courses. Again, then, study teachers stated that the preparation for parents to participate in school and the classroom was very important

Teacher Professionalism

As stated previously it was the theme of 'teacher-as-professional' and the statements that informed this ideology that appeared to be most important in understanding study teachers construction and beliefs in relation to parent participation and how these related to teacher practice of parent participation in the classroom. Often the most

important subthemes derived from the study teachers statements

were combination of statements in the theme areas already discussed particularly those dealing with statements related to `teacher'and `parent'and the perceived differences between these. As would be expected, and has been suggested in the literature review in this paper, questions of knowledge and autonomy were central to study teacher statements. These subthemes are explored briefly below.

Most important in the study teachers' statements was the view that parents if they participate in classrooms, should work under the guidance, and control of the teacher, even if the parent was a trained teacher, him/herself. Thus all teachers believed that teachers were more qualified to be in schools and classrooms than parents, although with intensive and probing questioning as to the basis of this view, most teachers found it difficult to actually express in clear terms reasons for such a viewpoint.

The view of teacher professionalism that emerged from the study teachers can be organised around three sets of statements:

i) Professional Knowledge

Study teachers identified aspects of professional knowledge of the teacher which they perceived as separating a teacher from a parent. these aspects included academic knowledge of such things as maths and reading. For example:

"There is specialist knowledge about subject matter and methodology of teaching, particularly for older children and in maths, reading and writing...teachers have this knowledge and parents don't".

The second quote identifies another aspect of professional knowledge linked to academic knowledge, that of, what might be called pedagogic knowledge of the subject. For example:

"Parents are not academically capable of teaching especially maths, reading and writing...they don't know the classroom/school aims, they don't have knowledge of the right methods and use conflicting methods to those of the teachers".

The third aspect identified was that related to the overall perspective of the child as learner held by the teacher and how this integrates with knowledge of the curriculum to produce an effective learning program for the student. For

example:

"The teacher has an overview of the whole child and the curriculum and can make informed judgements."

The final aspect identified by the study teachers was that related to the ability of the teacher to continue with academic learning as part of the staff development of the teacher. Thus study teachers commented:

"The teacher has academic skills to keep learning".

While all four aspects may be considered important aspects of a teacher's role and work, it is problematic as to whether they constitute valid differences between teachers and parents. Rather, it can be argued, as with experience, they constitute an artificial separation of teacher and non-teacher as a basis for preserving the interests of teachers and the teaching profession.

ii) Authority

The issue of authority has been long identified as one of the most important criteria for the recognition of a professional. Teachers' authority was also an important issue recognised by study teachers. There were numerous statements comparing and separating the roles of teacher and parent based upon the idea of teacher authority because of confirmed status, for example:

"The teacher has overall authority" and

"Teaching is the teacher's job and parents are welcome to help, observe, advise but not to make any important decisions concerning teaching and learning in the classroom".

and on the basis of their professional knowledge, for example:

"Teachers are the professionals and know what teaching is about....parents are not and they often are there to criticize".

"Within the context of parent participation the teacher's role is one of support for parents - to provide a framework for parents to work in and to discipline the children".

As with the theme of professional knowledge, while the statements of study teachers are clear, the issue of authority

as the basis for treating parents as non-teachers is problematic.

Each these sets of statements reinforces a powerful set of perceptions that parents are not equipped with the knowledge, skills, nor attitudes perceived by study teachers as essential to classroom teaching. In turn, it can be argued that such perceptions form the basis of a teacher professionalism, which even implicitly, acts as a strong barrier to authentic parent participation and reinforces practices which are more aligned to parent involvement than parent participation.

Conclusion

The data gathered from the study interviews suggests that a strong set of beliefs, associated with teacher professionalism, acts as a basis for important distinctions between 'teachers' and 'non-teachers' (Soliman, 1992; Hunt 1981, Macklin, 1981). These beliefs have a number of important implications for parent participation and non-participation in classrooms and the nature of such participation .

The value of this study lies in not only identifying the impact of teacher thinking and beliefs and how these relate to parent participation, but also how knowledge of teacher beliefs can provide important understanding of the process and culture of teaching to enable schools to undertake more effective curriculum change and implementation, as well as other educational reforms.

In addition a review of the literature on teachers professional development (Soliman, 1992; Walker, 1992; Williams, 1991) indicates that there is insufficient attention paid to the preparation of teachers in order to facilitate the effective involvement and participation of parents and the community in education. Knowledge of teacher beliefs about teaching during various stages of teacher training and careers can provide insight not only for school administrators but also for those responsible for designing and working in teacher education programs. These are some of the issues raised in this paper which reflect work in progress in investigating teachers thinking and beliefs and the implications for the knowledge and understandings that appear to influence teachers' work and practices particularly in the school and community domain.

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