Parents, Teachers and the "Community of Practice"

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Abstract

Raffo and Gunter (20087) argue that there is insufficient research which has "systematically examined, categorised and synthesised the types of leadership in schools that might assist social inclusion" (p. 397). In this paper I argue that Wenger's concept of a "community of practice", when applied to the parent-teacher relationship, provides a framework for future qualitative research agendas which explore "how social inclusion/exclusion can be defined in terms of access, recognition and meaningful participation issues ('equity')" (Raffo and Gunter, p.397).

Keywords

Social Inclusion, the "Community of Practice", Partnership, Participation, Parents and Teachers, and Special Education Needs

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Raffo and Gunter (2008) argue that there is insufficient research which has "systematically examined, categorised and synthesised the types of leadership in schools that might assist social inclusion" (p. 397). In this paper I argue that Wenger's concept of a "community of practice", when applied to the parent-teacher relationship, provides a framework for future qualitative research agendas which explore "how social inclusion/exclusion can be defined in terms of access, recognition and meaningful participation issues ('equity')" (Raffo & Gunter, p. 397). Key Words: Social Inclusion, the "Community of Practice", Partnership, Participation, Parents and Teachers, and Special Educational Needs.

Introduction

Relationships between parents and teachers are characterised by diverse agendas, expectations and priorities (Laluvein, 2007). Given this non-linear nature of relationships, and the need for liaison and negotiation of meanings, Wenger's concept of the "community of practice" could function as a template for examining parent-teacher relationships within a social theory of learning which sees learning as an expression of social participation. In this paper, I argue that Wenger's theory, with its social rather than didactic approach to problem-solving can contribute to the improvement of school and teacher-parent focused educational decision-making situations which affect children's life chances.

"Partnership" suggests a locus which permits negotiation and interchangeability of roles. Relationships which are built upon, or build towards, mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire generate a strong cohesion of commitment and shared interests which transforms them into partnerships over a period of time. The sharing of narratives, interchange of ideas and negotiation of meaning amongst participants are the prime characteristics of the situated cognition perspective whereby learning becomes essentially social and cultural occurring in social settings through dialogue with others (Lave, 1988). Wenger's theory builds upon the work of several cognitive and constructivist theorists, (Vygotsky, 1934; Piaget, 1954; Bandura, 1977; Wertsch, 1985; Engestrom, 1987). It brings together the aspirations expressed in Dewey's description of "conjoint communicated experience" (1961, p. 87), the Warnock recommendations for parent-teacher relationships (Department of Education and Science, 1978, p. 151) and Pugh's description of partnership as a working relationship characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate (1989, p. 5). All of these suggest a model for partnership which closely resembles a "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998).

What is a "Community of Practice"?

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, in their research on language and gender, refer to a "community of practice" as "an aggregate of people who, united by a common enterprise, develop and share ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs and values – in short, practices" (1999, p. 186). The "community of practice" can develop from any formally or informally constituted enterprise but once launched, it develops its own way of being and its own trajectory. This does not mean that "communities of practice" are necessarily egalitarian or consensual – simply that their membership and practices grow out of mutual engagement (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992). The development of shared practices and activities within the group members indicates the extent to which members belong to the group. Mutual engagement and learning are at the heart of the "community of practice" which is defined both by its membership and by the practice in which the membership engages.

In exploring the interaction between art and design and museum and gallery education Herne (2006) concludes that "trans-institutional and inter professional communities of practice can be established that have the potential to generate new forms of engagement, shared repertoire and joint enterprise" (p. 1). He reminds us that not all communities are "communities of practice". Three key dimensions, mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire are necessary conditions for recognition in Wenger's theoretical construct, therefore "people who work alongside each other in a department without mutual engagement cannot be said to be part of a community of practice" (Herne, p. 2).

Lindkvist (2005) develops an alternative, though complementary, view of the "community of practice" in the form of "the collectivity of practice" an example of which is a project-based team. Such a group will not be sufficiently developed to qualify as a "community of practice" because of its temporary and quickly established nature. While "communities of practice" depend on shared enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoires, collectivities of practice rely on individual knowledge, agency and goal-directed interactions. This idea that some communities are more enduring than others is also reflected in the description of "fast and slow" communities (Roberts, 2006, p. 632). Holmes (1999), differentiating between "the community of practice" and other social networks, writes that a "social network and a community of practice can be differentiated by the nature of the contact which defines them. A social network requires QUANTITY of interactions; a community of practice requires QUALITY of interaction" (p. 180, original emphasis).

In the context of support groups for home-educators the three key dimensions of mutual engagement, shared repertoires and joint enterprise help to explain the dynamics of support groups which take many forms, ranging from loose informal one-off meetings through internet chat rooms, newsletters, and informal contact by phone through to more formal regular activities in a particular venue (Barson, 2004). Barson concludes that home education constitutes a constellation of "communities of practice" as defined by Wenger, and that although groups may share a general enterprise, in this case the education of children out of school, each group "reflects and is created by the specific needs of those involved" (Barson, p. 2). The variations in mutual engagement and shared repertoires across groups suggest that the "community of practice" framework needs to be adapted to deal with a wide diversity of groups. This research makes a useful contribution because the support group, like the parent-teacher relationship, is not a formally defined institution with a generally well-known structure. Like each individual parent-teacher relationship, the support

groups have "no defined structure, no formal obligations, no agreed way to do things and their joint enterprise may not be made explicit" (Barson, p. 7). Each group is characterised by its own joint enterprise, ways of engaging and shared repertoire. Similarities and differences between groups imply that each group, like each parent-teacher relationship, may be a discrete "community of practice", membership of which will be self selecting (Wenger, 1998).

Paechter (2003a) writes that "a community of practice is, put simply, a community engaging in a shared practice" (p. 542). She draws upon Lave and Wenger's (1991) initial idea of a "community of practice" in order to explore the implication that children and young people learn what it is to be masculine or feminine through a kind of apprenticeship within particular, localised communities (Paechter, 2003b). In that context, boys are viewed as apprentice men, and girls as apprentice women (2003a). Paechter argues that the relative lack of exploration into the power relations both within and between communities is something which is particularly germane to the study of gender and represents a serious weakness within the literature. She argues that relations within and between localised masculine and feminine "communities of practice" contribute to and underpin power relations within and between wider practices (2003b). This is endorsed by Herne who argues that "A characteristic of the processes of the community of practice is that strategies are used to either promote or prevent access. This is a play of power relations and can be relatively transparent or opaque" (Herne, 2006, p. 15).

These few examples amongst many suggest not only that there are different types of knowledge creating and transferring communities but also that the "community of practice" itself can be seen as heterogeneous across several dimensions including geographic spread, lifecycle and pace of evolution. On a global level, size and dispersal may mean that members of a more global community may rarely if ever meet, leading to focal "practices" being somewhat diffuse (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1999). On a more local level, the "community of practice" is about people engaging directly with others involved in developing shared ways of understanding of how to do and think about things.

Lave and Wenger's theory of a "community of practice" which I draw upon in this paper centres upon the co-production of the social world by people as they constitute their relationships. The theory has increasingly become an influential framework for understanding learning and identity formation across a wide variety of contexts including professional and vocational communities and non-institutional informal learning networks. Wenger's work has much to offer to those involved in the management of organisations where people learn their trade by gradually becoming fully participating members of an existing "community of practice" and acquire cultural practices in the context of the practice itself. It is important to take this into account when harnessing the "community of practice" perspective to parents and teachers because of the similarities and differences between work-place productive relationships and parent-teacher relationships. The positioning of employee and employer differs from that of parents and teachers whose relationships are: (a) assigned rather than chosen, (b) constantly being mediated in relation to the perceived needs of the child, and (c) subject to different expectations, values and emphasis, especially because teachers and parents may not share the same understandings of their roles and spheres of responsibility (Katz, 1984). The motivation, goals, participants, methods and outcomes may not be the same within organisations such as businesses, as they are in educational contexts.

The "community of practice" approach asserts that learning is best understood as participation in social practices situated in particular contexts which are socially and culturally legitimated by those who engage in and develop particular practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The phrase "legitimate peripheral participation", originally coined to point to the character of the process of becoming, has come into common currency in accounts of learning and participation in many diverse settings. The phrase suggests that participation must be socially legitimated and that a trajectory of participation facilitates a move from being at the fringes of a community to engaging in more centralised performances in that community. The heterogeneous, multifocal character of situated practice in which people who constitute a "situation" together, know different things and speak with different interests and experience is explicitly acknowledged (Lave, 1993). However, describing individuals with different knowledges, interests and experience in terms of a "sense of trajectory" is, perhaps, less than satisfactory (Lineham & McCarthy, 2000). Understanding legitimate peripheral participation as a trajectory or movement from newcomer to old timer is clearly redundant within a small community of two or three members. Likewise it makes no sense when applied to a group of teachers who are all established "old-timers" (see Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003, p. 16). This suggests that legitimate peripheral participation is not a necessary or dominant component within a "community of practice", unless it is to continually define part or all of its boundary.

Issues of Power and Trust

Distilled within the phrase "legitimate peripheral participation" is an understanding of how operation of power fosters or impedes access to, and continuing membership of, "communities of practice" (Contu & Willmott, 2003). Roberts (2006) argues that the role of power, "the ability or capacity to achieve something, whether by influence, force, or control" has to be recognised (p. 626-627). Lave and Wenger do invite a closer and more systematic examination of how power relations mediate the acquisition, maintenance, and transformation of meanings, including what is deemed "legitimate". However, when it comes to illustrating their thinking by reference to the practices of midwives, tailors, quartermasters, butchers, and non-drinking alcoholics, connections between the practices of "community" members and the "structural characteristics" of these communities are left largely unexplored (Contu & Willmott, p. 286).

Within hierarchical organizational structures, such as schools, where power is relatively formal and centralized, negotiation may be limited to key figures of authority within the organization. Power shapes social interaction, and perceptions concerning its use will influence the degree of trust among those engaged in knowledge transfer (Roberts, 2000). The presence of a relationship of trust indicates an ability to share a high degree of mutual understanding built upon a common appreciation of a shared social and cultural context. Trust, familiarity and mutual understanding, developed in their social and cultural contexts, are prerequisites for the successful transfer of tacit knowledge (Roberts, 2000). Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that trust leads to higher levels of openness between co-operative partnerships, thereby facilitating effective knowledge transfer (Wathne, Roos, & von Krogh, 1996). The successful functioning of a knowledge–sharing "community of practice" is impossible without a) the active participation and willingness of members to share knowledge and b) members willingness to use the "community of practice" as a source of new knowledge (Ardichvili, Page, & Wentling, 2002). Members are

more willing to use the "community of practice" as a source of knowledge if they trust other members to be a source of reliable and objective information. Trust first emerges on the basis of recurring social interactions and takes root as people get to know each other. This trust legitimizes membership of a particular "community of practice".

Contu and Wilmott (2003), referring to Lave and Wenger's "embryonic appreciation of power relations," argue that situated learning theory encourages a focus upon the embeddedness of learning processes in relations of power (p. 283). In their view, situated learning theory presents an opportunity whilst posing a challenge, to established theories of learning. Contu and Wilmott critique the popularization of Lave and Wenger's thinking and argue that in their original formulation of situated learning theory, some radical elements are "underdeveloped and neglected in their illustrations of learning practices" (p. 284). Contu and Willmott argue that "popularized versions of situated learning tend to ignore or suppress Lave and Wenger's 1991 understanding that learning processes are integral to the exercise of power and control, rather than external or unrelated to the operation of power relations" (pp. 283-284). They contend that the adoption and popularisation of Lave and Wenger's ideas has led to its "dilution and selective adoption" (p. 284).

Learning, Process and Practice within a "Community of Practice"

Lave and Wenger's seminal account of learning in "communities of practice" triggered a qualitative shift in conceptualising relations between learning and participation in which learning is seen as a relational and not an individual process (Lineham & McCarthy, 2000). Within theories of learning which view learning from the abstract stance of pedagogy the setting for learning is "simply assumed not to matter" (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p. 47). The "community of practice" framework favours the view that "learners can in one way or another be seen to construct their understanding out of a wide range of materials that include ambient social and physical circumstances and the histories and social relations of the people involved" (Brown & Duguid, p. 47). Conditions and context are vital to understanding learning and practice, in other words: "What is learned is profoundly connected to the conditions in which it is learned" (Brown & Duguid, p. 48).

"Communities of practice" are not formal structures such as the departments or project teams which Lindkvist (2005) refers to as "collectivities of practice", but informal entities which "exist in the minds of their members, and are glued together by the connections the members have with each other, and by their specific shared problems or areas of interest" (Ardichvili et al., 2002, p. 3). Learning, occurs when members participate in problem solving and share the knowledge necessary to solve the problem (Wenger, 1998). Learning is not about receiving or constructing "objective" individual knowledge, but is about individuals learning to function within a group or community who share a common interest or goal. Learning is thus located in the process of the ongoing construction of co-participation, with knowing being an activity by specific people in specific circumstances (Adler, 1998). The "community of practice" is a fertile plain of shared ideas in which knowledge and information is exchanged formally, informally, incidentally, experientially, tacitly and through socialization" (Taylor, 1999, no page numbers), and learning depends upon who brings what knowledge into the group and how people interact together on a personal and intellectual level.

Learning within a "community of practice" is shaped by a shared desire to understand and experience events from multiple perspectives and a preparedness to consider various and diverse perspectives through dialoguing with others. For parents and teachers jointly involved in the education of children the importance of this mode of participative learning could not be greater. However, demonstrating what, how or when learning takes place within "communities of practice" is no easy task given, as Wenger says, that "it is not so clear where they begin and end" (Wenger, 1998, p. 96). This is because boundaries between "communities of practice" are not fixed but are flexible and continuously shifting so can be difficult to identify.

Summarising the Literature

Within the literature practices are frequently identified and referred to as "communities of practice", however, this is often done in an unreflective way. The phrase itself carries within it a degree of ambiguity and the related literature is "still evolving" and "hardly coherent" (Lindkvist, 2005, p. 1191). Although the theoretical strength of situated learning theory has been adopted by many researchers, the many conceptual issues which remain undeveloped in the literature has resulted in considerable variation around how "community of practices" are both described and characterised (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006, p. 646).

The "communities of practice" that I discuss in this paper potentially include members who have varying standings, experience, expertise, age, personality and authority within schools. It may be that degrees of participation are affected by power relations with those who have full participation wielding more power in the negotiation of meaning (Handley et al., 2006). The failure to explore the implications of the distribution of power might suggest that Lave and Wenger's account of the negotiation of meaning can be misinterpreted as "excessively quiescent and consensual", while, in reality, such activities are plagued by misunderstandings and disagreements (Marshall & Rollinson, 2004, p. S74).

Methodologically, there is little evidence of a dyadic approach in use either within the inclusion literature or within that of the "community of practice". This is surprising given that this approach produces much insightful data. In the dyadic study which I conducted participants oscillate between being the subjects of their own accounts and the objects of the accounts given by their "dyadic partners". The dyadic approach, although rarely a feature in educational research, affords a unique opportunity for "both parties" to participate equally in an area of research in which both are implicated. The double perspective upon parent-teacher relationships gives voice to the experiences and perceptions of those most directly concerned. This opens up a space for analysing and realistically accounting for the role played by negotiation among people who may not only have different values, ideas and understandings of "what matters" and what is considered desirable, but where several interests are at stake, including, most importantly, that of the child. This results in new knowledge being revealed about a largely invisible and under researched area, namely, the nature of liaison and negotiation between parents, teachers and children.

It may well be that approaches to participation and inclusion vary from country to country as policies themselves inevitably vary. However, linking parent-teacher relationships and the "community of practice" theory is a new area of research not represented in the extant literature. This previously unexplored terrain produces new empirical findings that form the launch pad for a range of follow up studies. Because this is a new area of research it widens the breadth and applicability of

Wenger's "community of practice" theory and has potential implications for the construction of partnerships which benefit parents, teachers and pupils.

The Research Design

My professional experience of working in the special educational needs (SEN) field in an independent capacity has allowed me to reflect upon and ponder about parent-teacher relationships in a way that many teachers in school may not be able to do. As an independent educational advisor, I have worked with a wide range of children and their families who experience difficulties at school. Initially a lecturer in Higher Education working with young people with (often unacknowledged) learning difficulties, I subsequently acquired extensive experience of working in and across many areas of special education, including supporting and liaising with parents, teachers, parent-partnership schemes and special needs tribunals. This has given me a unique insight into the huge amount of time and effort that parents, and particularly mothers, invest in their quest to establish and maintain a network of relationships which will allow them to participate equally in knowledge-sharing situations indicative of a "community of practice".

As part of my doctoral studies (Laluvein, 2007) I undertook research which explored and illuminated the contexts within which teachers made decisions in relation to children with special educational needs. I wanted to find out which sources and kinds of information influenced and shaped perceptions and practices. My broad aim in undertaking the research was to gather data which would illuminate the different knowledges and understandings that parents and teachers have about individual children in order to better understand different conceptualisations of discourses and official pedagogical practices in school, and the possible affect of these upon the dynamics of parent-teacher relationships.

The research design and the empirical programme upon which this paper draws consists of two inter-connected studies. The first, a preliminary study which engaged uniquely with the perspective of parents, gave a substantial, if partial, insight into some of the influences which interact in complex ways to affect parent-teacher relationships. It was woven around the transcripts of parents who, motivated by their children's educational difficulties, become involved in a personal learning process which involves seeking additional advice and information external to the schools. "Reskilling" is the term used by Giddens for the reacquisition of knowledge or skills, the weighing up and balancing of claims made by different approaches which allows for reasonably informed choices to be made (1991, p. 141). In the context of parent-teacher relationships and the difficulties which can affect children's education and their experience of school, the "reskilling" of both teachers and parents offer possibilities for a range of productive interventions, such as, for example, "expertise trading" (MacLure & Walker, 1999).

Designed as a first level of enquiry only, the preliminary study provided a framework for the Main Study, a dyadic study of parents and teachers jointly involved in the education of children giving cause for concern. In this paper I draw upon the data, analysis and findings from this small-scale interview-based dyadic study of ten pairs of parents and mainstream primary school teachers.

Methodology

I describe the methodological approach which I used as a participatory and dyadic approach within an interpretive, qualitative paradigm, using the semi-structured interview as a research instrument.

This approach to the data collection and analysis provided a unique lens through which to view the dynamics of mutuality and reciprocity between individuals involved in a collective social practice of a potentially conflictive and contradictory nature. The methodology needed to reflect the complexity of relationships embedded within the twin sites of home and school. It had to reflect and value equally the voices of all participants and be able to describe and link processes, changes and developments in relationships. This kind of exploratory research demands the use of qualitative research procedures to explore people's constructions of meanings which have not previously been explored (Hassard, 1990) to aid the unravelling of the "who is assigning significance to what question" (Radnor, 1994, p. 7) in this instance, in the context of parent-teacher relationships. I chose a dyadic approach for the Main Study simply because any other construction seemed to me to be less appropriate or adequate. This is because the dyadic approach treats equally the perceptions, expectations and priorities of stakeholders and demands that the data be analysed and interpreted from two viewpoints, offering two lenses through which to view interactions and relationships. Although this is a small-scale local study, its dyadic approach offers insight above and beyond the anecdotal or purely subjective indicators of effectiveness which characterise some research in the field.

At the heart of a qualitative methodology lies the accessing of data from sources such as interviews. The process of analysis, "the interplay between researchers and data" is both a science and an art (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 13), leading to the formulating of ideas into a "logical, systematic and explanatory scheme" (Strauss & Corbin, p. 21) which either builds, or extends and broadens, theory. Such an approach if conducted rigorously and analysed systematically can explore substantive areas about which little is known. In the context of my research, this approach proffers a source of valuable insight into both educational practices and interactions between those who are jointly involved in working with children experiencing difficulties in school. Given my area of research, my approach needed to be consistent with "partnership with parents" principles (Wolfendale, 1999, p. 164) and I considered the parents and teachers as partnering me in an investigative process. I therefore adopted what Wolfendale calls "the co-operative research model" and offered participants every opportunity to question freely the interview process and the purpose of the research. The verbatim transcriptions themselves, which were returned to participants allowing them the opportunity to make alterations or further comments, were recognised by me as "artificial constructions from an oral to a model mode of communication" (Kvale, 1996, p. 163). I understood the transcripts, and subsequently the computer programme which I used to facilitate the analysis, simply as useful tools for a given purpose.

My commitment to a "co-operative research model" led me away from a facile understanding of the transcripts as decontextualised dialogue, "the rock-bottom data of interview research" (Kvale, 1996, p. 163). I constantly vacillated between the audio-tapes, my memos, field notes and the typed transcripts as I sought to capture and represent to the best of my ability the stories that were shared with me in a form which would unify the spirit of the original interview situation, the analysis and the final report.

Prior to interviewing the parents, I contacted each of them individually to discuss the research and to answer their questions, many of which revolved around issues of confidentiality. All of the parents, without exception, were eager to participate in a research project which was a) motivated by the needs of the children and b) might produce a more transparent understanding of parent-teacher relationships. Each parent was given a brief written outline of the context and aims of the research and asked to complete a short questionnaire prior to the interview taking place. Audio tape recording was used for the interviews and copies of the transcriptions were returned to participants providing the opportunity for amendments, or further comments. Only when I believed that informed consent had been given were the transcripts incorporated as data in this research.

The Main Study is a small-scale dyadic interview-based study of ten pairs of parents and mainstream primary school teachers in one London borough. Separate interviews were conducted with pairs of parents and teachers involved in negotiating "a way forward" influenced by their personal understandings of the needs of the child. Neither was aware of the contents of the others' interview. My broad aim when conducting the interviews was to gather data which illuminated the different knowledges and understandings that both parents and teachers have about individual children, their conceptualisations of discourses and official pedagogical practices in school, and the possible affect of these upon the dynamics of parent-teacher relationships.

Recruiting Participants

Having discussed my research interests with the local education authority and on receipt of written permission from the Director of Education, I collected data for both studies between December 2000 and August 2002.

The parental sample for both studies was drawn from parents whose ongoing concerns about their child's educational progress led them to seek additional information/help/advice from sources external to the school. This included private assessments of any descriptions; contact with voluntary associations or support groups; private specialist tuition and any other sources of information or support, for example, doctors, family members, other parents, libraries or the Internet.

In order to gain access to possible participants for the Main Study I approached some of the sources of information and support identified by the parents in the preliminary study (see above). I explained my intentions and requested their assistance in identifying potential participants. Parents were asked by these contacts if their names and contact details could be given to a researcher. I was then able to speak directly to the parents and to decide whether they fitted the criteria to be participants in the research. This in turn generated a snowballing process whereby parents suggested names of further potential participants. In all cases issues of confidentiality were discussed in depth. I also contacted professional colleagues and personal contacts in my search for potential participants. The interviews, conducted at a location of the participant's choice, were only undertaken after I had personally contacted the parents, explained the dyadic nature of the research and received their specific permission to contact the child's teacher.

The teacher in every case was either the child's current class teacher, or the teacher who had taught the child in the previous 12-24 months. I contacted the teachers and explained the focus of the research. Some teachers responded immediately, others felt they needed to contact their head teachers. Teachers who

expressed an interest were sent a brief written outline of the context and aims of the research and asked to complete a short questionnaire prior to the interview taking place. The interviews, conducted at a location of the teacher's choice, were held either in their schools, my office, or at their homes.

Using a Software Programme

My decision to use a software programme N5 was premised upon a specific and personal need to facilitate the data analysis by rendering it more physically manageable. My choice of software was made only after deliberation and research into "which products did what".

The initial process of importing the transcribed transcripts into N5 involved having to manually format each sentence into a text unit and the creation of sub-headers. This became the first stage in what was to became a continuous process of disassembling and reassembling the texts in a meaningful way. There is a temptation when faced with a mass of data and a schedule to meet to make premature conclusions, to summarise sections of text, and thus to overlook the subtleties within the transcripts. The critical effect in the early stage of the analysis of seeing each sentence as an individual unit of text is to neutralize those initial assumptions which inevitably arise in the preliminary stages of listening to the recorded interviews, and the subsequent transcribing and proof reading of the transcripts. Thus, the very process of utilising software can instigate a mode of reflection which continuously links the research questions to conceptual and theoretical frameworks, data collection procedures and analysis.

Coding qualitative data is not a risk-free strategy. It involves slicing through the data in order to produce standardised categories, a process which appears closely associated with the treatment of quantitative data. Coding qualitative material however involves grappling with the data so that the results do not produce purely descriptive methodological artifacts but become instead an empirical grounding for emergent theories. The process involves careful reading, thinking and reflection which is captured in memos and annotations which run alongside the nodes. Together, this provides the infrastructure for writing up the findings and their analysis.

My conceptual framework guided the process of inquiry and provided the original rough guide-map for the node structure. Categories were not however fixed and completely identified in advance but evolved during the course of the coding process. Some text units were coded under several nodes where they related to several different concepts or were unclear to me. All of this was noted in memos, again demonstrating a particular mode of reflection which results directly from using the software. The memos and annotations become the canvas for sketching theoretical write-ups about ideas, relationships between nodes or categories, thoughts, reflections, possibilities and insights as they occur. Together they chart the analytic process of my increasing understanding of the data in a transparent format.

I presented each dyadic case study as a descriptive overview followed by a summary of its defining features. These defining features were instrumental to the analysis and findings.   The drawing together of the defining features of each dyadic case study revealed a spectrum of types of relationships which varied according to their potential to become transformed into, and sustain themselves as, working partnerships consistent with Wenger's idealised model of a "community of practice".

Discussion

In my research I have used the "community of practice" approach as an heuristic analytical frame in order to illuminate and better understand the nature of interaction and learning between parents and teachers. The model is based upon a metaphor of apprenticeship. However, parent-teacher relationships are not apprenticeships and theorising learning from successful apprenticeship models does not unproblematically illuminate or explain the learning which takes place between parents and teachers jointly involved in understanding and providing for children giving cause for concern. Clearly the trajectory of participation of the parent cannot be described in terms of seeking to become a teacher, nor the teacher's trajectory of seeking to become a parent. A more accurate description would be that participation for both is not only about doing but is about learning to be (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Indeed some argue that the central issue, in respect of workplace learning, is "*becoming* a practitioner and not learning *about* practice" (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p. 48, original italics).

Parent-teacher partnerships are small, self-constituting communities which, perhaps, have the advantage of evading "the ossifying tendencies of large organisations" (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p. 50). The actual behaviours of these "communities of practices" are open to frequent changing either because newcomers, such as therapists, are introduced or because the demands of practice force the community to revise its relationship to its environment. Gaps between espoused and actual practice can become large and difficult to close, yet, according to Brown and Duguild (1991) these gaps must be closed if working, learning, and innovation are to be fostered. This process of development is inherently innovative and involves acknowledging, legitimising and supporting activities perpetrated by members of the wider community, allowing communities of practice some "latitude to shake themselves free of perceived wisdom" (Brown & Duguid, p. 53).

Parents and teachers are two groups who form part of the discourse community of "educators". However, their day to day identities are as part of narrower groups with different public "functions". Conflicts can arise when teachers' expectation of parental compliance comes up against parents' historically constructed practices of parenting, and their understanding of their role. Boundary events provide opportunity for boundary practices, the beginnings of mutual engagement and perhaps a starting point for a joint enterprise. Parents' evenings are one example of boundary events where "dialogue and interaction are possible, power relations are played out and alliances formed" (Herne, 2006, p. 5). Given time this (work of) connection can become a practice in its own right providing a medium for new "communities of practice". The emergent "community of practice" can be the conduit for external and innovative views resulting from harnessing different energies resulting in alternative interpretations and potentialities.

My analysis suggests that relationships between parents and teachers who succeed in working together to sort out children's difficulties demonstrate mechanisms which allow for joint meaning-making and continuity of agreed strategies. Such partnerships have within them the potential to address and overcome the problematics of status and power which undermine so many professional-lay relationships.

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003) argue that the significance of individual dispositions and biography in relation to the development of "communities of practice" is "acknowledged, but underdeveloped and arguably over-theorised" (p. 5).

They ground their argument "in the complexities of concrete experience" (p. 6) and attempt to build in dispositions to learning and work of real individuals related to past lives and careers. In the case of teachers who have been members of a community of teachers for several years Hodkinson and Hodkinson argue that it may become impossible to separate out learning careers from the evolution of the "community of practices" to which they belong (p. 17). This may explain why some teachers have difficulty in accepting parents as partners in a "community of practice".

One of the key characteristics of the parent-teacher "community of practice" is the continual striving for new and better ways to work with the child giving cause for concern. This kind of learning, "is the very nature of the practice that determines full membership of this particular community" (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003, p. 17). The learning which takes place is understood within the relationship between that community and the developing dispositions towards working and learning of its participating members. But neither the learning careers of individual members nor the "communities of practice" which they participate in can be separated out from the wider contextual issues within which they are embedded and which provide both tensions and opportunities for their members.

For parents and teachers learning within a "community of practice" is a dynamic process of being engaged in, and finely tuning, ongoing practice by learning the meanings and practices which bind them together. The following extracts from the data demonstrate both that participative learning between teachers and parents takes place and that teachers value it as a resource for helping children:

> It's just taking everything on board really, and using the good bits and bits that perhaps you don't agree with.[…] I think parents have got a very important part to play. Strategies that have been proven to work in the classroom can filter through to home and vice versa'. […] Sometimes it's very easy to assume what we think is best for the child without actually consulting the child and finding out what they find difficult, why they find it difficult and what they would like us to do to help them. (Teacher No. Nine)

> A parent can tell you about the child at home. What, for example, is their homework strategy? Do they do it in ten minutes, when in class they seem to take pride in their work; why do they do it in ten minutes at home? I love to know those sorts of things. Are the children pretending to know things in class and then it's coming out at home that they're not knowing it? (Teacher No. Ten)

> (A parent's) knowledge of their child, you can't argue with that. They are the people who know the child more than anybody. They certainly know them better than the teacher. The teacher only knows one side of the child, the parent knows everything about that child except how they're performing in the classroom. (Teacher No. Five)

"Community of practice" captures the sense in which people share and exchange knowledge, some of which is internalised or tacit, by allowing them to talk about their experiences. Talking, which clearly involves exchanging information necessary to progress activities, is also about exchanging stories, engaging and focussing attention. For Lave and Wenger, becoming knowledgeable in a practice

entails learning to talk within and about practice. Within the "community of practice" learners interpret, reflect and form meaning because the community provides the setting for the social interaction needed to engage in dialogue with others. Interaction allows for various and diverse perspectives on any issue to be seen. Practice, enhanced by analysis and reflection, allows for the sharing of tacit understandings and the creation of shared knowledge from the experiences among participants in a learning opportunity (Wenger, 1998).

Talking is an important way of learning, because it provides for the sharing of information not only about how to proceed but also about meanings, norms and ways of knowing that are specific to particular "communities of practice" (Maynard, 2001, p. 41). Sets of shared thoughts provide a common interpretative framework. Within the "community of practice", news is relayed rapidly and knowledge readily made available to community members:

> When anybody came in to observe Diane, we'd always feed back straight away. You know, "This is the report and this is your copy", just so she (the mother) knew exactly how worried we were and what we were doing. (Teacher No. Seven)

"Communities of practice" do not assume homogeneity of interests, contributions or viewpoints among members, neither are they self-contained entities but develop in larger contexts each with their own constraints. People take on a variety of roles within sometimes overlapping localised communities forging their identities through and within these communities. Both teachers and parents are potential members of communities which "overlap and interact with others with continuity and discontinuity; contestation and co-operation; antagonism and attraction" (Herne, 2006, p. 4). This multi-membership changes the various "communities of practice" to which they belong.

Schools are sites which operate as potential forums for the negotiation of different meanings, part of the complexity of social life, which arise amongst diverse populations. Interactions, whether tense or otherwise, are the lifeblood of learning communities. Practice can create boundaries which act as restraints restricting, inhibiting and mediating the establishment of partnerships. Practice can also create bridges across boundaries. The negotiation of boundaries is contingent to all social situations where individuals move from, or between, one community and another. Engagement in practice can extend beyond the core practice of the group to include support from others interested in the community's maintenance such as, for example, a head teacher, an educational psychologist or a therapist. Some of these agents may function as brokers, introducing elements of one practice into another (Wenger, 1998, p. 105). Brokers make new connections across different 'communities of practice', enabling coordination and opening new possibilities for meaning (Wenger, p. 109). Brokering is one way in which disconnections can be bridged in an emergent, or developing "community of practice". Brokers utilise their multi-membership to co-ordinate and align perspectives among members who "have different interests, make diverse contributions to activity and hold varied viewpoints" (Lave & Wenger, 1999, p. 23).

Negotiations between parent, teacher and others can become a source of local coherence and cohesion, an agreement as to what to do and what not to do with the child giving cause for concern. The shared repertoire of practices which result gains coherence from the fact that it belongs to the practices of the "community of

practice." When this is successful, both the parent and the teacher acquire the community's subjective viewpoint and learnt to speak its language: "I actually feel that they ended up respecting us the same as we respected them […] I could tell them any worries and they wouldn't judge me" (Parent No. Five). Parents and teachers acquire "not explicit, formal 'expert knowledge' but the embodied ability to behave as community members" (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p. 48). There is a sense of belonging and sharing in a collaborative engagement which is peculiar to the "community of practice".

A Mechanism for Change and Implications for Practice

Arguably, there are few relationships between parents and teachers which are as intense as those which revolve around children experiencing difficulties, and which would benefit more from complementary contributions. Interpersonal relationships between parents and teachers are diverse and complex, laden with emotions. For parents and/or teachers who participate and belong to several different "communities of practice", "reconciliation" work (Wenger, 1998) and ongoing effort is needed to bring coherence to a self which has multiple, sometimes conflicting roles. Membership of multiple communities and the resultant negotiation of rival allegiances is a "high tension zone" which carries with it an experience "at once heterogeneous, split apart, multiple […] a self unified only through action, work and the patchwork of collective biography" (Star, 1991, p. 29). Effective partnerships do not simply or spontaneously happen of their own accord. Various issues operate to limit or block and exclude the informed and willing engagement of both educators and parents and families alike (Macgregor, 2006, p. 3). Many of these issues were cited by Hargreaves (1999) whose analysis shows that the extent to which parents and educators interpret and come at issues from different perspectives and motivations often leads to a collision course. To be able to learn from conflicts and to deal with contradictions requires openness to cogenerative dialoguing (Roth & Tobin, 2002), a practice base upon the affordances that collective activity brings to the understanding and explaining of contradictions: "Cogenerative dialoguing is aimed at expanding the range of actions available to each participant, who can then do his/her part to improve the situation" (Lee & Roth, 2003, para. 64).

The transformation of the parent-teacher relationship into a partnership akin to a "community of practice" requires modification, motivation, and a willingness to negotiate. Embracing struggle and negotiation as part of the entry into a "community of practice" involves transformation and the surrendering of notions of control and power. It moves the individual away from "exclusive identification with a certain identity and instead focus(es) on the process of becoming, of negotiating our participation across the many communities we traverse […] conflicts yield to new creations, identities and possibilities" (Lee & Roth, 2003, para. 53).

Theoretically, a "community of practice" offers a member the possibility of changing, or adapting, their existing frames of reference, assumptions and theories. It functions as a context and mechanism for change, a way of arriving at a place where we can recognise "what we do and what we know, as well as on our ability to connect meaningfully to what we don't do and don't know – that is, to the contributions and knowledge of others" (Wenger, 1998, p. 76).

The "community of practice" allows for a "synergistic collaboration rather than a conflicting separation" (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p. 55). However, attempts to

systematically foster such synergy through a conceptual reorganisation might produce difficulties within schools where:

> work and learning are set out in formal descriptions so that people (and organisations) can be held accountable; groups are organised to define responsibility; organisations are bounded to enhance concepts of competition; peripheries are closed off to maintain secrecy and privacy. (Brown & Duguid, p. 55)

Different kinds of pedagogic knowledges need to be recognised and acknowledged. Sites, for example schools, which privilege certain forms of knowledge and perspectives over others, decrease the possibilities for negotiating meanings through co-participation. This can make full participation, that is engagement with all the resources of the community and the potential for full participation in its social relations, more difficult and lead to discontinuities which thwart the emergence of new elements in the repertoire of practices, opportunities and relationships. As a result, parents, teachers and children may be restricted and/or excluded from contributing to a collective production of meaning reached through a process of negotiation requiring sustained attention, continuous interaction and continual readjustment.

Wenger's "community of practice" framework is useful because of the particular meaning he gives to practice which he describes in terms of those things that individuals within a community do to further a set of shared goals, drawing on available resources. Wenger describes how external influences are "mediated by the communities in which their meanings are negotiated in practice" (Wenger, 1998, p. 85) and this negotiation of meaning takes place between individuals as they attempt to make sense of tensions and contradictions. The engagement in a joint construction of meaning, implies that established understandings and practices can be called into question, perhaps ultimately to be changed (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006, p. 302). Ainscow refers to anomalies "which disturb and cannot be accommodated within existing frames of reference" (Ainscow et al., p. 303) and questions how some teachers and schools are able to respond to anomalies by rethinking their understanding and reconstituting their practices. He concludes that the answer to this lies partly in the attitudes and values of those who make up the "community of practice" and, in particular, of those head teachers "who can exercise positional power and other forms of influence on those attitudes and values" (Ainscow et al., p. 303). This therefore becomes a process of disturbance which offers a mechanism for change and development. However, "anomalies do not simply present themselves, but have to be recognised as such" (Ainscow et al., p. 303).

One of the key factors which affects responses to anomalies is the attitude of teachers and headteachers and their willingness to be reflective and open questions up. This is the territory of the "community of practice" where processes of meaning-making in the context of the community are at work. The negotiation of meaning, a dynamic productive process entailing interpretation and action, "constantly changes the situations to which it gives meaning and affects all participants" (Wenger, 1998, p. 54). The pupil, as an active participant, can also have a significant contribution to make, both to teacher expertise, and to negotiations around the meaning of being a learner. This space for the negotiation of meaning is particularly important for pupils because it allows them the possibility of becoming active members, rather than passive recipients, in their own learning.

Social theories of learning, which refer to learning in social settings, have the potential to illuminate previously unvoiced forms of social knowledge and offer a way forward so that currently "disqualified knowledge" (Foucault, 1980, p. 82) may have a role in the redefinition of practices, discourses and personal or public agendas. Wenger's work offers a theoretical framework for participatory practice with potential benefits for understanding and providing educationally for children giving cause for concern. Participation "permits individuals or groups to influence decisions that would otherwise be arbitrarily imposed on them" (Giddens, 1991, p. 212). It is the contextual interrelationship between learning, meaning-making, knowledge production and identity which can impact upon children experiencing difficulties in school and their families. For the child to benefit from the practice of their parents and teachers there needs to be a transparency within and among relationships which encourages participation, expanded learning and complementary contributions.

The "community of practice" can function as a mechanism for change. By allowing experiences to be shared by more or less experienced members, it offers the possibility of increased participation and the changing of existing beliefs and assumptions. The interchange of ideas and negotiation of meaning through active engagement both acknowledges and allows for tensions. This is as much a part of the process of problem-solving, as it is of diluting the effects of the power relationships, politics and competing priorities which characterise social situations. It can be difficult to challenge the distribution of authority, and negotiate constraints "the structures, rules and procedures, exclusions and oppositions which control and restrain what can and what cannot be said, which seek to shape meaning and to represent the 'normal'" (Haw, 1996, p. 324). The privileging of certain forms of knowledgeability and perspectives decreases the possibilities for negotiating meanings. This can result in discontinuities which thwart the extension of repertoires of practices, opportunities and relationships. Discontinuities can result in parents, teachers or children being restricted and/or excluded from contributing to a collective production of meaning reached through a process of negotiation requiring sustained attention, continuous interaction and continual readjustment. Lave and Wenger's theorising shifts the focus away from the theory/practice dichotomy and encourages an examination of the possible effects of resources made available in different contexts. Resources for learning can enable or exclude. Depending on how they are used, resources can enable access to the practice or alienate participants (Adler, 1998).

Although developed as an explanatory tool to understand learning, the "community of practice" framework is also taken as a tool for changing practice: "If learning takes place in communities of practice then it is a natural step to attempt to foster or support the development of such communities" (Boylan, n.d., p. 1). The earlier discussion of issues of power and trust show that a "community of practice" does not develop and function in a vacuum. The context within which it is embedded is a major factor determining its success or otherwise as a means of creating and transferring knowledge. The adoption of such communities requires active engagement by all members of the school community in a form of participatory democracy that focuses on process as well as outcome. The democratic process involved allows for, and fosters, fluidity and change in order that the social practices of the community be shaped by all of its members. Moving towards more democratic practices requires a willingness to respect and listen to others. This process, however, is frequently hampered by dilemmas arising from embedded relationships of power in current educational settings and a lack of sense of collective responsibility. Whilst

asymmetrical relations of power exist in schools, these dilemmas will have no easy solutions. If improving the amount and quality of participation within the school community lies at the heart of policy and policy makers, then consideration should be given to moving in the direction of learning communities which proffer the opportunity for a more inclusive approach to emerge out of internal school dynamics and conflict.

For participation to have benefits, activities needs to be undertaken with the specific purpose of enabling parents to influence decision-making and bring about change. In the words of Raffo and Gunter (2008): "People have become alienated from traditional democratic institutions which seem remote from their lives. A democratising rationale is, therefore, a means whereby people can once again engage with decisions which affect them directly" (p. 405). Participatory approaches will be more effective if embedded within a supportive organisational structure which avoids, or minimises, a tokenistic approach towards recognising parents as active and competent citizens. It may be that, in the context of parents and teachers working together, the "community of practice" is something to be worked towards developing rather than an adequate description of that which commonly exists. It may also be that the importance of this area of research lies not only in deciding whether parent-teacher relationships can be (re)configured as 'communities of practices' but also in better understanding the nature of the social groupings which exist when the "community of practice" model is not applicable.

One defining characteristic of a "community of practice" is its potential to resolve the problem of assumptions and stereotyping since there is no assumption of an homogeneity of interests, contributions or viewpoints among members. It is a self-contained entity which develops in larger contexts each with their own constraints (Wenger, 1998, p. 90). The "community of practice", as a community of learners involved in interpretation, reflection and the forming of meaning, is a site of cultural transformation in which all participants are potential beneficiaries. The interchange of ideas, and negotiation of meaning through active engagement with each other is as much part of the process of problem-solving as it is of diluting the effects of the power relationships, politics and competing priorities which characterise social situations. Accepting a parent into a community of teachers, like becoming and belonging, is not necessarily an easy project or undertaking. It is a process which is fraught with struggle since it involves the transformation of the community of teachers. Critical inquiry into practice forces practitioners to move into the centre of their doubts (Schön, 1987) sometimes resulting in a reframing, of personal understandings of role and professional relationships. Better informed parents can create new demands upon teachers which may result in changes to their practice. The process of existing community members learning from skilled newcomers is not covered by Lave and Wenger's theory (Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson, & Unwin, 2005). Educational professionals may have to question the adequacy of their knowledge traditions, and be able (and willing) to deconstruct and reconstruct their knowledge, practices and discourses. This may require a "specific effort to suspend (and/or contest) authority relationships and the authoritative interpretive judgements which sustain them" (Winter, 1991, p. 478)

Much of the literature on the nature of participation describes parental participation as a somewhat separate or fragmented set of activities, rather than as an embedded approach which presumes empowerment. In this paper I have argued that Wenger's concept of the "community of practice", deployed as an "ideal model", can function as a template for examining parent-teacher relationships within a social

theory of learning which sees learning as an expression of social participation. I suggest that this theory, with its social rather than didactic approach to problem-solving, can contribute to the improvement of school and teacher-parent focused educational decision-making situations which affect children's life chances. I hope that the analytical framework which I have begun to develop provides a means for exploring some of links between social inclusion, educational policy and school leadership.

The ideas enshrined in the notion of the "community of practice" provide the basis for a theoretical model of educational practices involving transformative and collaborative inquiry. It provides the vision of a potential application to the practice of parents and teachers who, theoretically, come together in a joint project constantly mediated by the perceptions of the needs of the child who is giving cause for concern. The "community of practice" has the potential to be a site within which discourse becomes more inclusive and less exclusive and participation increases whilst exclusionary pressures and processes decrease. This suggests that inclusion implies a whole school approach to social relations which values equally the knowledge and contributions of its parent, teacher and pupil members.

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