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Partnership Working between Home and School

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Abstract

This chapter will explore the concept of home school partnerships within British early years education. The advantages of effective relationships between home and school will be briefly outlined before the historical development of the concept discussed. It will be argued that home school interactions are historically situated within a deficit paradigm, wherein a desire to overcome social inequality is paramount. Consequently, enhancing learning through continuity and cohesion between home and school learning practices dominate professional perspectives on school-home relationships. Due to the growing influence of social constructivism, the relative position of parents within this exchange has changed over time and led to the inception of partnership working. Nonetheless, partnership working between home and school remains fraught with practical and conceptual complexities and may necessitate the mutual renegotiation of the constructs of ‘parent’ and ‘professional’. In turn, any renegotiation may require an understanding of the habits of thought underlying these constructs, as well as the time and space for renegotiation. Finally, overcoming inequality, the driving force behind current patterns of partnership working, may depend on systemic change, beyond enhancing the home learning environment, which the emphasis on partnership working may disguise.

Keywords: parental partnerships, home-school interactions, partnership working, early years, early childhood education, pre-school interventions

1. Introduction

Within UK Early Years literature, it is often noted that a child’s parents are their first and foremost educators [1–3]. It is also observed that developing strong and positive relationships between the child’s ‘first educator’ and their subsequent, school-based educators is highly beneficial. This concept is not unique to the UK. A quick internet search using the search terms ‘the benefits of home school partnership’ draws numerous results from across the globe, all outlining the many advantages of good relationships between a child’s caregivers and their professional educators. Within these global sources, the benefits to the child are foregrounded and include, increased motivation; improved attitudes towards learning; enhanced self-esteem; greater confidence; increased resilience; fewer behavioural problems and improved grades [4–6]. However, benefits for parents and teachers are also noted. For parents these include improved relations with the school, an increased understanding of their child’s education and greater confidence in their abilities to support their child’s learning at home. Similar benefits are also noted for

teachers whose job satisfaction is enhanced through stronger and more positive relations with parents and an increased understanding of the child. These conclusions reflect those of numerous academics and researchers (For example, see [7–14]). Furthermore, the benefits are observed in families from diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds [6]. Consequently, it is easy to understand the global drive to enhance relations between home and school.

Nonetheless, despite the enthusiasm for effective interaction between home and school, the concept is not without practical and conceptual complications [9, 14–16]. For both parents and practitioners, a greater understanding of these complexities may improve relationships and can be gained through an exploration of the dominant paradigms underlying home school interactions within British early years education. Whilst focusing predominantly on early years education, this chapter will explore issues of value to parents and educators of any age child. As a British trained educationalist, much of the literature and policy used within this chapter comes from the UK. Nonetheless, the conclusions have implications for parents and practitioners across the globe. Furthermore, the concepts discussed have relevance for all professionals working in close relationship with the parents of young children, whether they be educationalists, health or social care professionals.

Please note: For the purpose of this chapter the term parent is used according to Section 576 of the British Education Act 1996 in which a ‘parent’ is defined as any person, whether or not they are the child’s ‘biological parent’, that has parental responsibility, or who has care of the child. This is further defined as:

‘A person typically has care of a child or young person if they are the person with whom the child lives, either full or part time and who looks after the child, irrespective of what their biological or legal relationship is with the child’ [17].

There exist many different types of educational practitioner and establishment looking after the care and education of children under the age of statutory schooling in the UK. However, for fluency and ease, the terms ‘schools’ and ‘teacher’ are used to refer to all forms of early childhood setting or practitioner. However, as noted above, the conclusions of this chapter are not limited to education professionals but are relevant for all professionals working closely with parents.

2. Continuity, cohesion and narrowing the educational gap

It can be argued that positive relationships between home and school have often been characterised in terms of continuity and cohesion between the contexts of home and school [7–9]. This is deemed necessary because the learning practices within these two contexts can be perceived as distinct. In her seminal book ‘Children’s Minds’ [7], Margaret Donaldson noted that for young children, the dominant forms of thought found at home and school can be very different. Donaldson observed that schools favour a more ‘disembedded’ form of thinking, rooted in the abstract signs of the written word and mathematical symbol. This is distinct from the more contextualised and embedded form of thought natural to young children in other contexts, especially the home. Nonetheless, homes rich in parent–child communication, diverse literacy practices and exposure to number contain plentiful opportunities for both types of thought. Consequently, children whose home environment fosters a familiarity with disembedded thought are more school ‘ready’ and have an advantage over children whose home life has not adequately ‘prepared’ them for the forms of thought found in school. Since it was first documented, this association between a child’s home environment and learning outcomes at school has profoundly influenced how educationalists view home school relationships.

Since the 1960's, it has been observed that, compared to children from higher socio economic backgrounds, children from lower socio economic backgrounds are less likely to experience a home life rich in language, print and number and are thus less likely to be 'school ready' [18]. Furthermore, the comparable quality of a child's home learning environment remains a significant influence on educational outcomes throughout a child's schooling [3, 8, 11, 19]. Consequently, beginning in the 1960s and 70s, efforts have been made to improve school outcomes for working class children by 'preparing' them for the 'language' of school through preschool intervention programs, such as compensatory education in the UK [18] and the High Scope program in the USA [20]. Since that time, the association between the quality of the home learning environment, parental socio-economic status (especially poverty) and positive outcomes for the child, has dominated concepts of home and school interaction within British early years education and shaped government policy.

Fundamental to Early Years policy within the UK is the concept that educational outcomes for disadvantaged children can be improved through the creation of high-quality early learning experiences, both at home and school. This is critical to reducing social inequality by 'narrowing the gap' between the school readiness of children from different socio-economic backgrounds [21, 22]. This is evident within the Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory guidance published by the Department of Education, which states, 'Every child deserves the best possible start in life and the support that enables them to fulfil their potential ... Good parenting and high quality early learning together provide the foundation children need to make the most of their abilities and talents as they grow up' [23]. Consequently, there has been a drive to enhance the quality of early childhood provision *and* the quality of the home learning environment through parent and professional collaboration. The latter aim underlies many early childhood initiatives and organisations in the UK, such as the National Children's Bureau [19], the Early Learning Partnership Parental Engagement Group [24], the Parents, Early Years and Learning (PEAL) project [2] and Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) [12]. Attempts to enhance educational outcomes through parent and professional cooperation (epitomised by the Sure Start initiative launched in 1998 by the Labour Government) has been recognised by EY specialists worldwide as 'probably the most ambitious attempt of any government to improve the outcomes of children living in disadvantaged areas' [25, 26]. Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children by enhancing the home learning environment is an initiative that receives global support [27, 28] and is seen as a way of stabilising society and boosting national economic success [12, 29].

The consequences of this paradigm have been profound and has led to a model of home school interactions in which EY practitioners extend their professional influence beyond the setting to 'improve' learning practices at home [16]. In the UK, this is reinforced through government policy wherein expanding school learning into the home is encouraged, 'Practitioners must discuss with parents and/or carers how the summary of development can be used to support learning at home' [23]. Academics concur and argue that achieving long term gains in children's outcomes is dependent on improving parenting (For example [11–13]), 'it is work with parents to enhance what happens at home that is the real place of "intervention"' [12]. In many of the initiatives noted above, PEEP being an excellent example, improving the quality of parenting through training and professional support is their sole mission and this is made clear in their websites tagline 'supporting parents and children to learn together' [30]. Professional involvement in the home learning environment fosters the desired cross over and cohesion between home and school as parents adopt school learning practices within the home. The practitioner thus is

firmly positioned in the role of 'knowledgeable expert' [14] who shares their knowledge with less experienced parents, scaffolding them into a greater understanding of school languages. In turn, parents adapt their home learning practices, continuity of practice between the two contexts is heightened, motivation for learning in school is increased and outcomes improved.

3. Beyond the early years; continuity and cohesion in statutory education

To maintain the gains made by early intervention, continuity between home and school practices must extend beyond the early years and continue throughout a child's school life. This is advocated by academics within the UK (For example [9, 24, 31]) and internationally: 'Efforts to support children's long-term success must extend beyond the ECE setting into elementary school' [32]. Thus, cross over and cohesion between home and school contexts remains an important paradigm throughout a child's schooling. This is evident in the common terminology used to describe home school interactions, in which the phrases parental *involvement* and parental *engagement* dominate. This engagement or involvement may take different forms and can be defined thus:

'Engagement' is taken to include:

- Learning at home: help with homework, subject skills, other skills and talents, attitudes, values, aspirations and behaviour.
- Communication: school-home; home-school.
- In-school activities: volunteering; helping in classrooms, parents' evenings, field trips; participating as a member of an audience.
- Decision making: undertaking role as school governor or other committees and advisory groups.
- Collaborating with the community: community contributions to schools and families; family and school contributions to the community [31].

However, the emphasis remains on the parents participating in the language and learning of school, supporting attainment through the adoption and extension of school learning practices within learning at home. Consequently, the teacher is again placed into the position of the 'knowledgeable expert' [14] who extends their expertise beyond the classroom to assist parents in understanding and emulating the pedagogies of school [16]. This is exemplified within the various forms of parental communication employed by schools and organisations to communicate with parents, wherein parental engagement is used to enhance parental understanding of school pedagogy. Within my own experience, this has been undertaken in several different ways, for example:

- Workshops, information meetings.

Here a specific area of study is chosen (for example Numeracy in Key Stage 1) and teachers illustrate the teaching methodology used within the classroom through presentations or workshops. The parents may play a passive or more active role depending on the structure of knowledge transfer planned by the professional, but rarely have reciprocal influence over the methodology.

- Newsletters, magazine articles, information booklets and blog posts.

These can be used to impart administrative, procedural and pedagogical information to parents. The former can be online or in paper format and often include pictures and examples of children's learning to enhance parental understanding of school pedagogy. The parents are usually passive receivers of information but may be able to comment if the publication is online, though comments may be monitored by the school prior to publishing.

- Exhibitions, open mornings, performances.

These usually involve the parents and children, who share and present their learning to their parents. These may be interactive or passive, depending on the pedagogy of the school but, again, parents do not influence ensuing school practice.

- Reports and Assessment Feedback.

Paper or electronic feedback to parents that demonstrate learning outcomes against accepted indicators of progress. They may include detailed written comments or numerical/alphabetical symbols to represent learning. Confirmation of parental receipt and/or comments may be requested by the school but further participation by parents is rarely expected.

- Learning Journals and Assessment Portfolios.

Commonly found in Early Years settings, Learning Journals are an example of narrative assessment [33] and may contain examples of children's learning, photographs, observations and other relevant material. They are used to document and share a child's learning and progress. In the last five years, assessment portfolios are more frequently electronic. Dependent on the setting, contributions from the parents may be requested by the school.

- Home school communication booklets.

Most often found in Early Years or Primary settings, these are used to share information between home and school on a regular basis. The information they contain can be administrative, procedural or pedagogical and both parents and professional are encouraged to contribute.

These examples are usually offered in addition to the traditional parent/teacher meetings wherein parent and teacher meet face to face to discuss progress, either as part of a formal school event or requested by the teacher or parents. Dependent on context, such parental meetings can be knowledge transference from teacher to parent (common in the more formal school events) or have the potential for dialogic exchange. The format of meetings is usually decided by the school management, though this may be done in conjunction with parents through the involvement of a parent group.

Throughout a child's learning, then, the dominant paradigm within home school interaction places the school and teacher as 'knowledgeable experts' [14] who, to improve outcomes for the child, expect the parents to engage with their 'voice' [34]. Within this relationship, little or no recognition of the knowledge and expertise of the parents is evident, despite the insistence that parents are the child's first and foremost educators. Nevertheless, there has been a gradual shift in this paradigm, especially within early years education.

4. Partnership working with parents

The commonly accepted link between the quality of the home learning environment and positive outcomes for the child, has fostered home-school interactions in which parental knowledge is subsumed beneath that of the more knowledgeable professional, whose expertise extends into home learning practices. However, under the influence of social constructivist theories, the relative position of parental understanding within this knowledge exchange has begun to change (For example, see [18, 20]). To return to Donaldson, her initial research was prompted by a desire to challenge Piaget's experimental approach, wherein children were viewed as solitary learners [20]. Moving away from development as a process of individual maturation, Donaldson viewed the child as learning through active participation within a social context [20]. Enhanced by the ideas of Jerome Bruner [35] and Lev Vygotsky [36], social constructivism has since become the predominant paradigm of early childhood pedagogy in the UK [3, 18, 20] and is reflected in government policy. In her governmental report on the early years statutory framework, Dame Tickell notes: 'Children's learning and development from birth to five occurs as the result of a complex interaction between the child and her/his experiences within relationships, and in the environment' [3]. The participatory and interconnected nature of learning is also reflected internationally [13, 37] and underlies the New Zealand curriculum *Te Whāriki*, wherein "children are positioned as confident and competent learners from birth... (who) learn by engaging in meaningful interactions with people, places and things" [38]. Thus, learning is seen as the co-construction of understanding through purposeful and meaningful interaction between the child, adult/s and environment (including culture) within a particular socio-cultural context [12, 39]. Within early years pedagogy, this process is labelled 'sustained shared thinking' [18, 22] and takes place when a child and adult engage in a democratic, reciprocal and expanded interaction (verbal or otherwise) which deepens a child's understanding. Ideally this process is led by the child and the adult uses their expertise and knowledge to scaffold the child's learning, engaging in a meaningful dialogue through actively listening and responding to the child's utterances and reasoning [11, 18, 22].

Whilst first finding dominance in early years pedagogy, the concept of learning as the co-construction of meaning between active participants within a dialogic interaction is gaining influence throughout statutory education. The new curriculum currently being piloted in Wales [40], forefronts a responsive pedagogy based on reciprocal interactions. Within the 'Curriculum for Wales', communication and partnership working between practitioner, learner and community are central, prompting a more fluid and responsive co-construction of skills and knowledge [40]. The social nature of learning is also being championed by some neuroscientists. Cozolino, for example, [41] challenges the dominance within learning theory of concepts such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs [42] arguing that the brain is predominantly a social organ. Whilst it is true that infants need food, warmth and shelter to survive, Cozolino argues that these necessities are gained through successful relations with their primary caregiver. Consequently, survival is dependent on effective interaction with others. For Cozolino, this social drive has been severely underrated within learning theory and must be rectified through a more socially responsive approach to learning within schools.

Within both the UK and New Zealand, social constructivist theories of education, place greater emphasis on the role of parents within learning. If children's learning arises 'from the interplay between the inter-connected and dynamic facets of the unique child with surrounding relationships and experiences' [3] then it

cannot be sufficient to simply inculcate parents into the schools view of their child as a learner. Greater recognition must be given to parental knowledge. This is reflected within the concept of parental partnerships, 'I would particularly like to see parents and carers more involved and working in close partnership with practitioners' [3] wherein, '... the transfer of knowledge and understanding (is)part of a two-way process: not only from school to home but from home to school' [31]. Thus, schools must take more note and respond to the parent's perceptions of the child as a learner and begin working in 'partnership' with the parent.

Within partnership working, although potentially different from that of the professional, the knowledge and understanding of the parents is seen as valid to the child's learning and thus, cannot simply be subsumed within the school's voice. Consequently, the multiple influences and complex pathways of learning are recognised [13] and a more responsive relationship between home and school is required. This offers great potential for a more dynamic and fluid conception of learning, wherein differing perspectives are recognised and celebrated [43, 44]. This can be viewed as beneficial for several reasons. First, it could be argued that the centrality of schools in disseminating the social languages of our culture, necessitates a more responsive and intercultural curriculum, capable of reflecting multiplicity [43]. For advocates of such a curriculum, world peace and the future longevity of the human species may depend upon it [43]. Certainly, recent political and social movements have highlighted that multiplicity of voice is necessary to challenge embedded social inequality and institutional prejudice [45–47]. Furthermore, there is an increasing recognition that we are uncertain about the precise skills and knowledge our youngest learners will need in the future [48–50]. In a report published by UNICEF it is noted that, "the gap between the levels of learning that education systems are providing and what children, communities and economies need, is growing" [51]. The uncertainty created by the COVID 19 pandemic and the unknown direction that economies and educational institutions may take as a result, has further highlighted the potential, as well as the necessity for change. The rapid closure of schools and businesses due to the pandemic thrust parents and professionals into novel relationships. Whilst teachers remained in charge of designing, planning and resourcing the learning through online learning platforms, parents had to take responsibility for delivering this learning to their children. Informal discussions with parents throughout this process, indicated that while some parents found this extremely difficult and desired professional support (especially those working online from home in full time jobs), others embraced the opportunity to learn more about their children's thinking and learning. In addition, some children flourished in this new learning environment and, upon returning to school had made far greater progress in core skills than would have been expected within the classroom. These informal observations suggest that parents and children may benefit from a greater voice in education and that educational institutions play a greater role in society than providing skills and education for children, they also provide economic spaces for uninterrupted working. Thus, new pedagogies are needed that more responsive to community needs to prepare learners and families for the economies of the future [40, 50]. Within the new Curriculum for Wales [40] and 'Te Whāriki' [38] the potential for schools to respond to their local communities is inherent and it is expected that each school will be co-constructed between professional and community. Consequently, the crucial role of parents as the first and foremost educators [1–3] is paramount and their knowledge and experience is no longer subsumed to that of the professional expert but plays a greater part in the community construction of learning [14, 16, 37]. However, such participatory working may require a renegotiation of the concepts of professional and parent.

5. The complexities of partnership working

Whilst an exciting and positive step forward, responsive schooling and partnership working is not without conceptual and practical complexities. If the aim of parental partnerships is to co-construct an image of the child as a learner based on the knowledge and expertise of both parent and professional, then the relative roles of parent and practitioner require renegotiation [16, 18, 37]. Renegotiation, however, is dependent on several crucial factors including:

- Trust between participants
- An open-minded and responsive sharing of knowledge and ideas
- Honest self-reflection on both sides.

These requirements create significant stumbling blocks to effective partnership working and we will discuss each in turn.

5.1 Trust

A fundamental barrier to developing partnerships with parents is the considerable mistrust that can exist between parents and practitioners [9, 31]. The exact nature of this mistrust may be dependent on the context but is often exacerbated by perceived power differentials between parent and professional [16]. For practitioners working with disadvantaged children, negative parental experiences with schools and other professional institutions can be difficult to overcome [31]. Since their inception, practitioners working within initiatives such as Sure Start, PEEP and Children Centres have devised innovative strategies to overcome potential mistrust with parents, often with great success (see [31, 52, 53]). Nevertheless, constantly changing political strategies and a dependency on short-term public funding, lead to lack of continuity for parents and professionals, which undermines nascent partnerships and increases long-term mistrust [54].

Alternatively, practitioners working in schools with strong parental governance, or in fee-paying schools may feel that any power differential lies in favour of the parents, leaving the practitioners feeling vulnerable [16]. Conceptions of professional exposure or susceptibility can lead teachers to label parents in different ways, including acquiescent, pushy or conflictual [55]. Whilst, not an explicit attempt by practitioners or parents to undermine the role of the other, mistrust and perceived power imbalances undermine the potential for responsive communication and illustrate an inherent tension within the concept of partnership working [14].

5.2 Reciprocity between school and home

Responding to home learning practices and incorporating them into school learning, challenges the predominant view of the teacher as the knowledgeable expert scaffolding the parent into professional wisdom. However, the co-construction of a new 'position' for the professional is complex. From the professional perspective, renegotiation may undermine their conception of themselves, leaving them feeling vulnerable and less confident in their skills, abilities and role [14], especially in the face of opposing views or conflictual parents. Consequently, practitioners compartmentalise parental knowledge, considering it supplemental to their professional understanding rather than view it as an essential element of a responsive learning dialogue [14]. This effectively undermines any potential for the

co-construction of learning practices between home and school [56]. However, the renegotiation and co-construction of professional roles is possible and is evident within settings utilising the Te Whāriki curricula framework in New Zealand [37]. Nonetheless, successful role renegotiation necessitates questioning the underlying assumptions shaping participants current perspectives of themselves and each other. There may be two barriers to this process. First, an inability to easily identify the assumptions underlying the 'habits of thought' [57] that shape the constructs of parent and teacher. Secondly, the myriad of (often contradictory) sources that we draw upon to create our personal and professional perceptions of self [37]. This takes us to the third of the points listed above, the necessity for effective self-reflection.

5.3 Self-reflection

For many supporters of partnership working, self-reflection is necessary to identify practitioner and parental values which may inhibit the renegotiation of the roles of 'parent' and 'teacher' [19, 24, 37]. Prior to renegotiation, parent and practitioner must acknowledge the historically and culturally situated nature of these constructs, as only when this is fully understood, is it possible to question the assumptions underlying each role and co-construct new meanings [57]. However, due to our minds lack of proprioception, it is very difficult for us to understand the contingent nature of our thoughts. Consequently, culturally and historically created values and practices are converted into emotionally and psychologically powerful 'truths' whose origins and influence are difficult to perceive but shape our intellectual, physical and emotional reactions, nonetheless [57]. Their very nature thus masked, they act as a powerful barrier to empathy, trust and self-reflection [57] and hinder the 'genuine dialogue' necessary [58] for partnership working. Furthermore, the multiplicity of individual experience means that parents and teachers draw on a plethora of influences and underlying assumptions to define their roles and the relationship between them (often not fully understanding their pedagogical implications or potential contradictions) [37]. Thus, perceptions of what it means 'to be a teacher' or 'to be a parent' are gained through a vast conglomerate of individual experience, drawn from potentially similar but ultimately unique social and cultural influences. The complexity of questioning all these assumptions is huge and require time, space and continuity of interaction, all of which are often absent within parent and practitioner relationships [37]. Consequently, most teachers and parents revert to 'commonly accepted truths' within their interactions, these in turn most likely being drawn from dominant cultural discourses [37]. Thus, many opportunities for engaging in a genuine renegotiation of meaning may be unwittingly lost. However, these are not the only difficulties inherent within the concept of partnership working.

6. The extent and limits of re-negotiation

The nature and extent of responsiveness required for successful partnership working is also open to question. An open-minded co-construction of learning between home and school necessitates a respect for, and inclusion of, differing perspectives. However, balancing perspectives between home and school may not always be easy. This was recently brought to the fore within a primary school in Birmingham, UK, wherein the schools' attempt to embrace an equality agenda (essential under the 2010 Equality Act) through resources and lessons that included reference to same-sex families, drew vociferous protests from some parents and

religious groups. Following weeks of protests outside the school, court appearances and five months of consultation between parents, community representatives and the Department for Education, an uneasy truce was achieved and the lessons were resumed in a modified format. However, throughout the negotiations, both sides claimed that their intentions had been misunderstood [59–61]. This experience illustrates that partnership working with parents takes place within legal, cultural and religious boundaries that can themselves be complex and potentially contradictory. Thus, it is naïve and unreasonable to expect parents and teachers to easily negotiate the complexities of differing political viewpoints and instigate responsive schooling and partnership working without specialist training and support [37]. Whilst, there exist many educational resources and published schemes of learning to support the teaching of concepts of acceptance and diversity to children and adolescents in school (for example see [62, 63]), in the author's twenty five years in education, professional training and expertise in partnership working (especially within statutory schooling) remains relatively low. Nonetheless, professional learning to support parent and professional communication and negotiation will be essential for the successful implementation of more responsive pedagogies, such as the new Curriculum for Wales, in which community opinions play a crucial role [40].

It can be argued, then, that providing the necessary expertise to enable successful partnership working is vital. Utilising the rich experiences of practitioners working within the established Te Whāriki curriculum in New Zealand [38], alongside a framework derived from conceptions of dialogue outlined by Bohm [57] may assist. Nuttall notes that underlying the co-construction of parent and practitioner roles in New Zealand is the explicit sharing of participants' images of childhood as well as participants' expectations regarding education [37]. The importance of explicitly sharing knowledge and understanding was also reflected in a case study undertaken by the author as part of her doctoral thesis [16]. The purpose of the case study was to analyse nascent partnership working within a large and extremely diverse international school in Bangkok. Initially hypothesising that reciprocal and open dialogue would be best achieved in a context where professional sharing of expertise was kept to a minimum, it was soon discovered that without an explicit sharing of at least some expertise by the teacher, the parents had no starting point for negotiation. However, once teacher knowledge was explicitly shared, but left open to comment and debate, parents felt more confident to question and engage [16]. Furthermore, this professional knowledge was shared with parents, not as a prompt for action, but as an interpretation of children's learning as witnessed by parent and professional. Parental comment on this interpretation was then invited, creating a space for a mutual exploration of perspectives. Within these interactions, the *process* of dialogue was paramount, not the outcome of that dialogue. For Bohm, foregrounding the process of dialogue rather than the *outcomes* of dialogue, offers a potential framework for successful interaction [57] and may encourage a greater acceptance of a Bakhtinian multiplicity of voice [34]. Within such dialogue, the 'thinking together' becomes the focus of the interaction, rather than reaching any conclusion and thus a safe space for the mutual exploration of ideas is created. This 'sustained shared thinking' [18, 22] illuminates previously unquestioned habits of thought or assumptions, which are reflected upon in a more open manner because there is no pressure on a formal outcome [57].

Nevertheless, foregrounding the process of dialogue can remain beneficial, even when an outcome is required. When transforming two small nursery classes into one large, single nursery unit, space was provided for open dialogue between diverse colleagues prior to any change [16]. Through this dialogue, participants became aware of previously unperceived 'habits of thought' about their practice. These were then reflected upon communally and their import re-assessed.

Responsive and reflexive dialogue requires participants to develop a clear expression of one's beliefs [43]. As a nursery staff, our open dialogue allowed us to negotiate a clear expression of our shared beliefs [16, 64] and illustrated Bohm's view that, one's unperceived assumptions can be illuminated through open engagement with the beliefs of others. However, as noted previously, this process requires time and space, both rare in the context of most home school interactions [37] and remains dependent upon trust between participants. Furthermore, the question of the extent of responsiveness required for effective partnership working also remains. When beliefs differ, there comes a point where an individual must decide to modify their thinking through the renegotiation of a new understanding or return to one's original idea [43]. Thus, any decision must be drawn up against a robust evidence base and preserve the flexibility to respond to new evidence [43]. Within our staff dialogue, certain topics, such as the inclusion of gun play in the nursery, required the gathering and analysis of published evidence before a decision could be made and even then, required re-negotiation at periodic intervals in the light of new experiences. Thus, the sourcing and evaluating of evidence may also be essential for effective partnership working, alongside empathy, responsiveness and reflection. Paradoxically, developing the skills required for partnership working may require parents and professionals to experience the very skills and attributes embedded within curricula such as the new Curriculum for Wales or the International Baccalaureate Curriculum [43, 65]. Thus, it may be the next generation of parents and practitioners, who having themselves experienced a responsive education, may be better prepared to embrace partnership working.

Finally, before concluding, it is necessary to return to the noted driving force behind partnership working - the desire to reduce social inequality. Improving the quality of school and home learning are perceived by many to enhance the educational outcome and subsequent economic chances for disadvantaged children. Goodall, however, notes that emphasis on improving home learning practices remains firmly situated in the deficit paradigm, which is itself based on a 'culture of poverty' myth and disguises the need for systemic change [15]. She notes, 'Whereas once education was hailed as a great equalizer, an engine of social mobility, the current reality belies any such belief' [15]. Consequently, practitioners are left in the paradoxical and indefensible position of attempting to 'achieve equity by ignoring inequity' [15]. For Goodall then, whilst partnership working and parental engagement are positive moves towards a more reflexive education system, we can no longer unquestionably accept that they are a panacea for reducing social inequality. Instead, it is time for us to critically analyse the discourse and challenge the systemic issues that create that inequality [15].

It can be seen, then, that fostering successful home school interactions is far more complex than the literature may lead practitioners or parents to believe and may require a deeper analysis and evaluation, as well as professional training and expertise, for long term success.

7. Conclusion

Within this discussion it is argued that, whilst regarded as beneficial for a child's learning, the concept of positive home school relations is complex and fraught with inherent tension. It is also deeply embedded within a deficit framework, wherein improving the quality of the home learning environment is associated with more positive outcomes, educationally and economically, for disadvantaged children. Within this paradigm, contradictions within home school interactions are created that are not easy to negotiate. Nonetheless, drawing on the experiences

of practitioners working within the established 'Te Whāriki' curriculum in New Zealand [38] and fore fronting the process of dialogue, may enhance the potential for working in partnership with parents. However, as it currently stands, the paradigm may camouflage the real sources of inequity and thus inhibit the development of long-term solutions. Nonetheless, the purpose of this argument is not to undermine burgeoning partnerships between home and school but to clearly delineate the current complexities, so that the potential for successful partnership working in the future is enhanced.

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