



# Parent voice: knowledge, values and viewpoint

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## Abstract

National policy increasingly stresses the importance of parents' engagement in education. However, tensions and struggle for control between parents and teachers is a common research finding. This article identifies a number of reasons why parents' views on curriculum, pedagogy and the purpose of schooling are commonly seen as of less relevance or legitimacy than those of teachers. The views of parents of children participating in vocational courses offered through two 14–19 Pathfinder partnerships are interrogated. The cogency of parents' views and the differences in the values of parents and staff emerge. It is suggested that if parents' voice is silenced, it is likely to be for reasons other than their capacity to enter into a debate on curriculum and pedagogy.

**Keywords:** 14–19 Pathfinder, pedagogy, vocational education

## Introduction

The importance of the role of parents in schooling has been recognized since at least the Plowden Report in 1967 (CACE, 1967; Walker and MacLure, 2005). Such a view is increasingly prevalent worldwide. Reflecting this international trend, the UK government has laid growing stress on mutual support and accountability between teachers and parents. It has augmented the influence of parents on their children's education through structural change such as parental presence on governing bodies, parental contracts and the Parent's Charter of 1991 (DfEE, 1997; Power and Clark, 2000). Reay (2005: 25) asserts that 'parental involvement is no longer optional'. The policy discourse suggests a positive relationship between teachers/schools and parents to the benefit of both individual learners and schools (DfES, 2005a).

However, even a cursory review of articles in the media concerning parents' relationship with schools and specifically school staff reveals a less positive picture. Some parents are reported as ever more irresponsible, more litigious and more violent, as failing to parent their children adequately while at the same time making unreasonable and selfish demands on the school (Lowe, 2002; Passmore, 2002; St John-Brooks, 2001; Wilce, 1997). The contradictions do not escape parents. As one parent governor observes:

One minute we are the recipients of tough new measures such as tags, contracts and parenting orders because of all the feckless, truanting, disrespectful anti-social young people we are raising: the next, we're being wooed with round-the-clock childcare so we can work ourselves silly helping the country become more productive while still being perfect parents. Finally we're feted as the saviours of the education system. (Millar, 2005)

In the context of such ambivalence, this article explores issues related to the voice of parents. Epistemological, political and pragmatic issues are inextricably linked in who has a voice and how it is understood. Alcott (1991: 12) argues that all communication is an event where 'who is speaking to whom turns out to be as important for meaning and truth as what is said'. The relative power of speaker and listener 'affect whether a claim is taken as a true, well reasoned and compelling argument, or a significant idea' (1991: 13). The power flows within schools may affect not only how the views of different groups are received but also which of them has an opportunity to communicate at all. Parents, defined as not only the biological mother and father of students but other relatives, step-relatives, foster parents and guardians of those in care, stand in an uncertain power relation to school staff. Research has generally suggested parent teacher/school relations to be a tense struggle, where issues of ethnicity, race and socio-economic class inform the shifting power play for control of schooling and life chances (Ball, 2003; Bates and Riseborough, 1993; Crozier, 2000; Cullingford and Morrison, 1999). Here, 'the harmonious, anodyne relationships presented in many of the parental involvement texts ... are characterised by a struggle for control and definition' (Phillips, 2005: 27).

This article scrutinizes previous research on relations between parents and schools and identifies key justifications given by schools for their orientation to parents' views. The issues are then related to a dataset of interviews with 44 parents of children aged 14–19 participating in two Pathfinder projects in England. The snapshot data are used to explore, illustrate and challenge the barriers sometimes constructed by schools in relation to listening to the views of parents, by examining the perspective of one group of parents in one educational context. While these data cannot be seen as representative, they do however contribute to our understanding of the mechanisms by which parents, for all the structural change embedding their rights, are still often rendered silent by schools.

### **Parents' engagement with schools**

Academic explorations of parents' engagement with schools include sociological analyses of the influence of class (Reay, 2001), pedagogic analyses of parental impact on learning (Beresford and Hardie, 1996; Driessen et al., 2005) and analyses using business tools depicting parents as customers to whom schools must be 'marketed' (Smedley, 1995; West, 1992). The way their voice is heard is coloured by the assumptions and ambivalence of policy-makers, professionals and researchers. They are often conceptualized instrumentally in relation to how far they provide a perceived positive or negative influence on their child(ren) and on schools. Phillips (2005) identifies five imperatives for schools to engage with parents:

- parents will support the work of teachers;
- parents will be able to help teachers understand better individual children's needs;
- parents will be able to suggest improvements to the school;
- parents will help schools respond to diverse cultures and communities;
- parents involvement will empower the disadvantaged. (Adapted from Phillips, 2005: 86)

The list presents the contribution of parents as positive but is framed from the perspective of schools and teachers. Internationally, research has noted that parents' involvement in schools, even when labelled 'partnership' is generally on the terms of the professional (Robinson and Timperley, 1996). It is constrained in its influence, 'parents helping teachers to achieve goals specified by teachers in ways specified by teachers' (McCreath and Maclachlan, 1995: 71). The limitation or rejection of parents' involvement is on the grounds that they are both less knowledgeable and more partisan than teachers. Parents are assumed to be primarily concerned with their own child(ren) (Reay, 2005) demonstrating 'narrow self-interest' (Phillips, 2005: 93). In particular, middle-class parents are portrayed as ruthless and determined in their quest for advantage for their own children (Ball, 2003; Lumby and Wilson, 2003). It is also assumed that their knowledge of curricula and pedagogy is narrow, justifying the limitation of their contribution to supporting their own child, fundraising and, through governance, 'counting the toilet paper type stuff' (Robinson and Timperley, 1996: 70).

Partnership is mooted rhetorically as the relationship between education professionals and parents, predicated on mutuality of values and aims (Lumby and Morrison, 2006). However, the literature rather attests to an unequal relationship with parents viewed as lacking basic credentials necessary to play their part, including at times proper values and aspirations. Some at least are depicted as requiring re-education to properly shape their attitudes to mirror the professional values of schools (Maden, 2001; Vincent and Martin, 2005; Vincent and Tomlinson, 1997). While the rise of the quasi-market has led to some schools paying close attention to parents' wishes for their children pre-enrolment, schools then revert to habitual power relations once the child is in situ, with teachers retaining power over most decisions (Sallis, 1991; Walker and MacLure, 2005). Bagley et al. (1996) present a range of evidence from schools, quoting school staff who seek to deflect, ignore or manipulate parents' views in order to retain control of schooling. As a result 'educational professionals have been criticized for adopting a so-called "conversion" approach to parental involvement, seeking to change parents' attitudes and bring them round to the professionals' viewpoint' (Woods, 1994: 201).

This brief review of literature has identified a range of analyses which suggest that the contribution of parents to schools is related to two premises established by Alcott (1991). First, parents are involved in a 'ritual of speaking' (p. 14) where the position and the context of the speaker is a critical component in how understanding of their utterance is constructed. Second:

Certain contexts and locations are allied with structures of oppression, and certain others are allied with resistance to oppression. Therefore all are not politically equal and, given that politics is connected to truth, all are not epistemically equal. (Alcott, 1991: 15)

It is suggested that parents' voice is not given epistemic equality with that of staff and the article explores such epistemic inequity by considering the views of one set of parents on their son or daughter's experience of vocational education as part of a Pathfinder project. It briefly explains the nature of 14–19 Pathfinders and the methodology. Data from parents are then used to explore the issues raised in the literature through which epistemic inequity is sometimes justified by professionals, that is:

- The knowledge base of parents to contribute to debate and decisions;
- The degree of narrow self-interest or otherwise;
- The values and expectations of parents;
- The importance invested in emotional wellbeing.

Given that rather than the voice of parents being heard there is habitually a 'thundering silence' (Maguire, personal communication 2000, quoted in Vincent and Martin, 2005), the article gives a degree of voice to one group of parents in relation to a specific experience of education.

## Methods

The research reported here selects from a larger set of data comprising the views of 130 Year 10 and 11 learners and 63 staff as well as 44 parents, participating in two 14–19 Pathfinders. The latter were introduced in the Green Paper *14–19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards* (DfES, 2002), as projects designed to experiment with new strategies for educating and training 14–19-year-old learners through partnership arrangements involving schools, further education and sixth form colleges, employers, private sector trainers and universities. Additional funding is provided to pump prime structural and curriculum experimentation with a view to establishing sustainable innovation and transferable models for the use of schools, colleges and employers (Higham et al., 2004). The Green Paper indicated that pathfinders should:

- test out a range of ideas and discover new ones;
- develop best practice in 14–19 education and training to guide the steps to, and pace of, a national roll-out;
- see how 14–19 policy will fit with other policies, identify barriers to a coherent 14–19 phase and design ways to overcome them;
- show that a coherent 14–19 phase can be achieved nationally in a variety of locations with different social circumstances and different mixes of schools and colleges. (Higham et al., 2004: 7)

Resources for Pathfinders are often supported by funding from various sources. In this case, development was primarily funded through the Increased Flexibility for 14 to 16 Year Olds Programme (IFP). Vocational courses were offered to Years 10 and 11 (14–16-year-olds), to be taken at a further education college and less often in the school or workplace. Compulsory school age learners and their parents therefore had the experience of being able to compare school with a different environment for learning and to compare traditional academic programmes with vocational courses.

The parents in question had one or more son or daughter in 12 secondary schools which were participating in the Pathfinder partnerships. The schools were selected as a purposive sample to include different categories (mainstream, community, special needs), different locations (urban/rural), pupil intake (mixed pupils from predominantly white and from minority ethnic backgrounds), rates of deprivation and truancy, pupil attainment levels, and whether or not they have a sixth form. Participants in the Pathfinder partnerships generally spent a part of the week, usually a half or one day, undertaking vocational study. This ranged from training in a craft or trade such as construction, vehicle maintenance or hairdressing through to education related to general occupational areas such as

engineering, leisure and tourism, childcare. In a minority of cases the vocational education was undertaken in the school or a partner school or on employer's premises. In the majority of cases, the programme was offered at a local further education college. The young people concerned were generally those not expected to gain five or more GCSEs at A\*-C. In each case, as part of researching the impact of the Pathfinder, the school was asked to approach the parents of Pathfinder participants and ask if they were willing to be contacted by researchers and to speak to them by telephone to give their views. In the case of two schools, focus groups of parents were organized by the school, in one case to supplement telephone interviews and in another as an alternative. Forty-four parents agreed to be interviewed and were contactable (32 female, 12 male). Mothers often take greater responsibility for the education of their children than fathers and this is reflected in the fact that the majority of those who agreed to speak were mothers (Reay, 2002). The son/daughter of seven of the parents had special learning needs. Two were Asian British, the rest White British. One was a foster carer.

No claim is made that this group is representative. Indeed the group is likely to display a particular perspective. The schools generally selected participants who had not been academically successful. Therefore, most were not the parents of academic high-flyers. Some had children who were very troubled and perceived by the school as troubling. However, a few had other children who had been very successful academically and progressed to university. This group of parents therefore reflects a view influenced by the fact that the child in question had not necessarily found schooling a happy or successful experience.

Parents spoke to a researcher by telephone for between 10 minutes to half an hour. The majority of phone calls were in the evening, and therefore parents had other preoccupations such as making a meal, dealing with children, etc. Parents' time was therefore at a premium. Some parents responded succinctly and did not provide lengthy detail. However, others clearly wished to speak at length. In some cases, the parents spoke passionately about their child's experience of schooling and their own response. It was as if the floodgates had opened to communicate not just their opinions on schooling and the Pathfinder, but the emotional journey they and their children had taken. Listening to the distress, anger and frustration of some parents was at times a disturbing experience.

A semi-structured interview was shaped around a small number of key questions concerning:

- What parents saw as the purpose of the Pathfinder project;
- The parent's involvement, if any, in the child deciding to participate and choose a programme;
- The impact of the programme on the range of available opportunities;
- Any effects on the child's learning and behaviour;
- How they would like things to develop in the future.

Some parents answered each question. Others diverted in their concern to tell their story and provided a narrative of their experience and views. While there was a range of ease in articulation, the parents generally were fluent and clear.

Responses were noted by the researcher. Narrative of their story was recorded verbatim. Where only brief answers were given, key points were noted. The focus groups were tape recorded and transcribed into verbatim comments and key points. From the resulting data

can be discerned something of the views of this group of parents on curriculum, pedagogy and the purpose of schooling.

While the focus of the article is on parents, there is occasional reference to the views of staff and young people. The views of the latter are drawn from hour-long focus group interviews with 17 groups of six to eight Year 10 and 11 learners. Individual hour-long interviews were conducted with staff. Space precludes presenting a more detailed explanation of these aspects of the methodology, which is available in Lumby and Morrison (2006).

### **Knowledge base of parents**

The majority of parents noted that their child's involvement in a vocational programme had led to gains in confidence, self-esteem and affective skills and these were linked by the parents to pedagogic issues. Though they may not have used technical vocabulary, they nevertheless had cogent opinions on the level, teaching and learning approaches, resources and structure of their child's learning. A different pedagogy allied to a greater feeling of security away from being bullied or pressured at the school had led to a much higher level of motivation, effort and concentration for some learners. They identified a range of differences from school which in their view effectively supported their child's learning.

### *Experiential approaches*

Thirteen parents used the word 'practical' as a form of praise and many more implied that experiential learning was more likely to engage their child and achieve learning. As one father expressed it, 'He is not too keen on sitting in a classroom. He gets bored and doesn't try' (Father P). Several parents contrasted the experiential learning used in the vocational programmes with a habitual school approach of sitting, listening and writing.

### *Group size*

Parents valued the smaller groups and small group work which were the norm on the vocational programmes.

### *Appropriate level and pace of learning*

The work being pitched at an appropriate level was noted. For one mother her daughter 'now won't be left behind. It is fantastic, excellent' (Mother B). Mother D believed that 'tasks were worded properly', that is in such a way that her daughter could understand what she was expected to do and could achieve the learning aim

The idea of fitting learning to the individual was noted as a strength by several parents. 'Playing to their strengths, not their weaknesses' (Father J). Flexibility in timing was another aspect of individual fit, Mother L noting that her statemented son was able to take longer than the usually allotted single academic year to achieve a qualification. He was capable of the work but slower than other students. The flexibility of the college in this respect was not what she had come to expect from the school system.

### *Resources*

Mother N mentioned the greater space and resources at college. In this she was echoing the strongly expressed view of the young people themselves who found school classrooms claustrophobic and oppressive. Parents had sensed that issues of space and freedom to move about were essential elements of a different culture (Morrison, 2005).

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Other resources also mattered. Mother D suggested that the routine use of a computer at a work place, rather than writing by hand, considerably helped her daughter who had struggled for many years with handwriting and presentation.

These parents had valuable things to say about the nature of learning, about its level, its fit to individual needs, the use of group work and experiential learning, the importance of the physical environment and the relationship with the tutor. One focus group of parents made key points about the environment and approach which could help their children learn, summarized as:

- They need an adult relationship with the tutor.
- They need to know why they are doing what they are doing.
- They need to be occupied all the time.
- They need help when they need it.

While the majority of parents were positive about the vocational programmes and grateful for the different and, in their view, more appropriate learning it offered, they were not uncritical and some had observations on why the learning was sometimes not satisfactory.

The quality of teaching came under close scrutiny. In contradiction to a stereotype of parents concerned only with their child acquiring the specific job skills which would get them a job, several parents were critical of the lack of challenge and theory in the vocational programmes. For Father AA's son 'Today he made beefburgers. There is not a lot of theory going on as there should be ...the depth of the course is not up to it'. The experience of Father HH's son was similar:

My son came home one day and when I asked what he had been doing he said he had been digging holes ... He likes the college. It's given him an experience and he wants to go back, but the course itself is boring.

Similarly there was concern about how far key skills such as communication were being developed. Parents would not accept vocational programmes if they offered less challenge or depth than academic programmes.

What such views underscore is that, while the great majority of parents were very positive in their view of vocational experience, they did not accept it uncritically, nor did they necessarily see it as an answer to the issues faced in every individual case.

In summary, the views of the parents suggest a knowledge base sufficient to make cogent comments about the challenge, pacing and delivery of the curriculum, the relationship with teachers/tutors and the appropriateness of the physical environment. The parents were insightful about the learning environment and approach which was likely to lead to gains for their children, and they were equally insightful about what would inhibit progress. They were well able to contribute to a discussion about curriculum and pedagogy.

### **Self-interest**

The praise and criticisms of parents drew on the experience of their own child or children, but some related their views beyond their own family to what might be appropriate for others, for all children, for the economy and government policy. The children of this group may be those targeted by the 'raising aspirations' movement. The latter has

become a relatively unchallenged concept, policy-makers and professionals alike assuming that the current ambitions of some are inappropriate and need to be changed. Many of this group of parents viewed things differently. First, they saw the targets set by government related to achieving GCSEs as unattainable by their son or daughter and therefore irrelevant (DfES, 2005b). Secondly, they valued service or skilled jobs and saw them as a positive way forward for their children and a valuable contribution to the economy. They welcomed it as a return to what they termed 'the old ways' of training young people in a skill which would make them employable and therefore independent. Mother M, speaking of the vocational programme, felt:

I think it's a good idea. They used to do it before but stopped. A lot [of children] are not into reading and writing but are good at other things, so this can help with their careers, pushing them in that direction.

Is this mother guilty of low aspirations, realistic or simply expressing a view based on different values to those who wish to 'raise aspirations'? Mother V took the government to task:

For some time now the government has made young people feel they can't succeed unless they have a university qualification, no matter the discipline, even video watching. Now they are becoming aware of the void in the hands-on and skilled sector and of the need to provide opportunities for vocational training. You can only have so many people who are academically brilliant.

The same notion that 'we need manual workers as well as academic' (Mother A) was expressed by a number of parents. Not all of the learners were from families with no experience of higher education and consequently vulnerable to being charged with having inappropriately low aspirations. One parent had three children who had gone to university, but the fourth was felt to have different talents. Getting a job at 16 or at 18, sometimes with or through training, was not a despised outcome but one they valued. This group of parents was expressing a view which, while it was founded on the experience of their own child or children, went beyond narrow self-interest. They considered the implications for government policy not only for their own family but for other children and for the economy. Mother N suggested all young people should have a term at least at a further education college in order to achieve the gains in perspective and experience offered by the different learning environment and approach. Parents were expressing views about the devaluing of vocational pathways and its relation to the economy, discussed elsewhere at length by academics and policy-makers. In this they were clearly not promulgating merely narrow partisan perspectives but took a broader view which was informed by but not necessarily limited by their family and community history.

### **Values and expectations of schooling**

In many ways the views of parents reflect the dominant themes in the current 14–19 debate. Many saw their children alienated by school and left outside the credentialist system which acts as a gateway to pathways and life chances for the future. Also in line with current policy themes, vocational or 'practical' education was cited by most as a means to greater inclusion and success for many young people. In this, the different values base of staff, learners and parents was apparent. The young people themselves were acutely aware that they were often selected to participate because they were of low



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academic attainment and/or perceived as presenting behavioural problems 'thick'. Father S made a point about the selection of participants because they were a perceived 'problem' rather than as a match to their learning needs:

I think it's a very worthwhile way of doing things for the right people. Effort should be made in making sure the right people get selected. It's not right to send kids to college only to get rid of them. The issue of their learning should be given greater prominence.

Father CC commented, 'It was almost as if they had been shunted into a siding out of the way'. Equally some parents felt that limiting vocational programmes to 'slow learners' was a misunderstanding of the relevance of such courses to all.

The desire to ensure that young people, whatever their background, achieve their full potential and are not inhibited by inappropriate narrowness of aspiration is entirely to be supported. The replication of family experience from generation to generation is undoubtedly a limitation on many young people's lives (Bates and Riseborough, 1993). However, who is adjudicating where a decision – to follow a vocational pathway – reflects inappropriate aspirations or rather an entirely legitimate right of choice for the individual? Currently teachers adjudicate, many within this sample group generally seeing a vocational pathway as appropriately limited to those seen as 'problematic':

The perception is that it (vocational education) is appropriate for students who might not cope with mainstream and perhaps have an attention problem. Some kids who wanted to go to the college were not necessarily those who we wanted to send. (Head of Year 11)

Many staff wished to ensure that all those likely to achieve GCSEs were retained on such programmes. Some staff also saw an increase in learners going to college as a threat to option numbers and so the security of staff jobs. Government policy was cited as the root cause for keeping as many as possible on GCSE programmes, creating the imperative to maintain or improve one's place in league tables. The latter was seen as essential for the school to at minimum survive and hopefully flourish.

Some parents did not accept this as the whole story. Parents saw the issue much more in terms of teachers' attitudes to different pathways and to pedagogy. Mother A commented on the lack of differentiation according to individual need:

Some teachers are very helpful. Other teachers think all children should be in class learning like all the other children. Teachers need to be re-educated too.

The promotion of a middle-class trajectory in current 14–19 education policy (sixth form, higher education, then high-skilled job) (Lumby and Foskett, 2005) oppresses those who have different values and preferences of life choice, life style and education/training/employment. Parents were in effect questioning the values of teachers and the values implicit in the national curriculum. Currently 46 percent of children do not achieve the benchmark of five or more GCSEs at A\*–C (DFES, 2005c). This is nearly half the population. Equally under half of young people currently enter higher education, the increasingly feted path to success in the future (Young, 2001).

Analyses of the purpose of education offer multiple conceptualizations (Jarvis et al., 2003). The reproduction of divisions in socio-economic class, gender, and ethnicity has

been accepted as a persuasive analysis for many decades (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Education's role in social reproduction is obviously beyond the scope of this article. However, the article may make a contribution to understanding the process by suggesting that attitudes to parental voice is one mechanism by which a challenge to the existing system is deflected. The outgoing head of the Secondary Heads Association recently depicted the government's stated intention to give more influence to parents as 'putting alcoholics in charge of the bar' (Millar, 2005). This was an astonishing insult to parents. It stands as symbolic of many attempts to discredit their views as uninformed, prejudiced or unrealistic. It also reverberates with a perception noted by Ball that relations between staff and parents were organized 'on the professional's terms, and tended to see children as needing to be rescued from inadequate backgrounds' (1994: 44). The value base of these parents was such that most esteemed vocational pathways and saw them as appropriate to many, or in some cases, all children. They also wanted a tighter link between schooling and those outcomes other than progression to higher education. In this they were at odds with the value stance of many staff in the two Pathfinder partnerships.

Teaching professionals are sometimes suggested to be more objective than parents and therefore likely to balance the competing needs of different children or groups of children, where parents will prioritize the needs of their own (Ribbens McCarthy with Kirkpatrick, 2005). In contradiction to this view, Reay (2005) argues that schools attend most to the needs of the most vociferous rather than the most needy. Phillips (2005) goes further in suggesting that teachers generally support the status quo and see views which challenge this as deviant from a 'natural' order. Quantz and Rogers (1991: 3-4) point out that there is overwhelming research evidence that 'schools work for the very special interests of the status quo' and that working-class, black and minority ethnic children and their parents are silenced by schools. If parents are to be engaged in order to elicit their views, then their perspective must be valued rather than diminished, labelled as inadequate or based on ignorance. This group of parents is distinctive in as much as their children were not generally academically successful. Their expectations of schooling were expressed clearly, that children should be enabled to enjoy learning attitudes, knowledge and skills which suited their predilections and abilities and would fit them for a future happy life and economically viable employment. For most of them, pathways linked to further training rather than education, were not a second-best consolation prize. In contrast, staff tended to see strong connections with future employment rather than future education as deviant. If useful cooperation between parents and school is predicated on agreed aims and mutual values, then the exploration of the views of this group of parents has highlighted how far from the case this appears to be, at least in relation to these children who are not on academic trajectories.

The distance between the two groups was further highlighted by the parents' emphasis on the emotional wellbeing of their children. Many of the parents had a bleak view of their son/daughter's experience of school. The frequently expressed view was that school was a place you went to fail, that what it provided for young people like their son or daughter was not appropriate, not enjoyable, not likely to offer any success, and consequently demotivating and depressing. The frustration of parents of children who were bored by or hated school, and were forced to study for GCSEs they would not pass was very clear. The words enjoyment and happiness were used by 15 of the parents. Reflecting previous research fourteen of the 15 were mothers, who appear to stress

emotional wellbeing more than fathers (Reay, 2002). They were delighted by the new experience that their child could be happy, could enjoy learning. 'She seems to go out and return happy all the time. Not many kids can be that happy and enthusiastic about school on a Monday' (Mother V). Research into parental school choice has indicated the high value placed by parents on their children's happiness (Smedley, 1995; West, 1992). Echoing this finding, there was a strong sense amongst this group of parents of something important and irretrievably lost if the adolescent years were spent feeling miserable because of school. One young man with learning difficulties who had been bullied, according to his mother 'is now happy and all he wants is to get a job. He'll be happy as an adult although he is very unhappy as a teenager' (Mother A). Government policy and many of the staff to whom we spoke stress raising achievement and participation. Happiness is not a concept which is mentioned. For teachers, hard work, even if not enjoyable, was *de rigueur* to pay in advance for enhanced life chances. For many of this group of parents, the majority of whom were mothers, happiness is a key factor in how they judge education. The gulf in values and preferences is clear. Government discourse tends to privilege the voice of teachers, that learners must work hard, be disciplined, achieve. The assumed superiority of this value position over that of parents and many learners points up strongly the silencing of those families and individuals who have different preferences.

### Whose voice?

The privileging of teachers' views is grounded partly on the basis of their greater expertise, but also because they are 'motivated towards the public good rather than their own private benefit' (Davies and Coates, 2005: 119). Such commentary makes invisible the body of research which questions the alignment of the profession of teaching to 'to community interests rather than self-interest' (Bergen, 1988: 43), one of the elements of the ideal construct of professionalism. The degree to which learners' interests in secondary schools are overridden by those of teachers has become evident (David, 1993; Keys et al., 1998; Lumby and Morrison, 2006). The pre-eminence given to the teachers' or the school's self-interest rather than parents' or children's preferences or interests emerges from this set of data (see Morrison, 2005). One might also question in what sense teachers *could* reflect the interests of all learners, given the differences in values between middle-class academic teachers and vocationally oriented parents and learners which emerge from the discourse of this group of parents.

These parents clearly have sufficient knowledge and breadth of view to contribute to the debate on what should be the curriculum in their child's school, and how it should be delivered. The silencing of their voice appears to be more likely to relate to their different values and expectations and their critical attitude to schooling and individual teachers. Vincent and Martin (2005) suggest that current parent school relations are not democratic partnerships but rather attempts to re-educate parents to professional views or at best instances when parents may speak but are not heard. This group of parents was not homogeneous. Nor is it not possible to generalize about parents' views on the basis of this snapshot. However, it is possible to suggest that if these parents are at all indicative, the reasons for denying or silencing their voice are likely to be other than their ability to contribute cogently to the debate on schools and schooling.

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