Pupil participation and the home–school relationship

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Schools are required to develop policies and practices in line with the principles of both partnership with parents and pupil participation. However, there is increasing recognition of the potential tensions that may exist between these two principles. This paper reports on a study that aimed to explore the question of how schools might develop their home–school relationships in ways that enhance rather than constrain pupil participation. It focuses on the perspectives of children aged 6 to 16 years (with and without special educational needs), parents and teachers concerning children's involvement in decision-making at home and at school, and their participation within the home–school relationship. The findings highlight the need for schools to develop a coherent view of what active participation means for children and a vocabulary to communicate about this not only with pupils and staff across the whole school, but also with parents. They demonstrate that there is scope for two-way support between parents and teachers in relation to the promotion of children's involvement in decision-making both at home and at school. Further, they illustrate the complex and evolving three-way partnership between parent–child–teacher that is central to the home–school relationship. While it is acknowledged that children may rightly wish to keep a distance between aspects of home and school life, it is argued that there is a need for schools to give explicit consideration to the place of pupil participation within the home–school relationship.

Keywords: *Pupil participation; Parent partnership; Home–school relationship*

Introduction

The focus of this paper is on the relationship between parent partnership and pupil participation. Partnership with parents is an ideal with a long history in relation to education generally, and special needs education in particular. Although the term has been used in a range of different ways, it is usually underpinned by an understanding that parents and teachers have complementary roles in relation to children's education and that children benefit when the home–school relationship is characterized by

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reciprocity, trust and respect. An accumulation of research evidence beginning in the 1970s and continuing to the present day has highlighted the association between parental involvement and children's educational achievements (e.g. Hewison & Tizard, 1980; Coleman, 1998); school effectiveness and school improvement (e.g. Ball, 1998; Wolfendale & Bastiani, 2000); and, more recently, the promotion of successful inclusion (e.g. Gartner & Lipsky, 1999; Mittler, 2000). By contrast, although children's rights to participate in decision-making have been recognized by the UN Convention on Children's Rights (1989), pupil participation is a less well-established notion in educational policy (Wyness, 2000; Alderson, 2002). In the English policy context, both parental and pupil involvement featured in the original SEN Code of Practice (DFE, 1994), the governmental framework of guidance for special educational provision. However, whereas partnership with parents was described as a 'fundamental principle', the participation of children in the educational process was not strongly emphasized. This was a disappointment to many who endorsed not only the rights-based arguments for pupil participation, but were also persuaded by growing evidence that: children do better personally, socially and academically where they are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning (e.g. Cox, 2000; Weare, 2000; Bearne, 2002); and that pupil participation is an important part of inclusive educational practice (e.g. Roche, 1996; Rose, 1998; Thomas *et al.*, 1998; Messiou, 2002). These potential benefits have now been acknowledged within the Revised Code (DfES, 2001a), where both partnership with parents and pupil participation are each given the full weight of a specific chapter, as well as further elaboration within the associated SEN Toolkit (DfES, 2001b).

While there is an emerging consensus that both partnership with parents and also pupil participation are in principle desirable aims, neither by itself is an unproblematic notion. It is apparent, for example, that despite the principle of equality that is implicit in the idea of parent partnership, in practice the parental experience is rarely one of equal status in educational decision-making (e.g. Armstrong, 1995), and further, that the nature of the home–school relationship is also affected by gender, ethnicity and social class variables (e.g. Vincent, 1996). The notion of pupil participation, similarly, involves both questions of power and responsibility and also the need to accommodate diverse professional and community priorities and perspectives. What is more, as a number of authors have begun to note (e.g. Brannen *et al.*, 2000; Wyness, 2000), there is a potential tension between the two principles. For example, might increased parental involvement in their children's education work against children's autonomy in managing the home and school components of their life? Children may have their own perspectives on how best to 'manage the gap' between these (Alldred *et al.*, 2002). Where the relationship between parents and teachers is such that there is a regular sharing of information, advice and decision-making, might this add to the degree of adult control experienced by children? Parents frequently fulfil the role of mediators and advocates for their own children, and they are clearly in a unique position to do so. Indeed this may be a particularly significant part of the parental role where children have special educational needs (e.g. Dale, 1996; Read, 2000). However, the greater the degree of parental involvement, the greater may be the risks

of habitually having parents speak for their child, rather than acknowledging that parent and child perspectives are not identical (Edwards, 2002). It is notable, in this context, that many authors have highlighted the concern that: 'To be both a child and disabled ... conjoins characteristics which are doubly disadvantaging as far as having one's voice heard is concerned' (Thomas *et al.*, 1998, p. 18).

If schools are both to work in partnership with parents and also promote their children's active participation in educational processes, there is a need to recognize such potential tensions. A central question then emerges: that is, how can schools ensure that they develop their home–school relationships in a way that acknowledges the needs, rights and unique perspectives of both children and their parents, and that enhances rather than restricts children's participation. This question is not limited to provision for children with special educational needs and their parents, of course, but has a broader whole-school significance.

In order to begin to explore this question, a study was undertaken which aimed to elicit teacher, parent and pupil perspectives on children's active involvement in decision-making at home, at school and within the home–school relationship.

The study

The study involved interviews with staff, parents/carers[1] and pupils (with and without special educational needs) in four selected school settings: an all age range generic special school; a resource for visually impaired pupils (VI resource), based in a primary school and working primarily with five- to seven-year-olds; a primary school; and a secondary school. The schools were selected on the basis of their established commitment to the development of partnership with parents. This was identified in a variety of ways: in three schools key staff had participated in professional development courses on promoting home–school partnership; three schools were regularly the focus of visits and placements for other staff on such courses; and in two cases, schools were recommended for their good practice by local education authority (LEA) officers. The four schools were at differing stages in the development of their approach to pupil participation. Senior staff with responsibilities related to parents and/or pupil participation were interviewed individually or in pairs in each school. These staff then arranged for group discussions to take place with small groups of parents (group size six to 11) and/or pupils (group size three to ten). The pupils' ages ranged from six to 16 years. In all, six staff, 28 parents and 19 pupils were involved.

Staff, parents and pupils were provided in advance with an explanation of the study and the sorts of issues to be covered in the interviews and group discussions. Staff interviews focused on: their own and the wider school response to the current policy emphasis on pupil participation; the particular approach taken to participation at individual, class or year, and whole-school levels; and the extent to which their school sought to involve pupils in home–school communication. Parent and pupil groups followed a common set of discussion points. Both were asked for their views about the importance of children having a voice in decisions. Then, focusing on decisions

at home, at school and in the context of parent–teacher communication, parents were asked to describe and comment on the extent of their children's participation, while pupils were asked about their own experiences.

The parent and pupil group discussions took place within school and, in most cases, staff were present for at least some of the time. It must be acknowledged that these factors could have a bearing on the participants' responses. However, with respect to the parent groups, a decision was made to build upon existing home–school links within each school, taking the opportunity to use a setting and follow practices with which parents were already familiar. For both parent and pupil groups, the approach was guided by staff judgements about what would feel most comfortable and secure for the participants. It was notable that most parents and pupils appeared confident and uninhibited in expressing their views. As a result, group discussions were lively, with the exception of the youngest visually impaired children, who each answered the questions posed in turn and rarely joined in or commented upon each others' responses.

All participants gave permission for an audio record to be made. During the pupil group discussions, verbal summaries were made at intervals in order to check and confirm the main points that had been made. Following the staff interviews and parent group discussions, written summaries were sent to participants for their comments. Transcript data were then sorted and grouped according to the interview and discussion topics. The perspectives of staff, parents and pupils were compared in order to highlight similarities and differences both between and within groups. The data were also examined for age-related issues and those associated with special educational needs. In the following discussion, the data are used as a starting-point to identify and illuminate the themes that emerged from this analysis.

Active participation at home

Typically research literature (e.g. Mayall, 2001) suggests that there are potentially many more opportunities for children to exercise some autonomy and participate in decision-making at home than at school, where the structure imposed by the timetable and curriculum limits the scope for this. It is to be expected, though, that age and disability have a significant influence on home-based experiences. In discussion with the groups of pupils it was apparent that, with individual variation, the youngest children and those with the greatest level of special educational need reported very few decisions and choices at home. A greater range of involvement in decision-making, together with a wider range of individual variation, was reported by seven- to 11-year-old pupils, but as the older pupils made clear, it was after leaving primary school that they experienced a real transition in the extent of their independence and involvement in decision-making. This transition continued through the early secondary school years, and it was notable that, whereas most of the youngest and the oldest pupils in the discussion groups reported themselves satisfied with their participation in decisions at home, several of those pupils in the seven to 14 years age range said they felt their parents should allow them a greater say.

It was not possible on the basis of the small sample of children in this study to identify the impact of gender and ethnicity variables on their autonomy and participation in decision-making at home (cf. Brannen, 1996; Morrow, 1998). However, a number of contextual family factors emerged from their discussions. These included: the presence of family pets, which could act as a focus for both choices and responsibilities; interactions with siblings concerning shared decision-making, for example, in relation to family outings, use of bedroom space and fairness in household rules; and the involvement of other family members, such as grandparents, who might allow them more or less choices than their parents did. Overall, though, it was not surprising to find that the children saw their parents as the main influence governing the extent of their autonomy at home.

The principle of participation is not an easy one for parents to put into practice: they need to balance the needs and rights of all family members, giving attention to issues of fairness between siblings, as well as responding to their individual children's needs, preferences and priorities at differing ages. While some parents were forthright in their endorsement of their children's rights to participate in family decision-making, others expressed ambivalence as to how this could be reconciled with the maintenance of parental discipline. Many expressed uncertainty about 'the right thing' to do and where to 'draw the line' when fostering their children's independence, and they frequently sought reassurance by drawing comparisons with practice in other families. Parents discussed the need to help their children see which things are, and are not, negotiable, and how far it was possible and desirable to move into an increasingly negotiating relationship as their children grew older. Mutual trust has been described as central to developing autonomy (Alderson, 2002) and individual parents and children both referred to this as underpinning their negotiations.

Personal safety outside the family home featured strongly in both parent and pupil group discussions, and it was notable from what the children said that they were typically very attuned to their parents' concerns. Issues related to safety are heightened when parents perceive their children as particularly vulnerable, because of disability or special educational needs. Discussions with parents of the children with the most complex needs also revealed two particular further difficulties that they experienced with respect to the promotion of independence. The first of these relates to *consistency*. It was apparent that it was difficult for a number of parents to adopt a consistent approach to the development of their children's choices and preferences. For example, they described how it was sometimes less stressful to 'give in' to their children's choices of food, clothes, activities, etc., even when these were in tension with their own judgement of what was appropriate, or with other family preferences. By contrast, there were occasions where the family needs were such that parents saw decisions as non-negotiable, regardless of their children's preferences, for example, with respect to the use of short-term care provision.

The second relates to the relationship between *advocacy and self-advocacy*. Where children have limited cognitive and/or communicative competence, then the nature of the children's choices may be difficult to ascertain, and parents typically find themselves interpreting preferences and making decisions on their child's behalf. The

importance of this mediation and advocacy role has been well documented (e.g. Dale, 1996; Carpenter, 1997; Brown, 1999), but parents can find it difficult to move beyond advocacy to help their children develop their own voice. Their children's needs may be such that, even where parents would like to develop greater independence, there are too many constraints (Read, 2000). Furthermore, the promotion of choice and independence does not always 'come naturally' for parents of children with the most severe needs, and several said they required support to help them develop their skills and confidence in this area.

Summary of participation in decision-making at home

There is potentially more scope for children to be involved as active participants in decision-making at home than in school. However, the extent to which this takes place is clearly influenced by the children's age, and by the nature of their needs, as well as by the parents' approach to their developing autonomy. While the youngest and oldest children tended to express satisfaction with their situation, several in the intermediate age ranges wished to have a greater say in family decision-making. Nevertheless, across the full age range, it is apparent that many parents have a wealth of experience concerning the nature of their children's developing skills in formulating choices and preferences. They frequently also report difficulties and uncertainties concerning the promotion of their children's autonomy, and may express the need for support and reassurance in this aspect of their parenting. This need is not exclusive to, but may be heightened for, parents of children with special educational needs.

Active participation at school

Pupil participation was described by staff as a whole-school issue, rather than something specific to provision for pupils with special educational needs, and they highlighted the need to ensure a consistent approach across the school. Staff typically viewed pupil participation as a positive means of helping children to be more in control of their own learning, and judged this to be beneficial to progress. Nevertheless, there were concerns about the way in which the principle of pupil participation was implemented in school: in particular, staff emphasized the need for sensitivity both to the differing levels of participation that may be possible at different ages, and also to variation in individual needs, so that it did not put additional pressure on pupils. Within the special school context, staff focused particularly on the question of how to involve those with the most complex needs and communication difficulties as fully as possible. They were alert to the need to avoid the sort of tokenism whereby children's participation is more apparent than real. At the same time, they also acknowledged, as noted by Rose and colleagues (1996) in their study, that there was a potential risk of staff underestimating children's competence to be involved.

In all schools, staff emphasized the importance of an underpinning ethos that encourages active participation by pupils. Staff, parents and pupils all saw the teacher–pupil relationship as central to the extent that pupil perspectives are listened to and

valued. However, although parents typically had at least some awareness and limited knowledge of specific procedures used in school to listen to their children's views, they were generally less familiar with the way in which pupil participation might permeate activities across the curriculum. Among the pupils themselves, particularly those in the seven to 14 years age range, variation in the practice of different teachers was widely commented on. One raised the question of how far it could really be said that pupil views were listened to in a situation where disagreement with a teacher is often perceived as 'cheek' or 'talking back'. In a number of classrooms, these pupils clearly felt it was difficult to raise questions or get their views across successfully.

Difficulties of this kind have been reported in other studies (e.g. Mayall, 2001; Alderson, 2002). They have led some schools to develop a more formal means for the expression of pupil views, such as a School Council of elected student representatives. The establishment of an effective School Council has been described as 'a key practical and symbolic indicator of respect for children's rights' (Alderson, 2000, p. 124). Staff in the secondary school certainly expressed a strong commitment to its School Council and year group student councils, describing these as part of the school's partnership ethos. The parents and pupils also expressed strong support, and it was notable that the parent group discussion in this school led to a particularly clear elaboration of the perceived benefits of pupil participation. Individuals commented that children see more of what goes on at school than their teachers do, and have a perspective and things to say that should be listened to. Where their views are listened to and taken seriously, one parent argued, then children tend to be happier and better behaved which, in turn, is likely to support higher achievement. By contrast, it was felt that if children are not listened to, then resentment and bad behaviour can build up. The students themselves reported that the advantage of the School Council was that it helped to put their point of view across to teachers:

> You can get your point of view across because kids can talk to kids, it makes it more easy. Because if you're trying to explain something to a teacher, then sometimes they don't get what you mean. If you tell someone who knows how to talk to adults, then you'll probably get your point across better. (girl, aged 14)

They generally saw this as worthwhile, even if their viewpoint was not necessarily acted on by staff: 'It's good because teachers have it a lot different to us and they don't really know what we think or what we want' (boy, aged 16).

Specific curricular activities to promote pupil participation were identified in all schools. These included, for example, Circle Time (whole-class discussions aimed at encouraging cooperative and open sharing of views) and personal and social education sessions focused on self-monitoring of progress. Two common practices were pupil involvement in the setting of individual learning targets and in the drawing up of class rules. From the interviews and group discussions there was evidence of some differing perspectives among teachers and pupils about the ways these operate and the level of pupil participation that actually takes place. For example, although most pupils appeared to be familiar with at least some of their learning targets, there was considerable diversity in the extent to which they were informed of the basis for their selection and understood either the way they were monitored or the nature of the

judgements that teachers made about their progress. This was partly associated with age and with how much experience of target setting they had had.

At the secondary school, a number of the 11–14-year-old pupils expressed the wish for more information and involvement in the monitoring of progress from their teachers; for example, one pupil observed:

> like at parents' evening, they [teachers] can come out with something, they say, you're not doing very well in reading, and you feel like saying, if you'd have told me that I would have done something about it earlier. And they just come out with it, and you're like—I didn't know that—and you feel real stupid. And your mum's there and she says, 'why didn't you tell me about this?' and you say, 'well I didn't know'. So [teachers] just come out with something and you wish you'd known something about it before. (girl, aged 13)

By contrast, older students referred to more detailed discussion of targets with staff and a greater understanding of what was needed in order to meet their targets and the progress that they were making. The need for sensitive support for participation in the target-setting process was indicated by the number of pupils who referred to feeling anxious and under pressure when their targets were particularly challenging or precisely linked to particular grades.

Just as with target setting, there were also some discrepancies in teacher and pupil perspectives on the extent of participation in the formulation of class rules. For example, staff typically described procedures whereby pupils discussed and agreed rules together with their teachers. However, reflecting on these procedures, some pupils did not appear to perceive the purpose of the activity as one that involved them in any decision-making. Others were explicit that, although they took part in discussion, the final word always rested with the teacher. For example, involvement in the process was described as follows by some of the primary school pupils: 'we put up our hands to make suggestions. If [the teacher] likes it, she'll put it up [on the board], if not, she'll leave it out'.

It should be noted, however, that several pupils reflected on occasions where a teacher's decision, even when different from what they might choose themselves, can be in their best interest. For example, in discussing the question of choice about who they sat next to and worked with in lessons (cf. Bearne, 2002), the following diverse views were expressed: 'The teacher has to choose every time because sometimes [children sitting together] don't do their work properly' (girl, aged 6). 'You work better with your friends. If two people talk and they're constantly noisy, then you should move them, but I always work better with my friends' (girl, aged 13).

One commented that, particularly as teachers got to know the students well over time, then:

> if they [teachers] don't think you're working well with that person then, they'll move you—and it's in your own interest to be moved, it's not because they're being horrible. It's just that they know you're going to do better if you sit with someone else. You don't really mind who you sit next to— it's just if you sit on your own that you don't like it. (girl, aged 16)

The oldest pupils in the secondary school were able to reflect upon the way in which their participation in decision-making at school had increased as they progressed

through the school. They observed that, as at home, the more opportunities they had to express their own views and perspectives, the more they were on trust to behave in a responsible manner. On the whole, and in keeping with their views on decision-making at home, the youngest and oldest pupils expressed greater satisfaction with the extent of their participation.

Summary of participation in decision-making at school

Teachers, parents and pupils all agreed the importance of good teacher–pupil relationships for enhancing pupil participation. All schools described both formal and less formal means through which they sought to involve pupils and give them a voice, but it was evident that from the pupils' perspective, there was scope for greater whole-school consistency. The lack of parental knowledge about the full range of procedures used in school, coupled with the divergent perspectives among staff and pupils about the extent of their participation (for example, in relation to target setting and class rules), points to the need for more explicit communication not only among school staff, but also between staff, pupils and parents. Further, in order for this communication to be effective, there is a need for clarity about the nature and extent of the participation that is possible or desirable in different situations.

Active participation within the home–school relationship

The sorts of channels of communication between home and school in which children might have an active part are categorized in the following discussion according to whether they involve predominantly written or spoken communication.

Written communication

In the special school and VI resource, the *home–school book* is a significant form of written communication between parents and teachers, in which each can inform the other of ongoing activities and events involving the children. It can act as a vehicle for children's participation: for example, individual parents described talking through what was in the book together as a family on a daily basis, and also planning together what would go into the book to communicate to school about the weekend. By contrast, some children indicated little awareness of what was communicated in these books by their parents and teachers, and one young girl reported that she did not expect to know, as it was private to her parents and teacher.

   At secondary school, several pupils described the *planner* as a powerful method of home–school communication. The planner comprises a diary of routines, procedures, events, homework, and so on, and includes space for parental comment. One pupil observed that her parents only discuss it with her if there is a problem, but others described a more regular and constructive use; for example:

> it is a good link between home and school. Every week parents have to look at your planner and sign it—to see what you've been doing in school, if you've been doing well, and so on.

> Parents can change things, come and see your teachers if they want. So, if you use your planner right, parents should have input before parents' evening, not only find everything out on parents' evening. (girl, aged 16)

More formal written communication, such as *annual reports*, also have the potential to offer a basis for multiple two- and three-way discussions between parents, teachers and children. One primary school pupil observed:

> I think it's good when we get these letters home. I think teachers should be more like my mum. Because every year when we get a letter home about how I've done, we sit down and we go through it—I think that's what the teachers should do. (boy, aged 10)

With specific reference to special educational needs, *IEPs* (Individual Education Plans) can involve written or both written and face-to-face communication. In the primary school, for example, the special educational needs coordinator uses the IEPs as a focus for a three-way discussion involving both children and parents together. By contrast, in the special school, parents are encouraged to share IEP review sheets with their children at home. Developments currently under consideration by staff are ways of making the IEPs more accessible to children, and also the provision of information for parents on how to involve their children in discussion of these.

Spoken communication

When their teacher makes *home visits*, children from the VI resource choose whether to be present and take part in the discussion or not: some choose to do so and some do not. With respect to meetings at school, particularly formal *parents' evenings*, a range of differing perspectives emerged. For example, the head of the primary school feels strongly that children's presence would inhibit full and frank discussion between parents and teachers, because the children are not yet old enough to hear less positive comments. The parent group discussion at this school revealed varied views: some thought it would be good for teacher, child and parent to discuss reports together, in order to ensure clearer and fuller understanding; others thought that it could be overwhelming for their children and cause them unnecessary anxiety. All agreed that there was a need to look at each individual child's response to being involved, but most felt it might be most appropriate in the later primary years.

The seven- to 11-year-old children tended to reflect these parental views. Most would like to be present in order to hear the full detail of what was said, both positive and negative, because as one emphasized: 'It's you they're talking about. I don't think anybody in this room would be ashamed if they said we'd been naughty or that' (boy, aged 10).

Another pupil agreed and explained: 'It's not the same when your mum tells you—you should get the whole information from the teacher' (girl, aged 9).

One girl, who had attended a meeting earlier in the year, said:

> it felt better knowing it from the teacher rather than from mum, because mum doesn't tell me all the details—she only tells you the things that are good and there could have been things that were bad, but she doesn't tell me any of that. (girl, aged 9)

One boy, however, reflected the head teacher's view when he said that the teachers would not say everything that needed to be said if children were there: '… they'd say stuff when you weren't there' (boy, aged 11).

At the secondary school, there was general agreement between all three parties that children should be present at parent–teacher consultations. Individual parents described ways in which it had boosted their children's self-esteem to hear teachers and parents discussing positive aspects of their behaviour and work in school. According to one parent with experience of this, three-way discussions at school also provide the context within which a clear and effective message about negative aspects can be given. Among the secondary students themselves, almost all said they preferred to be present at parent–teacher meetings, and to have things discussed directly with them, a typical comment being that: 'you get more from it, you feel more involved' (girl, aged 13).

Some noted that they have a different interaction with teachers when their parents are present: for example, they can ask questions and disagree in a way that is not possible in the classroom context. However, individuals expressed the view that, because teachers do not wish to hurt their feelings, they may not say everything that could be said when students are present, and for that reason, one 14-year-old boy has chosen not to attend the meetings.

Specific questions were discussed concerning *annual reviews* for children with statements of special educational needs. These formal review meetings, which are a legal requirement, are intended to ensure that parents, children, school, LEA and all involved professionals consider each year both pupil progress and also any changes that may be required to the form of special educational provision that is made (DfES, 2001a, para. 9.1). At the special school, not all parents choose to attend the annual review meetings, with some expressing the view that they can get all the information they require through more informal communication with school. Where parents do attend, their children are, in the words of one mother, 'as involved as you make them'. Neither parents nor staff felt that many of their children gained much from sitting in a formal meeting and it was evident that, in some cases, their presence could be disruptive. It was therefore typically seen as more appropriate to explore ways of eliciting children's views before and after the meeting and to incorporate these into the written review. In the primary school, decisions on whether a child attended all or part of the review were made by parents and teachers, whereas in the VI resource and the secondary school, the children and young people were explicitly involved in the decision. It should be noted that, given the choice, not all of the pupils wished to attend.

Summary of participation within the home–school relationship

There is considerable variation in the extent to which pupils are involved as participants within the home–school relationship. Adapting Treseder's (1997) framework for considering participation, instances were reported when children were *aware* of communications taking place between their parents and teachers; when they were *informed* of what was being communicated; when they were *consulted*; and when they

were *involved* and *actively participant*. These variations are not only associated with the age and ability of the children and parental preferences, but also with school policy, and it is evident that the schools differ in the extent to which they attend to the place of pupil participation within the home–school relationship. There is scope for explicit consideration by schools of the ways in which, for example, home–school books and planners, as well as more formal written communications, can form the basis for three-way discussions. An alertness to pupil perspectives concerning involvement in meetings between their parents and teachers, and flexible ways of responding to these, are also required.

Discussion

There are individual differences between children in the extent to which they wish to participate in formal decision-making processes at school. The task for schools is to find ways of supporting forms of participation that individual children find constructive, and to build up positive experiences of participation over time. Parents have a significant potential contribution to make here, based on their knowledge and experience of their own children's involvement in decision-making outside of school.

It was apparent from both interviews and discussion groups that there is a need for schools to develop a coherent view of what active participation means for children and a vocabulary to communicate about this, not only with pupils and staff, but also with parents. The nature of the debate within parent groups on questions such as when it is, or is not, in children's best interests for them to make their own decisions, and how to balance children's rights to participation against adult responsibilities to protect and keep them safe, suggests that many parents might value and benefit from supportive opportunities to discuss these issues. There is, then, scope for two-way support between parents and schools concerning children's participation.

When it comes to children's participation within the context of the home–school relationship, however, it should be acknowledged that some children may like to keep a distance between home and school. From their group discussions it was apparent that there were aspects of home life that children would wish to keep private from their teachers. Nevertheless, it was also evident that they typically saw their parents as potential mediators on their behalf with school. A number of children described situations in which their parents' presence at a meeting provided a context within which they felt more able to express a point of view that differed from the school's. There was also one situation reported by parents in which the 'united front' presented by parents and teachers may have been a less positive experience for the child. However, as has been reported by a Norwegian study (Ericsson & Larsen, 2002), it is clearly not necessarily the case that a close parent–teacher relationship restricts children's opportunities to have their perspective listened to and taken seriously.

Throughout this paper, reference has been made to the changing nature of children's participation as they grow older. Parents are typically less directly involved in their children's schooling at secondary than at primary school, and it is frequently assumed that this is in line with what their children want as they get older and

establish greater independence. However, it is important not to over-simplify the relationship between parental involvement and pupil participation. At the secondary school involved in this study, the changing nature of the home–school relationship came up spontaneously in discussion within both the parent and the pupil groups. The 15- and 16-year-old students argued strongly that they would prefer a greater degree of parental involvement: they wanted to be actively participant themselves in choices and decisions and target setting which would affect their future, but they also wanted their parents to be more closely involved by the school. This is in line with findings with eight- to 14-year-old children reported by Morrow (1998), that although most wished to be consulted and listened to, they did not feel able to take full responsibility in decision-making and expressed the need for adult support.

A complex and evolving three-way partnership between parent–child–teacher is central to the home–school relationship. Although there are potential tensions between the principles of parent–teacher partnership and the promotion of children's participation, schools need to develop their policies and practices in relation to both. If they are to ensure that they develop their home–school relationships in ways which are genuinely empowering of both parents and pupils, then this requires them to explore the ways in which each principle serves to reinforce, rather than to contradict, the other.

Note

1. For the sake of brevity, both parents and carers are hereafter referred to as parents.

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