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Breaking the Silence; Providing Authentic Opportunities for Parents to be Heard

Carla Solvason, Johanna Cliffe and Emma Bailey

Abstract

Within Western society over the past 30 years a vivid picture has emerged of exactly what a 'good parent' looks like. This ideal parent works hard in order to contribute to the economic wellbeing of the nation at the same time as having abundant time for the nurture and educational development of their child. This parent does not question or challenge, but rather silently supports the superior knowledge of researchers, policy makers and educationalists. This parent is 'valued' as the child's first educator, yet, we argue in this piece, has no voice.

In this literature-based article we explore the silencing of parents within educational systems and look at the possibility of creating more authentic partnerships between them and educational settings. We challenge notions of parental conformity and instead encourage educational cultures where parents are invited to suggest and challenge, inspire and educate. We look at ways of opening positive channels of communication between parents and educationalists, where knowledge and perceptions of quality can be genuinely shared, recognising and respecting the multiple dimensions of school and family life.

Theoretical Framework

This area of research is a pertinent one for all three of the authors for a number of reasons. The first, and most significant, is the authors' shared experience as parents within the educational system. Despite ostensibly fulfilling the requirements of a 'good parent' as educated, conscientious, employed, middle income parents, we discovered that all of us had encountered negativity from our children's teachers at some point. We all share the experience of being made to feel troublesome for failing to comply with narrow requirements. This has made us far more aware of how we interact with parents within our own roles as education professionals; as qualified and experienced primary

teachers, early years managers and childminders. It has also made us more aware as academics in HE, of how we can support trainee practitioners to develop their understanding of what a positive parent partnership looks like, and how to keep empathy at the forefront of this.

The writing of this article was actually prompted by a literature review into research approaches with children. This brought to light that the relationships involved in researching with children were frequently explored in minutiae. The lexicon of power relations, the child's voice, trust, levels of engagement and appropriate research methods permeates the body of literature around research with children. In stark contrast, articles which recounted research with parents rarely mentioned any of these aspects. In order to move from speculation to understanding we explored a more definitive sample of the literature.

For this reason, the following article begins with a presentation of 'the problem' and an investigation into a representative body of literature which has a focus upon researching with parents. It then relates notions arising within the theoretical literature to ideas of power, knowledge and control within our educational systems. Finally, the piece considers the need to acknowledge parental perceptions of quality education and how these might differ to those delineated through policy. It contemplates means of developing genuine and authentic parent partnerships where divergent perspectives are valued and respected for the benefit of all. Although drawing upon the empirical research experience of all three authors, this discussion is very much situated within an examination of the role of the parent represented in literature and policy.

The problem

As an early years community we have all (parents included, as Haines Lyon, 2018, found in her research) been programmed into thinking that a 'good' parent behaves in very specific ways. Haines Lyon (2018: 196) refers to Ramaekers and Suissa's (2011) work, which argues that 'this narrow view of parenting...has commodified parents and thus removed their agency as human beings...there is an implied consensus as to the shape of parent engagement.' The authors of this piece have

experienced this, encountering criticism upon failing to conform to very contracted expectations of how a parent should behave. Despite the 'parents as partners' rhetoric, parents are frequently treated as a 'problem' (Baquedano-López et al, 2013). This article focuses upon 23 articles taken from a representative sample due to their inclusion of parents as partners in research. A number of these articles have a focus upon pushing parents to be more involved in, or insisting that they care more about, what educators and policy makers have decided is important; to conform to the elusive picture of a 'quality' educational experience. For example, Robinson et al (2018) use the language of *targeting* parents to induce better compliance through their research. Although the notion of parents as the child's 'first educators' (Vygotsky, 1978) has become firmly embedded within 21st century educational policy in the UK, it is education professionals and policymakers that remain the dominant voice in terms of deciding what quality education should look like. The role of a good parent is to conform.

The reality is that for some of us, as has already been established, encounters with our children's educators have been neither an informative dialogue nor a respectful and sensitive conversation; we have been on the receiving end of a critical monologue, not to mention the many passive aggressive comments left in reading records. It is such experiences that make supporting trainee educators to understand parents *better* so very important to the authors. We would argue that sensitivity, authentically listening and empathy are vital for building meaningful relationships with the best interests of the child at the centre. It is about accepting that at times parents are doing the best that they possibly can and that very limited interaction with schools or early years settings is all that you are ever going to get. It is about recognising that for some parents a school project, cooking ingredients or a costume may be so way down their list of current priorities in managing their family so as to be invisible. Most of all, it is about showing respect for the fellow carers and educators of the children that we are working with.

Parents as 'Partners'

'Parents are the child's first educator' is now a throwaway phrase used throughout the new world. There are numerous websites and publications making clear what parents should do in terms of their child's education in order to be a 'good parent'. That parents (we will use this term throughout to cover all parents and primary caregivers) *should* be involved in their child's education is taken as a given. We have accepted Vygotsky's (1978) notion that the parent is the child's first teacher, the concept has been normalised. Throughout the 1990s in the UK there was an avalanche of literature exploring the role that parents should play in their children's educational development (see Desforges and Abouchar, 2003, for a robust discussion of this) and in 2004 these expectations were legislated through Every Child Matters (DfE, 2004) and the Children Act 2004 (HM Government). Similarly, a shift in expectations was found in the US, where, following on from 'rescuing' children from ineffective parents and placing them into the nurturing (and normalised) environments of care centres during the 1960s (the Head Start era), parents were then blamed for 'having lost interest' in their children's education in the 1990s. This was because they used the opportunity of freed time for paid employment (Baquedano- López, Alexander and Hernandez, 2013) and so were insufficient in their responsibilities as educators.

Within this now normalised, or "common sense" (Kainz and Aikens, 2007) notion of education, where the active involvement of parents is necessary for a child's educational success, the government and its structuring of schooling ceases to be the cause of any problem. Instead, the blame conveniently lies with "the ways in which parents fail at their responsibility to educate their children" (Baquedano-López, Alexander and Hernandez, 2013: 152). Parents have become 'responsibilised' (Haines Lyon, 2018: 197) yet without the level of respect that you would expect to accompany such an important role. Educators' respectful relationships with parents remain hierarchical as opposed to symmetrical (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2012). That wealthy parents are viewed

as self-serving, whilst disadvantaged parents are viewed as inept, has also stultified attempts at democratic debate between parents and the government (Haines Lyon, 2018: 197). It would appear, on the whole, that despite the vital role that parents are espoused to take, they are not actually entitled to a voice. Instead, researchers, educationalists and policy makers continue to discuss and define the parameters of parents' contributions to their own children's development.

Existing Research Literature

First impressions when exploring the research literature suggested that educational research involving parents repeatedly saw them researched 'on' rather than 'with' (James, 2004). Although lip service has been given to hearing the voices of parents and to breaking down barriers between parents and practitioners (Brock and Edmunds, 2010) it is rare to find consideration of how the parents *felt* about the topic of the research or about being involved in the research. Most often we see the parents' data, but not the parents' perspective on the research. Unlike the discourse around researching with children (Hart's, 1992, ladder of participation is the most well-known) it can be a struggle to find *any* discussions about the sensitivity of approaches used and the choices made in order to truly involve parents in research.

In order to source a representative sample, a journal provider was accessed which features a number of progressive as well as more traditional research journals within the field of education. Across all of their journals (over 1,000) the term 'research *with* parents' was searched in the journal article titles or content, further specifying the category of education. Initial results were voluminous, so the last academic year, 2017-2018, was selected as a focus. A promising 773 matches appeared. It soon became clear that despite the search category very few of these actually discussed the parents of children within an *educational* setting, the majority had a social work or medical focus, which is, in itself, significant. After the first 200 results all reference to parents actually being involved in the research had disappeared entirely, instead the word *parents* was simply mentioned at some point in the article. Therefore, the following discussion is focused within this range of 200 articles.

Within the sample of 200 research articles reviewed, only 23 actually featured research that involved parents as research partners or participants. Section Deleted Articles based in the US dominated the sample, with 9 of the 23 articles based there, but the initial, speculative concerns regarding most research involving parents being *on* rather than *with* were verified. All of these articles treated the parents as subjects of, never partners in the research, even though some of them contained a rhetoric of collaboration. For example, Garbacz (2018: 1) discusses creating ‘partnerships’ with parents, yet this comprises no more than parents conforming to the very specific role that the school has defined for them. There is no evidence of dialogue as he says: “it is important for schools to create a role for families and clearly communicate that role and its components”.

Apart from the merest suggestion of ethics in *some* of the articles, an exploration of the *feelings* of parents about being part of the research, in stark contrast to the careful consideration of the emotional influence of research upon children, was notably absent. In an article by Gilkerson et al (2017), despite the fact that family conversations were being recorded during an entire day in the home and passed on to the researchers, no discussions took place about the intrusion upon privacy that this involved. Neither was there any discussion of what would happen if any safeguarding or concerning issues might arise. The potentially problematic sensitivity of this data was not considered. Even when extremely personal and intimate details about particular parents were discussed, for example Leath’s (2017) research focused upon conversations with just one father, *how* the individual was approached or their feelings about being a part of the research were not considered within the article. Foran et al’s research (2017) broached the exceptionally sensitive area of the impact of parent deployment upon a child’s mental health. However, notwithstanding the subject matter, there is no discussion around ethical sensitivity when carrying out the research; no indication of the subjects’ perspective concerning this research taking place, only a focus upon results. In the sample of 23 articles involving parents, positivist, experimental approaches to research which discussed neither sensitivity to emotions nor researcher/ respondent relationships prevailed.

In comparison with the thoughtful debates exploring ways of authentically representing the child's voice (Einasrdottir, 2007 and Merewether and Fleet, 2014 are just two examples), in the sample of articles involving parents in research an element of naivety concerning the data collected was frequently demonstrated. For example, Owen and Anderson (2017) assumed that by 'genuinely listening' to their parent participants they could bracket out their own views and present those of the participant. There is no acknowledgement that the researchers designed the questions that would be asked, or that the researchers identified the themes during the data analysis in order to reach their own conclusions about what they decided was most important. Similarly, in Gilkerson et al's (2017) research there was a failure to acknowledge that the eighty-five dollar payment for participation might influence the sample that volunteered for the research, or the impact that the recording might have upon natural family interactions. The focus remains firmly upon the results themselves, which are assumed valid. Studies such as these remain at the earliest stages of Hart's (1992) participation, the parents' contribution remains tokenistic or decorative.

The three articles within the sample which did aim to develop parent participation into co-construction were all UK based. Haines Lyon (2018), Marsh et al (2017) and Hackett (2017) all make claims that their research gives parents a voice, but as you look a little more closely, and compare the parents' involvement to the debates that exist around a child's involvement, questions still arise. Haines Lyon (2018), discusses her PhD research work and makes some very strong claims about the new-liberalist approach to education, some of which we have already mentioned and some which we will refer to later in this piece. Her discussion groups with parents, on which her research is based, did, it would seem, bolster the confidence of the very small group of parents involved in the study; the results appeared positive, some barriers between the head teacher and parents appeared to have lessened. Nevertheless, this article leaves too many questions unanswered, inhibiting a full understanding of the degree to which the research has been co-constructed. It was not clear what the relationship of the researcher was with the school or the parents, how the research was introduced to both the school and the parents or how the questions explored were developed.

Whose questions were under discussion, the researcher's or the parents'? Although the discussion group appeared to provide a safe space for a very small number of parents to air concerns, the research activities themselves still do not appear to advance beyond Landsdown's (2005) consultation.

Marsh et al (2017) explored digital literacies in the home with children ages 2-4. This research positioned parents as the collectors of data; therefore, the results were influenced by the choices that those parents made about what to include. It also involved parents through interviews and data analysis. They were clearly participants in this research; they are consulted and informed (Hart, 1992). The weakness of this article is that Marsh et al (2017) do not acknowledge the specificity of the sample (just 4 families) that volunteered for the research and the impact that this would have on the representativeness of the data. It seems unlikely that those families willing to take part in a demanding research project, with a digital focus, will be representative of an 'average' family. Therefore, the voices of parents are represented here, but only a very select few.

Hackett's (2017) research with parents, had an ethnographic focus, exploring young children's learning activities. This was carried out with her friends, all of whom are eager to find meaningful activities for their toddlers. In Hackett's case, the involvement of these parents does appear to go beyond consultation to initiation. It presents as a truly collaborative endeavour. Therefore, what appears remiss, is that this small group of three parents who were involved in both the research question formulation and the data analysis, and who were acknowledged as 'fellow-researchers', were not recognised in any way as co-creators of the article. Instead, general thanks to 'friends' are included in the acknowledgements. The issue here is not involvement, but professional and ethical recognition, ownership and respect.

Is it possible to create authentic research partnerships with parents?

The sample of research literature explored above is by no means exhaustive, it is a generic sample from a popular journal provider. We are not suggesting that genuine, collaborative research with

parents does not exist. It does. Sherwood and Nind (2014) show real sensitivity in their ethnographic research with parents; Kroeger and Lash (2011) endeavour to support their teacher trainees to develop a caring empathy towards the parents that they work with, and Gaitan (2012) explores ways of re-aligning power differentials between schools and Latino families. The point being made with the sample above is to say that far too often the experience of the parent as a research subject is not considered. That often the complexities and power differentials involved in carrying out research with parents are not touched upon within research reports. The sample also demonstrates the positivistic and functional approach that is regularly taken to *extracting* information from parents. The sample raises the question of whether it is, in fact, possible for parents to voice their perspective in a genuine and authentic way within an increasingly delineated, results driven educational system not only in the UK, but throughout the Western world. In this article we argue that it is, but not without some difficulty.

Knowledge and Power (*heading moved*)

As well as the top down pressure for educationalists to achieve positive results, another key issue when researching with parents is that many teachers are used to being in control and feel uneasy when it is taken away. We speak from experience as early childhood practitioners. We are not suggesting that this is an entirely bad thing, it is just that teachers are used to keeping things on track, in line, neat, ordered. Disorder does not sit comfortably with those used to managing large numbers of children adeptly. Most often those who are researching educational practices are, or have been, practitioners themselves. (*Deleted*)

Research that is not carefully structured has the potential to bring up unexpected surprises. If the academic or professional researcher does not regain tight control, then the topics raised through research may not be the right ones. By allowing parents to identify those areas that hold most value for them, there is the potential for disequilibrium, “pluralism and dissensus” (Haines Lyon, 2018: 205). (*Deleted*) In order for us, as educationalists, to really hear what others (and in this case

parents) have to say, we need to loosen the reigns when it comes to deciding upon the questions that need to be asked.

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In a number of previous pieces ethical research practice has been a key focus (Author removed 2016, 2017 and 2018) so we will not repeat those discussions here. It goes without saying that when carrying out any social research, care and sensitivity should be employed and all processes (in the UK these are prescribed by the British Educational Research Association, 2018) diligently followed. In the following discussion we move beyond ideas of consent or assent to recognising parents as fellow meaning makers as opposed to recipients of information. In order to do that, it is necessary to consider concepts of status and dissent.

As educators in the UK, we are required to respect and honour diversity within our partnerships with parents and other professionals. This concept was firmly established through Every Child Matters in 2004 (DfE) and remains relevant, although there is some variance in how this 'respect' is interpreted. We suggest that the only way to undertake this authentically and effectively would be to wholeheartedly embrace "otherness"; represented as parent voice, within our daily interactions. It seems reasonable that if we accept the significance of this within our daily practice then it should also be the case within collaborative research between educators and parents.

In reality, the problem that prevents this seemingly straightforward approach is seated within issues of knowledge and power that we have already begun to touch upon. The western-based propensity to prioritise ideals that are founded through rationalism, essentialism and developmental psychology, has ensured an increasingly standardised and regulated approach to education. This includes a one-size-fits all approach within our provisions and our relational encounters.

Subsequently, over the years, an implicit and officially sanctioned understanding of what is normal and accepted with regard to education and, now, parenting, has developed. Binary judgments of what is right/wrong and good/bad have emerged and, even with the best of intentions, we are all

susceptible to the influence this has had upon our values and beliefs and within our interactions and decision-making processes (Honan 2007, Langford 2010). Anything that does not fit within the implicit and officially sanctioned image of good parent and good educator is often considered “off task” or “wrong” (Author removed and Author removed, 2016). Inadvertently, when we try to grasp and reason with what is ‘other’, we merely succeed in making it function as ‘same’; whether this is represented by parent, child or colleague’s voice.

Essentially, as pointed out by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Olsson (2009), there is a certain safety and unthreatening comfortableness to sameness. This familiarity is not always easy to give up or challenge. From a Deleuzio-Guattarian (1987) perspective embracing otherness can threaten our sense of order and control. Within the demanding and stressful life that is the world of teacher, sameness is often easier, less complex and less time consuming. With the many demands placed upon educators, including the planning of child-centred learning, the requirements of Ofsted inspections and meeting assessment expectations, it is easy to understand why it can be testing for educational practitioners to be open to anything beyond the status quo.

Both experience and published research (Sumsion, 2003; Elfer, 2012; Morris 2018) suggest that within settings, educators are increasingly expected to navigate and manage evermore complex and emotionally unpredictable situations that reflect the diversity and vulnerability of their communities. Maintaining an ethical, caring but professional relationship with parents and children can be a challenge. Taggart (2011) and Elfer (2012) refer to the exhausting effects that this emotional labour can have on practitioners. As a result, educationalists default approach can be to re-direct otherness to a more acceptable and familiar pathway. To make standard expectations of a diverse group. Often without even realizing, we, as educators, silence that seemingly anarchic voice of both our students and families rather than listen and honour it.

Brooker (2010) observes that many of the approaches we are encouraged to promote as evidence of our continued acknowledgment of parental voice and partnership working, remain ‘one-size-fits-all’

and do not suit the needs of every family. Subsequently, what begins as an inclusive attempt to respect and honour individual requirements, inadvertently becomes, in its own way, exclusive and potentially silencing. It is, then, easier for stretched educators to point the finger at parents for being hard to reach, rather than acknowledge that the fault might lie with themselves.

Trodd and Chivers (2011:p.119) observe 'a child is a person not just an object of concern', and we argue that parents need to be viewed and respected in the same way. However, this can be difficult to enact within the competing priorities, stress and demands of daily practice. Although practitioners are considered *experts on children*, parents are considered the *experts on their children*; and in many respects both looks to the other for validation and the right/wrong way to educate and parent whilst judging the other on the basis of their own context. Freire (1999) suggested that educators needed to meet children in truly transformative and democratic spaces where both occupy the role of teacher and learner in order for both to fully realise their potential, and the same should be said for educators and parents. Until we can engage in interactions where sense and meaning is negotiated and not judged, weighted, labelled and pigeonholed, we cannot truly experience the depth and uniqueness that could be possible within working partnerships and issues of power and social justice cannot be addressed.

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Author removed and Author removed (2016) suggest that the Deleuzio-Guattarian (1987) notion of rhizoanalysis may offer an alternative way forward. A rhizome is a metaphorical structure that resists binary right/wrong judgements and allows for multiple pathways to sense and meaning to become possible and simultaneously function as true. Instead of attempting to curtail uniqueness, depth and diversity, rhizoanalysis challenges us to ask, instead, how does this work? What else might be happening here? What new thought does this make it possible to think? (Author removed and Author removed 2016). This perspective encourages us as educators to contemplate our relational encounters with fresh insights and a willingness to be open to possibilities, to 'see what was not

seen before' (Deleuze 1994). The limiting and fixed binary concepts of rationality, judgements and generalisability are removed, and relationships are built on reflexive and reflective communication. There is no beginning, no end and no preconceived outcome or direction to our interactions with parents, just an immersion in the middle of things where multiple realities can be (re)created and respected. By resisting the temptation to become fixated on what something *is* (or needs to remain in order to maintain the status quo) we open the door to the prospect of what could, potentially, be possible. For parents, research could be something that happens *with* them rather than *to* them, it would not only provide parents with a voice, but it would also support the notion that parents can be true partners in their child's learning.

Parents and Quality

Ozga (2008) argues that educational research is steered largely by notions of quality. Whilst she refers primarily to notions of research quality, she makes clear that knowledge, and the development of new knowledge, is governed in such a way that a dependence upon, and alignment with, existing policy is promoted. These accepted discourses of quality (not only in terms of research but in terms of practice, policy and pedagogy) play a role in shaping current practice and in legitimizing future research and discussion. The term quality, however, is not definitive. For example, through the lens of a teacher, quality may look very different than it will through the lens of a foster carer. Despite this, the use of the term is pervasive throughout pedagogical discussion and policy, whereby *quality* improvements are being called for in order to create *quality* experiences and build 'foundations for quality' (Department for Education, 2012). But whose perspective of quality does this UK policy present? It is likely that any discussion of quality within policy will consider, to some extent, how educational programmes reflect national investment. Dahlberg, Pence and Moss (2013) state that the discourse of quality education seen in policy is a 'universal formula' through which we invest in children in search for economic payoffs for society. This is unlikely to mirror a parental perspective of quality.

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Fenech (2011) identifies that since the 1980s approximately 90% of research regarding quality early childhood education and care considers the researchers' perspective; in contrast with the perspective of parents featuring in 7-12% of studies. She adds that due to the closed nature of many of these studies featuring parents, the researcher's perspective dominates even further than first identified. Empirical research carried out by one of the authors noted that parents will often assess setting quality intuitively, based upon the emotions of those in the setting (practitioners, children and families) and the relationships between them (Author removed, 2017). Through this research the emotional environment was recognised by parents as key to their child's enjoyment of the setting experiences, yet this element of provision is not mentioned throughout the statutory framework (DfE, 2017). By lacking acknowledgement of the parental perspective at this macro level, parents are positioned only as supplementary tools to be utilised in order to promote greater efficacy of existing educational programmes.

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Dahlberg et al (2013) comment that the concept of quality is employed in policy without question as to its implication, rendering it altogether meaningless. They liken it to Readings' (1996:23) discussion of excellence, stating it's 'general applicability' reflects directly its 'emptiness'. An additional layer of complexity is, therefore, presented at the point of implementing policy. Whilst it may be argued that there is flexibility and therefore a level of autonomy for settings in interpreting quality, this ambiguity serves to distance practitioners from any ownership of the term, and parents, perhaps even more so. Akin to the earlier notion of safety in sameness, there is safety in a discourse of quality which aligns with hegemonic ideas of professionalism (Osgood, 2010). As part of this, an audit culture emerges (Rizvi and Lingard 1996; Osgood 2010) which is rationalised by many within Osgood's study as being necessary 'to improve accountability, transparency and measurability' (2010:125). This can culminate in parents being 'engaged' in tokenistic research and through easily

evidenced activities in order to appease regulatory bodies, rather than to genuinely co-construct aims for the provision. Without genuine dialogue with parents, opportunities to create a mutual vision of practice are missed.

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At a micro, local level, there is potential that due to the safety in the status quo there is little room for change in the ways in which parents are invited to engage with their setting. Engagement often amounts to the offer of a choice of one of two evenings for a teacher consultation and a semi-regular parent questionnaire. Were parents invited in at the point of research and policy development there is the potential for education policy to reflect more holistically the needs of children and families, and the unique contexts of the educational settings on a more meaningful basis. By sharing ownership over a mutual discourse of quality which is then legitimised in policy, greater coherency could be promoted in children's lives as their wider social contexts serve as both an ingredient in and a product of research and provision.

Conclusion- Creating a Culture of Exploration

If we are really to challenge the safe, status quo that exists in many educational contexts it is important to move away from a transmission approach to educational partnerships and to begin to see parent, child and practitioner as fellow researchers. We need to create a healthy culture of exploration that is not threatened by, but instead invites question and challenge. As Dewey (1910, p.12) once inferred, we do not need to think harder about this we need to think differently. We should be asking how can we find this out? How can we do this better?

The notion of child and adult researching side-by-side, already mentioned in relation to Freire (1970), is an aspect of the Reggio Emilia approach to education. Rinaldi (2005: 148), a key proponent of this system, argues that research needs to "become the stance, the attitude with which teachers approach the sense and meaning of life." If, as educators and academics, we were able to approach

research guilelessly, with childlike naivety, then the options for discovery would be unrestricted, unlimited. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008: 510-11) suggest that:

In contrast to the dominant image of the academic as expert, the very status of the researcher as seeking knowledge suggests a position of incompleteness and immaturity. If researchers were fully mature, they would know all the answers; and if they knew all the answers, there would be no need for research. It seems to us that, if research is to achieve anything, it should proceed from a position of ignorance.

We need to create setting cultures where parents are able to question sameness and to offer alternatives. But, again, that requires us, as academics and educationalists, to forego control, to embrace possibilities of otherness. What does a harried parents' evening (*deleted*) and a formulaic questionnaire say about the value that we place on parents' views? Should we not be asking the parents themselves? Asking them how they would like to be heard?

This piece started as an exploration of researching with parents, but it is fair to surmise that very few settings or practitioners are in a position to develop full-scale research with parents, so let us start, instead, by cultivating authentic relationships. Relationships based, as Lawrence-Lightfoot (2012) suggests, on symmetry rather than hierarchy. On mutual respect. We propose three key approaches that should be at the core of effective working with, and eventually researching with both children and parents. These are very simple:

1. To create space for diverse views and authentically listen
2. To embrace and value otherness rather than striving to conform to same
3. Act.

It is clear that the first step entails having a better understanding of the ways in which parents would value being listened to. As practitioners we are so used to presuming to know what is best for children that this can spill into other relationships. Perhaps putting the kettle on at the end of the

school day for one evening a week and opening your doors to chat is the answer. Perhaps email. But work *with* your students' parents to create a space in which they feel comfortable communicating. And then, listen and value what they have to say. Seek to really *understand* what they are saying and *why* they are saying it. Get to know them as individuals not the genus 'parents'. Try to resist the urge to pigeonhole, assume, sanitise, make same. Hold your own knowledge 'lightly' (McNiff, 2010) and be prepared to concede that there may, in fact, be different ways and better ways.

Finally, act. Nothing changes if nothing changes. As this whole article has discussed, our current educational system is one that does not value the parent voice. It silences it and problematizes it both within educational practices and research. In order for parents to feel confident to speak they must feel listened to, they will not feel listened to if no action is taken in response to their suggestions. If we have a genuine respect for the parents that we work with as the child's first educator, then we should be prepared to act upon the advice that they offer. We should value the role that parents play in their child's development during their many hours in the home environment, and not presume that their role is a supporting act for us as educators. If we gaze from a position of "incompleteness and immaturity" (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008: 510-11) then we have the potential to learn so much more from parents, as individuals and as experts on their children; from their experience, their traditions, their values and their cultures. To enable this, we need to be open to the possibility of parents' contributions and the diversity of their needs in a way that avoids presumptions about same. Be open to authentically listening to the exciting variety and otherness that parents and families can potentially bring, to develop quality within an educational climate that, far too often, fears authentic question and challenge.

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