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## Parental Involvement In The Upper School\*

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I am presenting these ideas to you from my perspective as course tutor to the Diploma in Pastoral Care at the London Institute of Education.

I also am a member of the National Association for Pastoral Care in Education, a fairly new and flourishing association. On their behalf may I bring sororial and fraternal greetings.

It's a particular personal pleasure for me to be with the Association of Chief Educational Social Workers, since sixteen years ago when against the advice of my teacher-rich family I decided to train as a teacher, I had the notion of educational social work in my head.

In those days I was ineffective at finding out where it went on (and I didn't know about Seebohm and Ralphs then), so I ended up becoming a maths teacher, then in charge of a unit for pupils whose effect was sometimes disruptive, and then a trained school counsellor.

Interestingly in preparing for this talk I looked back at my teacher training course to find no mention of parental involvement, nor of educational welfare — a point I shall return to.

This afternoon I would like to raise points in three main chunks:

1. First and foremost I am happy to do as asked and paint a picture of teacher-parent relations in the secondary school and its later years. Here I shall attempt to gather research evidence and also to include some sort of analysis which will appeal to metaphors about families.

2. Second I would like to make some comments about the *development* of parental involvement in the upper school, and how action at a number of levels may be needed.
3. Third I would like to make some comments on the "family of helpers", as I feel that here there might be parallels between my role in training teachers in pastoral care and your role in supervising educational social workers.

It would be exceptionally easy on a theme such as this to start off with a comment such as:

"The state of teacher-parent relations in British secondary schools is quite abysmal"

and it would be possible to back up such an assertion by appealing to some of the small amount of research which is available.

For example in Alastair Macbeth's highly illuminating survey of home school relations in nine countries of the EEC we could point out that in UK our schools have below average number of visits from parents to discuss their child's progress, and the highest percentage amongst any of those nations of schools who said they have *no* such visits from parents of the typical child (14% of schools).

And we could then also go on to point out that in UK our schools arrange a below average number of class meetings for parents to discuss educational matters, and have the highest percentage of schools who say they arrange *zero* such meetings per year (a striking 40%).

But to carry on in the development of such a thesis would be to gloss over some very important prior questions. It would

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be to jump to evaluation first, instead of clarifying the basis of our evaluation.

Shouldn't we first question why we're talking about teacher-parent relations, especially in the secondary school, and what it is we aim to achieve?

If we do not get this clear it will be all too easy to fall into over-simple processes such as taking sides. I wonder whether as I was reading out those research findings just now there was in each of us here this afternoon a small voice saying either "rotten schools" or "rotten parents" (simple stereotypes about this audience would support a fantasy that the former was most prevalent).

So I would like to raise two questions at the general level:

1. What do we want parental involvement in the upper school *for*?
2. How can we make sense of teacher-parent relations in order to best achieve this?

There is by now a regular list of justifications which you see advanced for greater parental involvement in school:

- a) to improve pupil achievement through parental support
- b) to help in-school and out-of-school learning to mutually reinforce.
- c) to allow parents' stake in education to influence the school
- d) because parents are legally responsible for their child's education (and, some would say, are the clients of the system).

And you will see these sorts of reasons advanced in the same literature as you will find evidence that apparently little is happening in parent-teacher relations in the Secondary School (and let me give myself a reminder here that I'll be saying nothing this afternoon about primary schools — their practice may have parallels in some ways, but there does also seem to be real difference).

So we encounter fairly quickly this first puzzle — with an apparently plau-

sible set of good reasons for some sort of teacher-parent contact in the secondary school it appears that the practice of those schools doesn't much incorporate such contact.

Now this is where people's views about teacher-parent relations enter in an apparent attempt to explain this phenomenon.

For example, to turn to Alastair Macbeth again, he lists for us some of the complaints which are repeatedly heard about teachers and about parents, and are also found in the publications of teachers and parent organisations.

First, *teachers* complaints about parents:

*Teachers' complaints against parents:*

- apathy
- offloading responsibility
- contact seen as 'optional right'
- shyness, fear, lack of confidence
- contact made only in time of crisis
- they're conservative about educational ideas
- they're too concerned with academic achievement
- their role is unclear
- they're overconcerned with trivialities
- the ones we want to see don't come
- an unwelcome 'interfering' minority are involved
- they lack expertise in school matters

and now parents' complaints against teachers

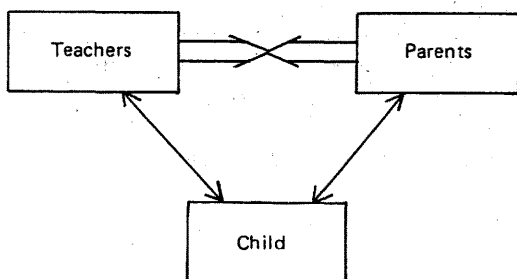
*Parents' complaints against teachers:*

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- shyness, fear, lack of confidence
- contact made only in time of crisis
- they're conservative about educational ideas
- they're too concerned with academic achievement
- their role is unclear
- they encourage parents into trivialities
- they're incompetent at adult relationships
- they lack expertise in home-school liaison

Have you seen these processes at work? It's what Macbeth calls the "Blame Game"

There's an important process here, one which we need to understand.

*How may we understand the 'blame game'?*



In this diagram we have parents and teachers involved in blaming and not communicating with each other, and the child (whose existence is the only reason for parents and teachers to communicate anyway) engaged in different sets of relations with each, maybe playing one off against the other maybe siding with one.

Does this look familiar? or familial? Well for me, with a touch of family systems thinking this looks like the triangulated family system, with the two parents vying over a lot of things and the child bearing some of the strain in their relationship. I'd guess you see this process in families you meet. *With teachers and parents, we might say it is a competition to be best parent* and I feel I see examples of this dynamic around in teachers and parents. As with families this sort of triangulation often is accompanied by accentuated themes of care and control and perhaps a splitting of those two as Denise Taylor's recent article suggests.

But let's hesitate a moment. Perhaps we can recognise examples of this process. But we could be committing the clinician's fallacy to believe it was necessarily the whole picture.

Is it really the general picture?  
Does it accord with research evidence?

Well as you will know there is not a great deal of research evidence available to us which focuses on secondary school and home contacts.

There is even less on the later years of secondary school. And some authors suggest that what there is is more likely to focus on the teacher's perspective than anyone else's.

So I've gathered together the few (it's four really) recent studies I've been able to find on parents and secondary schools which also access the parents' perspective and we will then see what picture of teacher-parent relations is being painted.

Before I do, let us not forget our question "what is parental involvement for?" and "how does parental involvement affect pupils?" *I know, no research which bears on this last question.* Perhaps we'll speculate on reasons for this later.

Anne West and others interviewed 216 parents in the summer of 1983 — their children had been first year pupils for one year in 20 ILEA schools.

Here's what parents said they had attended:

*Parents' contact with School: (Secondary)*  
(ILEA, 1984, 216 parents of first year pupils in 20 schools)

	% who had attended
Parents evening/open evening	88
Appointment with individual teachers	42
Parent Teacher Association	22
Cheese & Wine/Social	30
Concert	30
Play/Show	29
Fete/jumble sale/bazaar	24
Meeting about specific subjects	15
Exhibition/display	9
Dance/disco	9
Sports events	6
Other (e.g. speech day, fruit picking)	15
Home visits by teachers	3

Source: ILEA (1984), Tables 2, 13 and 14

This seems a wide *range* of contacts. Only 6% had not attended the events where the main purpose was to meet teachers.

This general pattern hides some wide divergences. For example, 0% of Asian parents had made an appointment to see an individual teacher at their child's school. This compares with 44% of English/Scottish/Welsh/Irish parents, and 36% of Caribbean parents.

The same study asked which staff parents had met. (See below)

In response to the question "Is there

enough contact with your child's teachers?" 89% replied "Yes".

What would you conclude from these findings? "Generally very positive" was the researchers' phrase.

Moving to the next study, you will probably have heard of the National Consumer Council's report which was published a month ago.

The interviews of 297 parents of secondary age pupils in Manchester and Oxfordshire were carried out in April 1985, i.e. after teachers' industrial action had started. (See below)

*Parents have met:*

Their child's class teacher/tutor?  
Head of year/house?  
At least one subject teacher?  
Head teacher or deputy head?

All four	73%
Three of	15%
Two of	6%
One of	4%
None	2%

(ILEA, 1984, 216 parents of first year pupils in 20 schools)

Source: ILEA (1984) p. 57

*Parents' contact with school: (Secondary)*

(NCC, 1985, interviews with 297 parents in Manchester & Oxfordshire)

	% in last 12 months:
Parents' evening to discuss progress	72
Open day/evening with display of work	46
School concert, play; or sports event	40
Talked to teacher at social event	26
Made special trip to see teacher about child	22
Made special trip to see Head about child	21
Helped with/attended informal or fundraising event	21
Attended meeting to learn more about school	17
Gone to school to ask for information	16
Attended PTA meeting	14
Attended meeting to discuss changes at school	13
Made complaint in writing or in person	12
Attended to learn more about new subjects	8
Contacted school governor	4
Attended one of child's lessons	1
None of these	10

Source: National Consumer Council (1986) P. 30

*Parents Dissatisfactions?*

(NCC. 1986, interviews with 297 parents of secondary pupils in Manchester and Oxfordshire)

— with school initiated contacts	“low”	
— with parent initiated contacts:		
trip to see teacher about child		16% (3½%)
trip to see Head about child		16% (3½%)
complaint in writing or in person		21% (2½%)
— with written information from school	“low”	
— with school’s success at helping make decisions:		
	good & neutral	: poor
deciding secondary school	7	: 1
choosing subjects to take	8	: 1
deciding which exams to take	5	: 1
deciding what to do at 16	5	: 1

Source: National Consumer Council (1986) pp 29–37

Parents’ contact with school in the last twelve months again showed them attending a wide range of possible events, and this time 10% of parents attended none. These were parents of pupils of all secondary years. These parents were then asked a series of questions focusing on their dissatisfactions with home-school contacts. (See above)

The National Consumer Council merely reports that dissatisfaction with school-initiated contacts was “low”.

Dissatisfaction with parent-initiated contacts, especially complaints, were at first sight greater. However it must be the case that this 21% means of parents making a complaint, not of the total, since only 12% overall made a complaint. There are *only* 2½% of the total were dissatisfied.

Dissatisfaction with written information from school was again described as “low”.

And when asked about the school’s success at providing information and help at the time of making decisions, the proportion of parents describing the school’s success as good or neutral to those describing it as poor was in the ratios outlined above.

Given the complexity of these decisions and the difficulty of schools exercising an influential role in them, I know plenty of teachers (and a few researchers) who would say this is pretty successful! But this afternoon I’m not aiming to adopt their perspective. Let me just say that the change over time of these success ratings seems possibly important. Perhaps it suggests that schools become progressively less influential in helping in these decisions after pupils are within their walls, and perhaps that the influences outside become stronger.

The third study I know of is again an interview survey of parents of secondary age pupils, 422 of them from 7 schools across Wales. It was authored by Phil Woods for the Welsh Consumer Council. Here the proportion of parents attending various events shows a similar pattern, but this *study has the extra sophistication of first asking parents whether they knew* of the school offering such events: the figures sometimes increase considerably. (See page 82)

How then is our picture of home-school relations in the secondary school building up? Is the picture one of lots of parents going to parents’ events? with

*Parents' attendance at school functions: (Secondary)*  
 (Wood P, 1984, interviews with 422 parents from 7 schools across Wales)

	% of parents	% of those aware
Social events	60	66
Open days	57	76
Parents' evenings	52	65
Prize/sports events	31	42
PTA Meetings	21	31

Visits since child started: 86% to at least one.

*Parents' satisfaction with arrangements school makes for involving parents:*

Satisfied	78%
Dissatisfied	6%

Source: Woods P (1984)

a lesser number going to other events? And the vast majority of parents satisfied?

Somehow this doesn't seem to fit very easily with the picture we had at the beginning. But let's not evaluate too quickly. Perhaps parents are not wanting to criticise, and are attending ritual events in a ritual fashion. We don't know from this sort of survey data much about people's motives or intentions.

Nor, you will have noted, do we hear much of the perspective of the people who are meant to be at the centre of all this — the pupils. It's been almost as though the adults have been talking behind their backs. What do they think *in the upper school?*

The nearest I can get to data answering that question is a little snippet again from the recent National Consumer Council's report. They asked 204 young people aged 16 to 18 in Manchester and Oxfordshire about their decision at 16 to stay at school/go to college/enter employment/enter unemployment. And these young people were asked to rate the influence of parents, teachers, and themselves on that decision by allocating ten points to portray the strength of influence. (See opposite column) The result was:

Self	7.96
Parents	1.38
Teachers	0.68

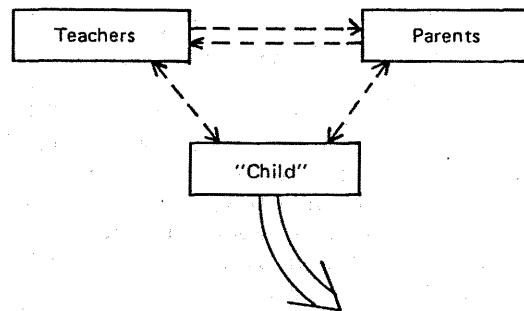
Also:

47% allocated all ten points to themselves  
 52% " zero " " parents  
 67% " zero " " teachers

Source: National Consumer Council (1986)  
 pp. 43-5

Aha!

Now whatever you think of this data, it surely reminds us to bring the adolescent back into the picture as a highly potent force, as mediators of school to home and vice versa. Or is it really the case that we should bring them back into a picture they are leaving? Perhaps the diagram of the triangle we had earlier should look more like this:



This aims to portray parents and teachers in intermittent communication, each with variable communication with the adolescent who is beginning to make it clear that s/he has sights set elsewhere than either home or school.

My device of viewing this system by metaphor to a family system is useful if we note that the main theme is then one of *leaving home*, with the adolescent often involved in a struggle for control over his/her own identity and negotiating release from the "family", i.e. from school and from home. The metaphor has to be modified a little because instead of these "parents" then having to face each other again in the "empty nest", they of course have no need to maintain a relationship. School and parents go their separate ways. True, both feel the loss of the adolescent, and show it in different ways, but they separate, their job together now completed.

What does this say for teacher-parent relations? It says that a progressive reduction of contact in the later years of secondary school could be exactly appropriate for the impending separation, and also perhaps for the adolescent. Indeed, this reducing contact could be viewed as a strategic and progressive failure of the best sort, paralleling that which occurs in effective parenting.

And I hope you do not regard this as a fanciful view — some research seems to support it. Daphne Johnson's (1977) sensitive and illuminating interviews with 109 parents in Hillingdon and Hounslow raised evidence that *parents take this view*.

Parents in this study took their child's entry into secondary school as a point to review their role in the child's education. They had a range of views on how their responsibility for and influence over their children should operate. They had complex ways of understanding the school's influence and they often spoke of their encouraging increasing independence on the part of their adolescents

(including the progressive leaving of school issues to them).

So it could be that the most important questions to consider are these:

- *How can teachers help pupils grow in school and leave school successfully?*
- *How can parents help adolescents grow in the family and leave home successfully?*

Maybe teachers and parents have some common ground to share with each other from this perspective, and in a status-equal way, each tackling parallel issues in a separate context.

Johnson & Ransom conclude:

"It seems to us that both teachers and parents are to some degree mesmerised by the conventional wisdom and rhetoric of the campaign for closer relations between home and school which has been uncritically espoused for the past 20 years".

"Cannot the secondary schools drop their preoccupation with 'the home', cease to lament the parents they do not see, and concentrate on working effectively with the young people they do see?"

The rhetoric of closer relations may have real force in the primary school; there is little evidence available in the secondary school, and parents behave accordingly. Thus teachers need a different perspective in secondary schools to that which is current in primary schools.

Where does a view like this lead? It leads me to say that if you asked me what would be *my* plans for improving teacher-parent relations in the upper school. I'd first want to talk about improving teacher-*pupil* relations inside the school so that it really is a vital place for adolescents' growing up, and much of the rest of what I'd say would be in the context of improving the school's relations with the world around it.

After that, I'd be able to make some



suggestions about how the focus of teacher-pupil relations could change in the upper school, but these would be very carefully thought out so that they didn't appear to be yet another set of demands on schools to do *more*.

My suggestions would look something like this:

(A) For the secondary school as a whole, and the events it arranges

— in the short term:

experiment with the aspects of large group format (which has ossified) for parent meetings:

timing (eg afternoons)

appointment systems

the role of form tutor

venues off-site

different styles across years

different themes

and if you want ideas, some action research consulting the parents will doubtless produce a number.

— in the medium term:

try out a smaller format for meetings, arranged for *tutor groups* (these required by law in parts of West Germany and the tutor's role is enshrined in statutes in Luxembourg). They would start with discussing parents' interests, pupils' progress, curriculum, teaching methods and so on, and would doubtless develop other themes (this is not a new idea — I've seen it work exceptionally well when teachers share with parents the aims and methods of the pastoral curriculum).

— in the long term:

Work towards much more fluid contact between home and school including home visiting and parents in classrooms

(this is not a new idea: it operated in a school I worked in fifteen years ago).

(B) And for other aspects of school:

— improved reception for parents who come to school, with someone available, (and on the phone).

All of this I'm keen to see happen, *not* because it will certainly lead to greater pupil achievement, *not* because it will certainly make schools responsive to the consumerist view of parents as clients, but because it will make schools more open, lively and realistic organisations and will in my view enrich both their curriculum and their approach to learning. And it may mean that schools will contribute more effectively to the adolescents' transition to adult life, or for the successful ones, transition to working life.

In the upper school I believe we should reassess who the client is, and avoid the easy or merely legal answers which draw our attention overmuch to parents. Some recent initiatives such as TVEI can change the approach to teaching and learning so that 14–18 year olds are more clearly seen as the clients: they are consulted, negotiated with, reports are mainly for them, and so on.

Of course it follows that if organised parental contact is arranged well in these ways it will have the pupil in a much more central role at such events.

Finally, there are implications of all this:

(a) for the initial training of teachers: John Bastiani's survey has shown us some radical examples.

By coincidence I'm speaking to you in the middle of three weeks where the 520 student-teachers at our Institute are spending their education studies time focussing on teachers and parents.

It's not very much but it's a start in an overcrowded year.

(b) For INSET inc. for pastoral team leaders which is abysmal.

(c) for teachers pay, teachers contracts and teachers performance (all handled pretty narrowly to date).

I realise I've not mentioned parent governors and the 1986 Act prompted by consumerism. My reason is that I'm as yet uncertain that it is likely to achieve great change for pupils.

A creative and vital relationship between teachers, parents and community may not become fully developed until education is viewed as a public social service, by both teachers and parents. And our crazy division of social welfare doesn't help by separating our many of the caring functions into separate institutions.

Finally, I have the feeling that there is an increased identity between schools and their communities, especially since the cuts began.

So paradoxically, we may be getting there.

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