A Difficult Act
to
Balance

Partnership between Teachers
and Parents
of Children with a Disability

Elizabeth Elsworth

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree of Master of Teaching and Learning
Christchurch College of Education

October 2003
Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................ 2
Abstract .................................................................................. 3
Chapter One:  
  Introduction ................................................................. 5
  Literature Review ...................................................... 8
Chapter Two:  
  Methodology ............................................................ 21
Chapter Three:  
  Parents' Perspectives of Partnership ............. 35
Chapter Four:  
  Teachers' Perspectives of Partnership .......... 50
Chapter Five:  
  Towards Effective Partnership .................. 60
Chapter Six:  
  Overcoming the Barriers .......................... 70
References: ........................................................................ 78
Appendices: ......................................................................... 83
Acknowledgements

To all the participants in this study, thank you for giving your time so generously and for sharing your experiences and insights. I felt deeply privileged to be entrusted with your experiences. I hope that through this study your voices can be heard by others.

To my supervisor Missy, thank you for your generous support and guidance, and for introducing me to many fine researchers in the field of disability and partnership.

To Kim and Denise, thank you for many hours of typing, and to Alan, Judy, Jane, Michael and Fiona thank you for your thoughtful advice throughout this process.

To Sarah, thank you for your understanding. Now its time to share your interests!

Finally, to Tony, who has demonstrated what can become possible through partnership. Thank you for your encouragement, for many hours of editing and for the support you have given, at so many other levels, to help me complete this study.
Abstract

This qualitative study investigates how ten parents and six teachers of children with a disability negotiate and enact partnership in New Zealand primary schools. In-depth interviews were conducted to examine their experiences of working together and to identify the factors that they considered essential for supporting an effective partnership. Data were also drawn from school policies and documents describing the New Zealand Special Education 2000 policy documents.

Since the inclusion of children with disability in regular classrooms there has been an increased recognition of the important role of parents as partners in their child’s education. The New Zealand Special Education 2000 Policy Guidelines have clearly articulated a vision of partnership between parents/caregivers and education providers. These guidelines promote partnership as a means to overcoming barriers to learning and ensuring successful learning outcomes for children with a disability. For parents, these guidelines potentially signaled a new way of working with their child’s school. Parents had high hopes that a partnership, which involved them in sharing knowledge and decision-making, could contribute to better resources and learning opportunities for their child.

While the teachers and parents in this study viewed partnership as a desirable outcome, many found the process of negotiating partnership to be problematic. Frequently they were challenged by their different understandings and positionings, and the knowledge/power dynamics in their interactions. Parents found that their knowledge was not sufficiently valued and that there was little clarity about how to work in partnership with their child’s class teacher. Teachers were required to meet a diverse range of educational needs, and to fulfill the expectations of parents and the Ministry regarding partnership. However, many found that they lacked training in working with parents, and few had any training that supported them to understand and meet the special needs of children with disabilities.

This study shows how multiple discourses of partnership and of disability shaped teacher/parent interaction and created barriers to achieving effective partnership. While the Special Education 2000 policy documents reflect a democratic discourse, through promoting the democratic participation of parents, this study shows that professional discourse continues...
to dominate interactions between parents and teachers, and maintains barriers to achieving effective partnership. Through professional discourse, teachers tended to position parents’ knowledge as secondary to their own. Parents found that their child’s particular learning needs were not always recognized by their class teacher and the necessary conditions for their success in learning were not always provided. Parents had found that, when their views differed from teachers, there were few structures that enabled them to negotiate different perspectives. Partnership, for these parents, had been a stressful experience, involving considerable personal cost.

While this study identifies barriers to forming effective partnership, it also highlights the factors which parents and teachers found helpful in achieving an effective partnership. Parents wanted a partnership with clearly stated roles, responsibilities, systems and procedures so that they knew what they could, or could not, reasonably expect from the school. They wanted the school to be the proactive party in initiating meetings. Parents also wanted the school to make their child’s learning programme and progress more visible, and to value the knowledge they wanted to share about their child.

This study shows that teachers need to recognize the position of power they hold in relationship to parents and what steps they can take to minimize this power differential. For parents and teachers to work effectively together, the many dimensions of partnership need to be recognized, made visible and critically examined by each school. The negotiation and enactment of partnership may continue to expose different perspectives between parents and teachers. However, these differences can be viewed as a valuable opportunity for learning how to achieve better partnership. Through such a partnership, the educational needs of children with a disability could be more effectively met.
Chapter One
Discourses of Partnership and Disability

Introduction

With partnership as a key principle, the New Zealand Special Education 2000 Policy Guidelines have signalled important changes to the relationship between parents and teachers of children with a disability. This has been clearly articulated in the Special Education 2000 (SE2000) Policy Guidelines: “partnership between parents/caregivers and education providers is essential in overcoming barriers to learning” (Ministry of Education, 2000; p.3). According to these guidelines, “partnership” involves teachers, parents/caregivers and whanau sharing information and deciding together how the special educational needs of individual students should be met. While teachers and parents have acknowledged that partnership is a desirable outcome, many have found the process of negotiating partnership to be problematic. Frequently they are challenged by their different understandings and positionings. Research investigating teacher-parent partnership (Brown, 2000; Dale; 1996, Skrtic, 1991) and disability (Ballard, 1999; Fulcher, 1989) indicates that there are many differing, and often competing, discourses that can create barriers to effective communication between parents and teachers.

Since the New Zealand Education Act, 1989, the rights of children with a disability to be included in a regular classroom have been legally recognised. Previously, parents of children with a disability were seldom included in any form of decision-making. The “special” needs of their children were defined and used by professionals to justify a segregated process of education. The introduction of an inclusive educational system has meant that teachers are now required to teach children with a more diverse range of learning styles. Few, however, have had any specialist training to help them understand the educational needs of children with a disability. Parents had high hopes that being involved in partnership with their child’s school would bring better resources and learning opportunities for their child. However, their experiences show that there are critical issues concerning different expectations and practices of partnership.
My interest in examining teacher/parent partnership has evolved during fifteen years of work in the field of special education. As a class teacher, on-going resource teacher (ORS teacher), educational therapist and a parent, I have had both a professional and a personal interest in this topic. From these different positions I have recognized that teachers and parents of a child with a disability do not always share common understanding of a child’s special educational needs and the appropriate classroom practices to meet these particular needs. Although expected to work in partnership, many parents and teachers are unable to effectively work together. Consequently, the learning potential of children with special educational needs is frequently unfulfilled. This concern has stimulated my interest in seeking ways that teachers and parents can work better together, so that the educational needs of children can be more effectively met.

The purpose of this thesis is to identify factors that support an effective teacher/parent partnership, so that children with a disability have the optimum conditions for learning and for being valued in their school community. This study is based on the experiences of partnership of ten New Zealand parents (five couples) and six New Zealand teachers of children with a diagnosed disability. A qualitative methodological approach was used for data gathering and analysis. Primary data was drawn from semi-structured, in-depth interviews, school policies, and special education policy documents.

Reference to “effective partnership” throughout this study will use the principles stated in the SE2000 Guidelines as a working definition: a partnership which involves educational providers, parents/caregivers and whanau sharing information about barriers to learning and resources, and deciding together how the special educational needs of individual children should be met. Added to this definition is the recognition of the underlying power dynamics between all those involved (Fine, 1993; Timperley & Robinson, 2002).

Because partnership is not easily defined, it is open to many interpretations, assumptions and practices; shaped by the individuals, the context, and the social and political climate in which it is enacted. Different approaches to partnership in education can reflect competing, and often conflicting, socio/political discourses i.e., the language, values and beliefs that shape our interactions and practices. Partnership, as described in the SE2000 policy documents, is premised on the expectation of shared understandings and decision-making between parents/caregivers, whanau and teachers. However, this expectation is not always possible to
fulfil because teachers and parents are positioned within, and positioned by, different discourses that can hinder the way they attempt to work together. Teachers and parents can also use different discourses to advantage their own position. Implicit within these discourses are issues of power.

The work of Michel Foucault has particular relevance for examining discourses used by teachers and parents in this study. According to Foucault (1971): "every educational system is a political means of maintaining or modifying the appropriateness of discourses with the knowledge and power they bring with them” (p.46). Because the sharing of knowledge is a key principle in Special Education 2000 policy, it is appropriate to investigate the function of knowledge within partnership. Foucault viewed power and knowledge as two sides of a single process: “an inseparable configuration of ideas and practices that constitute a discourse” (Ball, 1990; p.5). Foucault’s insights into the inter-relationship between power and knowledge precipitated many key questions for this research: what positions of privilege does knowledge make possible for parents and teachers? How does knowledge shape their relationships? What discourses are evident in their interactions and practices? These questions addressed important issues of knowledge/power relationships not only between teachers and parents, but also the wider body of policy makers, specialists and administrators.

This study examines the different discourses that shape the interactions of teachers and parents. While previous researchers have identified barriers to effective teacher/parent partnership, few have critically examined the discourses that create and maintain these barriers, particularly in inclusive educational settings. Partnership in these settings has been evaluated more in terms of success in accessing funding and resources than the quality of interaction necessary to achieve the kind of partnership promoted in the Special Education 2000 policy. Foucault maintains that issues of power are associated with knowledge. Because the sharing of knowledge is a key principle in the partnership promoted by the SE2000 Guidelines, an examination of the different power differentials between teachers and parents is highly relevant. In this study I will examine the different discourses of partnership and disability and show how knowledge and power dynamics operate within teacher/parent partnerships.

Chapter One describes the context in which the notion of teacher/parent partnership in New Zealand has evolved. This chapter also outlines the differing meanings and rationales for
partnership which recent research has identified in school settings. In Chapter Two, I describe
the methodology used to gather and analyse the data for this study. Chapter Three examines
the parents’ experiences and understandings of partnership. In this chapter I also identify the
different discourses that both enabled and hindered their interactions with teachers and show
why parents, particularly mothers, found partnership “a difficult act to balance.” Teachers’
perceptions of partnership are discussed in Chapter Four. This chapter examines the different
discourses that influence teachers’ interactions with the parents of children with a disability.
In Chapter Five I identify the dimensions necessary for effective partnership. The final
chapter discusses the implications of this research for teachers, parents and children with a
disability, and suggests areas where further research on partnership is required.

Literature Review

This review draws together key findings from research concerning partnership in educational
settings. It first looks at the context of partnership in New Zealand education and the issues
highlighted by the *SE2000 Policy Review* by Cathy Wylie (2001) and the *Ministry of
is then examined through an analysis of different research perspectives. These perspectives
include a review of research that has investigated the aims and means of achieving
partnership. This is followed by a review of research that has examined research in practice.
Finally, this review outlines the differing, and often conflicting, discourses concerning
partnership and disability.

Partnership in Aotearoa /New Zealand

The New Zealand Education Act, 1989, not only legalised changes in ideology and practices
concerning human rights and the education of children with disability, but it also precipitated
major changes in educational practice. Inclusive education, described as an education which
welcomes and values diversity, and strives “to identify and remove all barriers to learning for
all children” (Ballard, 1999; p.2), became a policy requirement in all schools. The aim of
*SE2000*, as stated by the New Zealand government “is to achieve, over the next decade, a
world class inclusive education system that provides learning opportunities of equal quality to
all students” (Ministry of Education, 1996a; p5).
Inclusive educational practice challenges the traditional conceptualisation of special education that had emphasised diagnosis, categorisation and individual remediation. An inclusive approach seeks to adapt the curriculum and learning environment to meet the needs of the child within the classroom. This paradigm also includes the input of parents who can provide valuable information about their child’s learning strategies and interests. Effective partnership between parents and teachers is considered critical to the successful inclusion and programming for children with a disability (Fraser, 1995). These principles are foundational to the SE2000 policy documents.

During 1988-1990, a major study by Ramsay, Hawk, Harold, Kaai, Mariott and Poskitt (1993), examined the collaboration between teachers and parents in twenty-eight New Zealand schools. This study showed that certain conditions were necessary for changes to occur e.g., non-hierarchical structures and a willingness to share power, opportunity for quality reflection and provision for teachers and parents to develop the skills required for successful interaction.

Ramsay et al.’s (1993) study has particular relevance for SE2000 partnership. Their findings indicated that where inclusive methods were used e.g., allowing many people to be part of the decision making process, a greater sense of ownership occurred. A significant finding was that no ‘one best method’ emerged. Each school needed to find a repertoire of approaches that suited its own needs and vision. A further finding was the pivotal role of the principal who, in order to effect positive change, needed to be open-minded, flexible, visible to staff, students and parents, and to be committed to a collaborative model.

Although the Special Education 2000 Policy Guidelines do not clearly specify how partnership should be achieved, they acknowledge the importance of a collaborative approach through the sharing of information and decision-making. They state:

It is vital that early childhood centres, schools, and families decide together how the special education of individual students should be met.

This principle [partnership] will be visible in practice when information about barriers to learning and provision of resources is shared between both parties (Ministry of Education, 2000; p.3.)
The Individual Education Plan (IEP) Guidelines also highlight the importance of a collaborative approach, stating that “team work is founded on respect for the opinions and choices of all members: parents, student, teacher and other specialists” (Ministry of Education, 1998; p.5).

However, research investigating the practice of inclusive education in New Zealand shows that parents often experience frustration, because their knowledge and opinions are not valued, nor are their wishes for their children respectfully met (Ballard, 1994; Brown, 1994; Fraser, 1995; Wylie 2000). Fraser (1995) highlights the importance of recognising the power dynamics that underlie teacher and parent relationships. This, according to Fraser (ibid), requires shifting the emphasis from the traditional role of the teacher as expert advisor, to a more collaborative approach that encourages the mutual exchange of support and knowledge between parents and teachers.

Special Education 2000/2001 Policy Review

In her review of the impact of the SE2000 policy Wylie (2000) found that “a notable gap in the present policy is the provision of information, advice and support for parents, and for principals and teachers, for the practical working through of issues” (p.34). Wylie (2000) found that many parents “operate amidst considerable uncertainty about how best to meet their child’s needs” (p. 100). Key issues for parents were the need for early information and support, the use and respect of parents’ knowledge about their child, clear and accessible information, and respect for parents’ desires for the kind of provision that is working for their child. In her review of professional development Wylie (2000) found that “many teachers continue to think of students with special needs as abnormal, or extra, something on top of what they had expected” (p.97). Although professional development related to Special Education 2000 had been offered to schools, it was optional and as Wylie reported “not picked up by many schools” (p.97).

In a substantial review designed to evaluate the implementation of the Special Education 2000 policy, the Massey University Final Report (2002) reveals a wide range of perspectives held by parents and teachers on issues concerning partnership. This report involved both qualitative and quantitative methods. The quality of relationships between schools and parents was examined over three years (1999-2001) through parent forums, surveys and fieldwork.
While both parents and teachers reported positive relationships, “these relationships had been largely unaffected by the implementation of the policy” (Massey University, 2002; p. 14).

In some areas, e.g. access to information, “there have been consistent differences in the perspectives of schools and parents. Parents have continued to rate provision of information less positively than do schools” (Massey University, 2002; p.197). Parents also reported the need to improve communication with teachers. Lack of involvement in decision-making and consultation remains a concern for many parents, particularly concerning the allocation of funding. Although issues between parents and teachers continue, (Morton, 2002) points out that “literature from the Ministry to date does not suggest how parents and educators might better understand each others’ perspective or how such new understandings might be applied to improve the partnership or make it work it better” (p.307).

Conflicting meanings and approaches to partnership

Partnership, as described in educational research literature, is a complex and slippery term. It is not easily defined, or enacted, because it has many different and changing meanings and purposes according to those it serves. According to Wolfendale (2000) partnership is frequently in process; being redefined and negotiated within a wider social/political context. Frequently the terms collaboration, participation, parent involvement and partnership are used interchangeably, yet each of these terms can represent different intentions and different degrees of power sharing and responsibility between partners.

Partnership: an aim or a means?

Research examining how partnership is perceived and enacted in schools reflects changing perceptions of the purpose of partnership. Earlier studies in America have focused on parental involvement as a key to enhancing student outcomes e.g. increasing literacy achievement (Cotton & Wiklund, 1989; Henderson, 1988). The New Zealand SE2000 documents (Ministry of Education, 2001) also promote the need for improved educational opportunities and outcomes. However, partnership is also used as the means to understanding opportunities to learning for children with special educational needs so that better educational outcomes can be achieved: “partnership is essential in overcoming barriers to learning” (p.3). These
documents promote shared decision-making and collaboration as a key principle. The SE200 Policy can therefore be interpreted as a blend of both aims and means.

A further New Zealand study (Nagel and Raxworthy 1999), involving families and members of the national committee of the Vision Impaired, used parent involvement as a mode of research. This collaborative approach aimed at empowering the participants through making their concerns central at every point of the process.

Means to achieving partnership

Researchers have been primarily interested in examining how partnership is negotiated and enacted (Brown, 1994; Dale, 1996; Epstein, 1987; Fraser, 1997; Pugh, 1989; Soodak & Erwin, 2000; Wills, 1994, Wylie 2001). From her research investigating the enactment of partnership between parents and teachers in early childhood settings, Pugh (1989) has highlighted the importance of a collaborative approach. She describes this as:

“a working relationship that is characterized by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and a willingness to negotiate...this approach implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability” (p.36).

The New Zealand Ministry of Education documents for Special Education (2000, 2001) describe partnership between parents and teachers in similar terms. The information handbook for parents (Ministry of Education, 2002; p.17) states:

“The partnership with your school will work best when everybody:

Accepts responsibility for meeting the special education needs of your child.

Has a view on how these needs should be met, however, works together to find the right answer.

Works with others in a way that concentrates on your child, not the personalities involved in the relationship.

Presents their views openly, sensitively and honestly.

Shares the responsibility for making decisions.

Seeks to achieve the best outcome for your child.

Deals with problems as they arise.”
According to Friend, (2000, p.130) there is a vast body of qualitative and quantitative research that concludes that the success of inclusive education “in large part relies on collaboration among staff members and with parents and others.” However, Friend (2000) contends that these skills are not well developed in many teachers. In her research examining the collaboration between teachers and parents in inclusive educational settings, Friend (2000) found contradictions in teachers’ perceptions and actions. She attributes their confusion to “the lack of a precise and technical understanding of what collaboration is and how it can be achieved” (p.132). Therefore, she maintains that skills of collaboration should be further researched and “carefully taught and nurtured” (p.132).

The qualitative research of Dale (1996), which has investigated partnership between parents and professionals working with children with a disability, found that the most effective partnerships were formed when a negotiating model was used. Within this model parents and professionals were able to negotiate different perspectives. However, Dale’s model does not indicate what steps can be taken when power dynamics between parents and teachers prevent negotiation. Further research (Brown, 1994; de Carvalho, 2001; Fine, 1993, Friend, 2000; Henry, 1996; Lueder, 2000: Wills, 1994), gives insight into how these power dynamics can operate.

**Unmasking the power dynamics of partnership**

Research in educational settings has shown that teachers, and other professionals working with children, have used partnership to invite parents to join them on their terms (Fine, 1993; Henry, 1996; Lueder, 2000; Pugh, 1989). Although using the term partnership, typically schools have, instead, used parents merely to support and supplement their own needs.

While the SE200 documents reflect a notion of partnership based on democratic participation, research shows that issues of power have been predominant themes in New Zealand special education prior to the SE200 policies. From a parents’ perspective Brown (1994, p.239) identified barriers to partnership as “basic issues of power and prejudice” not only towards children with disabilities but often towards their parents as well. Wills (1994) also highlighted the power imbalance between professionals and parents and argued: “how can a partnership exist when inequality of information, financial and material resources are the basis of the
relationship? Lifelong needs, wants and hopes drive one of the parties in this relationship. What is the rationale for the other?” (p.239).

A uni-directional approach to partnership has serious limitations. According to de Carvalho, (2001) and Lueder (2000), it does not reach the “missing families” who may not have the necessary relationship with the school, or the cultural capital to be involved. Nor does this approach adequately address the power differentials within partnership, or encourage the sharing of power and responsibility, which Fine (1993), Pugh (1989) Timperley and Robinson (2002) argue are essential dimensions of effective partnership. Fulcher (1989) alerts us to a broader picture. She argues that “it is not so much class barriers that make different outcomes between teachers and parents but more the discourses available to the parents in their negotiation with the teacher” (p.174-175).

Nicholls (1997) draws attention to the importance of ownership and reflection by parents and teachers within a partnership: She suggests that “this requires them to make choices and reflections on these choices” (p.93), and that, parents as participants within the partnership, can be active rather than passive agents. However, Fine (1993) and Sarason (1990) have a less optimistic view and alert us to the power differential between parents and teachers. Fine (1993) argues that parents can be severely limited in agency. Her research on parent involvement in American schools showed that often parents were “invited in as if this [partnership] were a power neutral partnership” (p.460b). Timperley and Robinson (2002) have also found unequal relationships and positions of power inherent within teacher/parent partnerships in New Zealand schools. Like Fine (1993) they maintain that this power differential needs to be recognised and negotiated in order for partnerships to be effective. They concluded that “in the most successful partnerships, the partners negotiated how the power was to be shared” (p. 32).

Literature on parent involvement and partnership has tended to treat the themes of social democracy and student outcomes as separate aims and has neglected to consider how these themes could be interrelated and mutually enhancing. Timperley and Robinson (2002) maintain that researchers with a social theory perspective tend to treat partnership as a uni-dimensional concept and focus primarily on power relationships. They argue that researchers who focus on increasing student achievement tend to focus more on parent participation, but often neglect the power inequalities and issues involved.
While a considerable body of research has described the different dimensions and barriers to effective partnership there is little research that suggests how to address these difficulties. Timperley and Robinson (2002) show that there is a lack of coherence in the concept of partnership because researchers have not adequately examined its multi-dimensional nature. Nor have researchers adequately investigated the specific roles within teacher-parent partnership or the nature of partnership in different educational settings. Currently there is little research that examines the nature of partnership between teachers and parents of children with disability in inclusive educational settings. Because the mediation between home and school has been traditionally mothers’ work (Henry, 1996; Smith, 1987; Soodak & Erwin; 2000) issues of partnership are particularly relevant to mothers. According to Henry (1990) and Smith (1987) this work is generally taken-for-granted. Therefore there is little research that examines the mother’s particular role in school partnership.

Research has also neglected to address how teachers may develop the skills and understandings of partnership through their training and professional practice. Although partnership between teachers, parents and whanau is identified as a key principle in the New Zealand early childhood curriculum documents Te Whaariki, (Ministry of Education, 1996) and Te Mahi Whati Hua (Ministry of Education, 1998) there is little training or research in this area. According to early childhood educator and researcher Helen Hedges (2001) many teachers have reported feeling unprepared to work with parents. Hedges (2001) suggests that early childhood student teachers can begin to develop valuable professional skills and understandings of partnership through such experiences as a family practicum (a period of training in a family home). However, many teacher training institutions continue to reinforce the perception that professional practice is secondary to theoretical learning (Barrie, 1999). In the primary and secondary sector it is frequently assumed that teachers know how to work in partnership with parents. This assumption needs to be questioned. Why would educators have particular skills in interacting with adults when most of their preparation has focused on interacting with children?

A further issue is that many teachers lack training in working with children with a disability and special educational needs. Many class teachers consider that they do not have sufficient knowledge to work with children with a disability and view these children as “extra”. According to Wylie (2000): “this is not surprising given that special education is treated as an option within preservice teacher professional development, another extra itself.” (p. 97).
The chasm between policy and practice

Although policy on partnership between teachers and parents for working in partnership has now been made available to parents, teachers and Boards of Trustees (Ministry of Education, 2000, 2001, 2002) it can not be assumed that this policy is readily implemented. Problems concerning the implementation of policy in educational settings have been topical in recent research (Bassica & Hargreaves, 2000; Evans, 1996; Fullan, 1999; Lovett, 2002).

Fullan (1993) argues that the problem of bringing about educational change is a complex process:

The way that teachers are trained, the way that schools are organised, the way that the educational hierarchy operates, and the way that education is treated by political decision makers results in a system that is more likely to retain the status quo than to change. When change is attempted under such circumstances it results in defensiveness, superficiality or at best short-lived pocket of success (p.3).

Further research on the process and outcome of previous educational reforms show that the complexity of teaching makes reform at the classroom level difficult and that teaching practices are unlikely to be changed by policy directives and/or structural changes alone. Lovett (2002) cites Wehlage, Smith and Lipman (1992) who argue:

The individualised technology of teaching and the specialised knowledge of teachers make their participation central to the successful design and implementation of reforms. The failure to involve teachers, who are the implementers of change, and the failure to account for the particular nature of their work have been identified as central weaknesses in past attempts at mandated reform (p.790).

The research cited above warns that policy needs translation and ownership by those required to implement it. How can the Special Education 2000 Policy be effectively implemented in New Zealand schools? Could teacher training contribute?

Teacher Training in Aotearoa/New Zealand

The Ministry of Education first signaled the importance of teacher/parent partnership almost a decade ago. Since SE2000, principles and practices of partnership have been articulated in several special education policy documents. Yet there is little evidence of pre-service and in-service training to support teachers in developing the skills and practices that these documents
align with partnership. A look at the social political context in which New Zealand teacher training takes place can give some further insight into this issue.

Since the New Zealand Education Act, 1989, teacher education has undergone considerable transformation. According to Jesson (2000): “the ultimate purpose of this transformation has been to replace the traditional bureaucratic structures of education with a commercial market-based system” (p.57). She maintains that many of the conflicts and problems of teacher education can be traced to the drive to organise the administration of teacher education into a provision or market model. Although the Education Act (1989) gave an illusion of autonomy to teacher training, there is actually a tight specification of the government’s requirements through the contractual process of the Equivalent Full Time Student (EFTS) system of funding. This means that the Ministry continues to control teacher training through the way it distributes the EFTS and specifies the outcomes (Jesson, *ibid*). Each teacher training institute has been required to respond to the external market relationships established by the government. “The major effect of funding control has been to change the political, economic and social culture in which teacher education exists” (Jesson, 2000; p.62). Funding exigencies have forced courses to be shortened or compressed and have therefore contributed to the changing nature of tertiary training.

Jesson (2000) argues that “the ideal of professionalism to which teacher education aspires has been undercut by the reality and immediacy of the economics of teacher education” (p.66). She considers that focus has been “mainly on technical skills, and a broad-brush knowledge of curriculums, rather than on allowing time for students to cogitate on the moral activity of education” (Jesson, 2000; p.65). Snook (2000) sees problems faced by teachers as multifaceted and frequently social and political in nature and therefore argues for a training that offers teacher trainees insight into the social, political and historical context in which schools operate. He contends that “complaints about teachers have to do not with their technical incompetence but with the insensitive or unprofessional ways that they have (allegedly) dealt with a child” (p.149). Like Snook, Beyer (2000) maintains that a larger theoretical and normative framework is necessary to counter the danger of a “flattened sense of the nature of teaching as essentially a technical/applicative domain” (p.33). He argues for a theory of social power that is grounded in critical educational inquiry and in understanding the possibilities for democratic participation in reconstructing social reality (p.39). Rathgen (2000) also argues that teacher education should include a range of theoretical frameworks. She contends that
“unless teachers in their pre-service education address the issues of social justice and equity directly, then all schools will continue to do is to reproduce the status quo” (p.214).

What Jesson (2000), Snook (2000), and Rathgen (2000) indicate is the need for a reconceptualisation of teacher training which involves alerting students to the socio-political nature of their work and the discourses that operate within it. The following section will consider the discourses that are particularly relevant in special education.

**Discourses of Disability**

From her research investigating the politics of disability, in Australia, Fulcher (1997) argues that disability is an ‘object’ constructed by discourse: “a political and social construct used to regulate” (p.21). She maintains that differing discourses compete or combine, with varying influence, to inform social and educational practices and legislation.

Traditionally, the education of children with disability has reflected a *medical* discourse of disability. Through this discourse disability is considered the problem of the individual who is viewed as having deficits in need of remediation in order to fit with “normal” others in society (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999). Medical discourse allows notions of disability to be decided by professional experts who claim an objective and technical basis to their judgment. A medical discourse therefore “professionalizes disability” (Fulcher, 1989) and in this way aligns with professional discourse. Until there were significant changes in New Zealand education policy in 1989, this view was used to justify the segregation of children with disability. Their parents were seldom given other choices, or opportunities, to be involved in educational decisions concerning their placement and curriculum. This is essentially a discourse of exclusion that contrasts markedly with the *inclusive* discourse represented by the SE 2000 policy documents. An inclusive discourse is based on an *ecological* theory of disability that focuses on the social and environmental barriers as the cause of disability. This discourse requires schools to adapt programmes and provide effective instruction to meet the diverse learning needs of students. In keeping with this view, the notion of students with special learning needs should be replaced with “learners who experience barriers to learning” (Ainscow, cited in Mitchell, p.205).

Changes in perceptions of disability and educational practices have been influenced by a *rights discourse*. With its themes of self-reliance, choice, independence, consumer wants
(rather than needs), a rights discourse challenges oppression and discrimination. In contrast to the submerged politics of a professional discourse of disability, it is overtly political and therefore underlies much legislative change.

Research shows that parents/teacher interactions and teaching practices for children with a disability can be influenced by any of these discourses. As noted by Clark, Dyson, Millward & Skidmore (1995), mixed and even competing discourses can coexist in the same school and even in the same individuals.

**Discourses of Partnership**

Central to criticism concerning the rhetoric of partnership in special education (Armstrong, 1995; Fulcher, 1989; Skrtic, 1991) is the continuing predominance of practices of the discourse of *professionalism*. This discourse, as described by Skrtic (*ibid*) is the use, by professionals, of knowledge and power over others (e.g. parents/lay people). This discourse positions the professional as the expert, using a specific set of practices and languages to regulate and control their power. Because a professional discourse frequently involves the diagnosis with a disability, it has a strong association with a medical discourse of disability.

A *democratic* discourse, in contrast, is based on an understanding of shared decision-making and negotiation more equally enacted between parties (Dale, 1996). With its emphasis on shared information and decision making this (democratic) discourse is evident in Special Education documents being promoted by the Ministry. A democratic discourse can be associated with a rights discourse, particularly evident in the domain of funding and resources for children with special needs.

Research giving voice to parents’ experiences in New Zealand (Ballard, 1994, Brown, 2000) reveals the conflicting ways these discourses can operate. Despite policy that requires a participatory and democratic approach, Brown (*ibid*) contends that most parent involvement is dictated on professional terms. She argues that “even those parents who follow a rights discourse on behalf of their child are often manipulated out of the decision making process by those in power, (Brown, 2000; p.39).
Negotiating and enacting partnership within the context of so many changing, competing and often conflicting discourses is clearly a challenge for the teachers and parents involved. Barriers to achieving effective partnership not only involve different meanings and understandings of partnership but also of disability. However, there is a lack of research that investigates the interrelationship between discourses of disability and partnership in special education.

**Implications for this study**

The review of the research already cited indicates that there is a need to examine how discourses of both partnership and disability shape the interactions between teachers and parents of children with a disability when attempting to work in partnership. Teachers and parents are seldom aware of the impact that discourses have in shaping their relationships and may therefore continue to interact in habitual ways. Therefore, this study intends to show how competing, and often conflicting, discourses surround understandings and practices of partnership and disability. Through the voices of the parents and teachers interviewed, the following chapters will show how these different discourses can be recognized.

Central to this study are two interrelated questions: “what is an effective partnership?” and “what factors are necessary in creating and maintaining such a partnership that helps children with a disability to overcome barriers to learning?” The following chapters consider the perspectives of the six teachers and ten parents involved in this study and examine how their practices of partnership were shaped and maintained within a broader social/political context.
Chapter Two

Methodology

This chapter provides the rationale for the qualitative methodology and the theoretical tools used to shape this study. It also describes the research design and approach to data analysis. I begin by describing my position as a researcher. This is important in qualitative research, where interviews are used, because the interviewer is not an impersonal data collector, but a “research tool” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) and can therefore influence the responses of participants.

My Position as a Researcher

As a therapist, I first approached this study from what nominally appeared to be a neutral position between parents and teachers. However, I found that I was, initially, drawn more readily to the parents’ position. While I listened to mothers describing the considerable challenges they had faced in their efforts to have their child’s particular needs recognized, memories of my own experiences as a school parent were prompted. As the mother of a child once marginalized at school, I had a particular empathy with the mothers who participated in this study. Throughout this research I was aware of my own subjectivity and guided by the view that “we [researchers] do not come innocent to a research or a situation of events; rather we situate these events not merely in the institutional meaning which our profession provides but also constitute them as expressions of ourselves” (Clough, 1995; cited in Vlachou, 1997; p.2). My position as a mother, and the personal history I brought to this research, has particularly sensitized me to the issues mothers have described. In the initial stages of this study it was tempting to reorientate my study to focus solely on mothers’ perspectives of partnership. However, through my experiences as both a teacher and a parent, I have recognized a tendency of parents to blame teachers for unresolved issues concerning their children. To avoid a polarized representation of parents’ and teachers’ views I saw value in critically examining the issues beyond the personal level in which they are enacted. I wanted to examine the broader social/political issues that may have hindered their interactions. This
involved frequent reference to recent research literature, not only concerning partnership, but also of disability issues, teachers’ perspectives, and teacher education.

**Why Qualitative Methodology?**

A qualitative approach was used because it allowed an in-depth investigation of the individual experiences and perceptions of partnership between parents and teachers and an examination of the different discourses that shaped their interactions. This approach also helped to identify different meanings about partnership and assumptions about how it is practised. Through in-depth interviews, deeper layers of meaning and experience, which are not generally shared in the public domain, can be brought to the surface (Biklen, 1995). This study showed that, for many parents, difficult partnership had caused distressing experiences that they had not expressed publicly. The lived experiences of the teachers and parents involved in this study can give others insight into issues concerning partnership which may not be widely recognized. Qualitative research can contribute to the evolution of policy and practice (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). If policy-makers and professionals are genuinely concerned about achieving effective partnership then the experiences of parents and teachers need to be made more visible.

**Ethical Considerations**

In my initial research design I had planned to work with parent/teacher dyads so that differing perspectives of issues concerning the same child could be investigated. Parents were approached first in this study so that they could be given the option of including their child’s class teacher or not. While in three cases parents and teachers agreed to work in this way, there were two cases where parents did not want to include their child’s teacher because the relationship was particularly difficult. I therefore interviewed two other teachers who were not associated with any of the parents in this study. This study required respect and sensitivity to issues that some parents had found particularly distressing.

A letter providing information concerning this study and a consent form was sent to all participants. These are in Appendix 1.
Anonymity of all the teachers, parents and children involved in this study, and any other personnel mentioned, has been ensured through the use of pseudonyms and different cultural representations. The name of a rare syndrome of one child in this study has also been intentionally unnamed to give further protection to her identity.

Theoretical Perspectives

Because my interest was in understanding the different meanings and enactments of partnership, I originally drew on a symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969) as a means of guiding my inquiry. To consider the individual realities of parents and teachers I used an interactionist approach which:

attempts to show how individual troubles and problems become public issues. In the discovery of this nexus, it attempts to bring alive the existentially problematic, often hidden, and private experiences that give meaning to everyday life as it is lived in this moment in history (Denzin, 1989, p.139).

However, I found that this perspective, in itself, was not adequate in providing a framework to critically examine assumptions about teacher and parent roles and issues of unequal power and positioning, which were evident in the data. Discourse analysis became a more relevant tool to guide my inquiry into these issues for “in discourse, the beliefs, norms, and values that are taken for granted in every day life are instead thematised and critiqued” (Crotty, 1998; p.144). This approach enabled me to consider how individual meanings were placed within the broader social structures which Giddens (1984) describes as the larger and relatively enduring features of society that provide the background against which social life is carried out. Through this approach, focus was also given to the agency of individuals: the volitional and purposeful nature of human activity.

To represent the distinctive voices of the mothers in this study I drew on feminist analyses (Biklen, 1995; Henry, 1996; & Smith, 1987). Smith (1987) has drawn on phenomenological and Marxist theories to examine how male dominated (patriarchal) structures and discourses have shaped women’s experiences (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Both Biklen (1995) and Smith (1987) have highlighted the taken-for-granted nature of women’s work.
Previous studies (de Carvalho, 2001; Lareau, 1997; Lueder, 2000) have examined teacher/parent relationships in terms of cultural capital. These studies have drawn on the work of Bourdieu (1997) who highlights the influence of class and class cultures in maintaining, impeding or facilitating the way parents or children can negotiate and enter the process of schooling. Although cultural capital was relevant to the negotiation of teacher/parent partnerships in this study, I found that the use of discourse analysis allowed for a broader and more complex analysis of the data.

**Symbolic Interactionism**

This theoretical perspective is based on the assumption that human experience is mediated by interpretation and that individuals interpret and construct meaning through interaction with others. Therefore, “primary importance is placed on the social meanings people attach to the world around them” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; p.11). Highly influential in this field of research is the work of Herbert Blumer (1969) who proposed the three central tenets on which symbolic interactionism is premised.

Blumer’s first tenet is that people’s actions are determined by meaning. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) expand this premise by stating “people act towards things, including other people, on the basis of the meanings these things have for them. Thus people do not simply respond to stimuli or act out cultural scripts: it is the meaning that determines action” (p.11). Social reality is, therefore, a process of constant negotiation and action according to perceived meanings. From this perspective, I investigated partnership more as a *process* of negotiation than the *result* of a prescribed practice, imposed by policy makers.

Blumer’s second tenet of social interactionism is that through interaction with others, shared meanings are developed. According to Blumer (1960) “meaning evolves from the ways in which other persons act. This occurs as long as people give the same meaning to the same act” (p.4). Being able to share meaning also depends on the ability of the actor to perceive the role of the other (Woods, 1996). Partnership (as stated in the *SE2000* documents) is based on an expectation of teachers and parents deciding together how the child’s needs be best met. In this study the particular challenges associated with each child’s disability were often subtle and therefore not always easy to recognize for teachers without prior experience of these
challenges. Therefore I was interested to see how parents and teachers attempted to share meanings and find common understanding related to the nature of the child’s disability.

Blumer’s third tenet, as described by Taylor and Bogdan, (1998), concerns interpretation: “meaning is attached to situations, things and themselves through interpretation” (p.11). The process of interpretation is constant, and involves interpreting, defining and redefining in different situations. It was anticipated that problems arising from different expectations and experiences of partnership might cause individuals to create new interpretations and meanings.

While symbolic interactionism stresses the ability of individuals to construct, reconstruct and give meaning to their world, it does not critically address issues of unequal power relations and structural properties which are implicit within professional /parent interactions. Issues concerning the negotiation and enactment of partnership, therefore, need to be considered not only at an individual level but also within the broader context of policy, politics and power.

**Discourse**

Central to this study is the examination of the power/knowledge relationships within discourses of partnership and disability. According to Foucault (cited in Ball, 1990; p.2).

Discourses are about what can be said and thought and done, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority. Discourses embody meaning and social relationships; they constitute both subjectivity and power relations. Discourses are practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.

Foucault maintained that power and knowledge directly imply one another. He argued that “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault, 1977, cited in Ball, 1990; p.81). This view stimulated many key questions for this research; e.g., How is power and knowledge disseminated or withheld? What possibilities of privilege does knowledge allow?

Foucault’s insight into the ways that knowledge can be buried or disqualified has particular relevance for this study. In his analysis of the use of power and knowledge in the social sciences, Foucault argues that particular knowledges have been buried or disguised through
formal systematization (Foucault & Gordon, 1980). He maintains that the experiential knowledge of individuals is frequently devalued by professionals assuming a more privileged position of expertise through specialist and scientific knowledge. Foucault refers to this devalued knowledge as “disqualified knowledge” i.e., “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate knowledges low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (Foucault & Gordon, 1980b; p.81).

Skrtic (1995) has drawn on Foucault’s theory of disqualified knowledge to critique the overemphasis of a functional approach in special education. He argues that many other forms of knowledge (e.g. observations by parents) have been hidden because of an overemphasis on objectivity, assessment and measurement by specialists. For professionals, the anecdotal knowledge parents offer concerning their children can be problematic, because it can contradict their own clinically based views. Skrtic (ibid), however, argues that it is the multiple perspectives and “buried knowledges” of parents which are essential in reconceptualising special education.

Issues of power and positioning have also been the focus of extensive research by Gillian Fulcher (1989) in the field of special education and disability policy. Fulcher theorises policy making as a political practice. She views policy as a struggle between contenders of competing objectives, where discourse is used as a tactic to achieve these objectives. This struggle, she argues, occurs at all levels in education, not only at the more obvious levels where policy is debated and created, but also in the daily practices of the classroom. Here, she considers policy is not only being enacted but also shaped by teachers as they make curriculum decisions and struggle with parents to find ways to achieve particular goals. Therefore, she contends, teaching practices and teacher/parent encounters are equally political practices.

Like Foucault, Fulcher (1989) argues that within discourse we become positioned, yet from discourse we can also draw our own position and deploy certain practices. An understanding of our own position, and an ability to use it skillfully, can offer us the possibility of choice and change, either for ourselves, or others, towards better circumstances. This study investigates what discourses were evident in parent/teacher interactions and how discourse shaped their interactions. It also shows that interactions can shape discourse. Through their
suggestions for more effective partnership, parents and teachers can contribute towards an expanded understanding of democratic discourse of partnership.

If partnership is to be enacted, according to the *SE 2000 Policy Guidelines*, then it is essential that parents as well as teachers have the opportunity to share their knowledge, views and wishes for their child. In this study I have attempted to uncover the “buried knowledges” of parents: the specific and particular knowledges they had wished to share with teachers in order to optimize learning opportunities for their child.

**Method of Investigation**

**Design**

Consistent with my theoretical perspectives, with emphasis on individual meanings, I used a qualitative interviewing approach to gather data about different experiences and understandings of partnership. This involved in-depth interviews, i.e. “face to face encounters between the researcher and informants, directed toward understanding informants’ perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situation as expressed in their own words” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; p.88). Semi-structured interviews were used to provide a structure that addressed the same key questions to each participant, yet allowed me to be flexible and sensitive when responding to issues which participants had found distressing.

As a site of partnership, the IEP meeting of each child was also an intended source of data. The term *disability* was used as the selection criterion for the children in this study rather than the term *special needs* because it was anticipated that a “medicalised” diagnosis of disability would ensure that each child had an IEP. However, despite all children in this study having a diagnosed disability, only two of these children had an IEP. It was only possible to attend one of these meetings during the time frame of this study. Following this meeting I decided that analysis of partnership and the power/knowledge dynamics involved in IEP meetings was an issue beyond the scope of this thesis, but clearly a very relevant area for further research, using participant observation as an approach.
Interviews were planned to address the following questions:

- What do parents/teachers consider to be effective partnership?
- How do parents of children with a disability negotiate and enact partnership with their child’s class teacher?
- How do teachers negotiate and enact partnership with the parents of a child with a disability?
- What barriers make the enactment of partnership difficult?
- What supports the enactment of effective partnership?
- What particular knowledges did parents wish to share with their child’s teacher?

These questions were however, based on my assumption that partnership, as described in the SE2000 documents was a familiar and “working term”. However, few teachers and parents used the term “partnership” when describing their interactions. Therefore I used the terms interaction and relationship when it was apparent that the term partnership was unfamiliar. In the first interviews I also realized that few teachers and parents were aware of the existence of the SE2000 documents. In further interviews, participants were asked if they had read or sighted the SE2000 information booklets and policy documents.

**Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews involving ten parents and six teachers, of children with a disability, were the main source of data for this study. Document analysis was a further source of data and included the following Ministry publications: SE2000 Policy Guidelines (2000) the IEP Guidelines (2001), Meeting Special Education Needs at School (2002); and policy documents on equity and special educational needs from the schools where teacher participants were based. Documents were analysed according to their use (or omission) of the term partnership.
Participants
Parent contacts were provided by a speech therapist at an Early Intervention Centre and by an occupational therapist. Three teacher contacts were provided by parents. The other teacher contacts were provided by a Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour.

Parents
Both parents of each child were invited to participate in the interview, because I was interested in multiple perspectives of partnership. Parents ranged in age from 30 years to 43 years and represented a wide range of occupations, including nursing, midwifery, business management, psychology, engineering, speech therapy, household removal, commerce and household management. Through these occupations each of these parents had a range of prior experiences of partnership outside the school context. These experiences were relevant to their expectations and understandings of partnership, as shown in the following chapter. For each of the couples interviewed it was their first experience of being a school parent.

Children
Although not interviewed for the purposes of this research, children were obviously pivotal to the relationships described in this study. There were three girls and two boys, aged between 6 years and 11 years. Each child had a diagnosed disability. All of the children attended their local primary school on a full time basis and were mainstreamed into a regular classroom.

Teachers
All teachers were trained primary teachers. Four teachers were female with their own class and more than two years teaching experience. The male teacher also held responsibility as a deputy principal. Only one of the teachers had received any training in working with children with special needs.
Interview Procedure

Initially I telephoned each family to explain the purpose and the practical requirements of the research. I then sent each parent an outline of the key research questions, ethical considerations and the consent form. When consent forms were signed and returned, I telephoned the parents and arranged an interview time and setting convenient to their family life. In each instance the mother was the key contact person. During all parent interviews both parents were present and key questions were addressed to both, in turn, so that different experiences of the same issues could be recorded. In instances however, the father’s responses were considerably fewer than the mother’s.

Parent interviews were audio-taped and took place in the family home around 8 pm. Interviews normally lasted 50 to 55 minutes, although further comments often occurred once the tape was turned off. As accurately as my memor, allowed the off-tape conversations were summarized immediately after the interview. During data analysis it became evident that follow up questions were needed, so further interviews were arranged (refer to Appendix 2b).

Interviews with teachers occurred in a variety of school settings including a library, a resource and storage room, a trust board meeting room, and a Year 4 classroom. In each case there were interruptions and considerable background ‘school’ noise that made transcription of the tapes challenging.

After each interview the tape was transcribed, word for word, I wrote a short summary of the main points drawn from my interpretation of the transcript and a list of key questions to explore further. The full transcript and a summary of the key themes were then returned to the participants to allow them to make further comment, clarify, or withdraw any response. A similar contact and transcript procedure was followed with the teachers. Although it was anticipated that participants may want to rephrase or withdraw comments, this did not occur. Instead some parents added further examples, and emphasized their original comments with expressions such as “too true!” Two teachers found that reading the interview transcript gave them an opportunity to reflect on their professional practice. As Sue stated: “it helped me think through my ideas.”
Data Analysis

My approach to data analysis was essentially an inductive process, allowing themes to arise from the data itself rather than interpreting the data with a predetermined hypothesis. Data analysis requires the researcher to accurately describe what they have understood and then reconstruct the data into a ‘recognizable reality’ for those who have participated in the research. The researcher is required to select and interpret the data and using this data, become adept at “weaving descriptions, speaker’s words, field note quotations, and their own interpretations into a rich and believable descriptive narrative” (Strauss & Corbin, cited in Maykut & Morehouse, 1996, p.122).

To reach this stage of descriptive narrative I followed a modified analytic induction method that is an approach for “collecting and analyzing data as well as a way to develop and test a theory” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p.63). This process entailed three distinct phases outlined by Taylor and Bogdan, (1998): first a discovery phase where I identified themes, propositions and developing concepts; second a coding phase, and finally a discounting phase.

The Discovery Phase

During this phase I read and reread my field notes, documents and transcripts many times. I also listened to the tapes of my interviews again, because the qualities of participants’ voices evoked, for me, a stronger recall of the interview and helped to bridge the gaps in communication that the written word alone cannot adequately fill. As I read and listened, I tracked any hunches and ideas that occurred, in the margin of the transcripts. During further readings I noted repeated phrases, topics and emerging themes. The first phrases which came to the foreground of my transcripts at this stage were the different words used to describe experiences and expectations of partnership e.g., ‘mutually respectful’, ‘honest’, ‘straight-up,’ I also began to identify certain approaches to partnership by teachers and parents e.g., ‘pro-active’, ‘mutually supportive,’ ‘resistant’ and ‘gendered’ (refer to Typology of Approaches to Partnership, Appendix 3).

To build on the descriptive phase of data analysis, I began to interpret the data looking for sensitizing concepts and propositions. Sensitizing concepts, according to Blumer (1969, p.148), provide a “general sense of reference” and suggest “directions along which to look.”
As a research instrument, sensitizing concepts are “used to illuminate social processes and phenomena that are not readily apparent through descriptions of specific instances” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984; p.133). Sensitizing concepts were developed from grouping related chunks of data (Appendix 6). I then considered these concepts in the light of the related literature.

Although the interviewee’s understanding of partnership was the initial focus of my study, I found that other themes arose. Some of these I chose to pursue in more depth. I was also guided by the particular language, and repeated words and messages within each transcript. A key theme that appeared was the mother’s key role in negotiating the parent/teacher relationship. The research of Biklen (1995), Henry (1996) and Smith (1988) guided my analysis of the particular understandings and approaches to partnership by mothers. Another key theme was the tension between power and knowledge. At this point it was useful to return to literature by Foucault and Gordon (1980), Fulcher (1989), Skrtic (1991, 1995) and Biklen (1995). Within these readings I found concepts that helped to guide my initial interpretation of the data. Throughout this discovery phase I was frequently shifting between data and literature. It was useful to record my responses to the data by writing in my research journal. Mind maps helped me to show the interrelationships between ideas I had previously thought to be disparate.

Also at this time I reconsidered my original theoretical perspective. Although I had begun my research primarily using a symbolic interaction perspective I found that discourse analysis provided a useful framework to examine issues of power, knowledge and positioning. A feminist analysis of power relations was apposite. Initially I had avoided using a feminist perspective because I did not want my research to be restricted to a gender view of partnership. However, I found a feminist analysis helped to examine and represent the distinctive voices of mothers. The work of Dale (1996) and Henry (1997) became particularly relevant towards the end of my analysis. Their work affirmed the particular roles that mothers have in partnership and supported the democratic ideals discussed by many of the participants.

**Coding**

To systematically develop and refine my interpretations of the data, I coded all the different themes, concepts, interpretations, typologies and propositions identified during the first stages
of analysis. Each typology of partnership was assigned a letter or number e.g., III for co-
incidental partnership and IV for a collaborative partnership. Further categories were
assigned letters e.g., L for labeling, P d for examples of professional discourse (refer to
Appendix 3, 5). This letter /number system was written onto each corresponding section of
the transcript.

The next stage involved sorting the categories into files, usually by copying each relevant data
segment from the transcript and placing it in a labeled file. Attached to each of these segments
were identifying codes from each interview and the relevant page numbers. Files were
frequently reviewed so that categories could be regrouped, refined and condensed around
themes. Once the themes arising from the data became more apparent, they were summarized
and used to shape the first draft of the parents’ chapter and the teachers’ chapter. The parents
were first given their chapter to read and then the available teachers were given theirs as a
form of member checking. Parents were particularly responsive to this and frequently wrote
comments that showed that they readily identified with the themes articulated. Following this
stage I examined these themes within a broader context, using discourse as the main
theoretical perspective. Further literature reading helped me to see beyond the problems of
individuals and consider the broader social/political factors and structural influences. The
impact of these social/political and structural influences on the differing understandings and
practices of partnership is examined in detail in the following chapters.

Discounting data

This stage, as described by Deutscher (cited in Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; pp156-157) concerns
interpreting the data, in the context in which they were collected and assessing their
credibility within the same context. My own assumptions and biases, as both a teacher and as
a parent, required continual self-reflection and evaluation. The positive experiences of
partnership described by some parents provided an important contrast to the difficult
experiences of others, and contributed data to illustrate the diversity of experiences
concerning partnership. Writing regularly in a journal was a useful way to check that I had not
oversimplified the issues by polarizing teachers and parents. I looked for intersecting themes
and the possibility of shifting positions and discourses. I also looked for evidence that I had
adequately represented the voices of all participants. However, in two instances, fathers said
very little in the interviews despite being invited to enter the conversation. They “explained” that partnership was primarily their wife’s domain.

DeVault (cited in Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) cautions that what is missing from the data may be just as important for theorizing as what is there. With this awareness I considered what appeared “missing” from the data I had gathered. While interviewing teachers, I was aware that teachers tended to talk more about children than parents. Their talk appeared less emotionally weighted than parents’ talk. With parents there was naturally a personal interest, and at times a strong emotional response, to the issues involving partnership. Teachers, however, seemed to be responding more from their professional role and therefore may have monitored their talk accordingly. They were not as forthcoming about “problem parents” as parents were about “problem teachers.” It is difficult to know how much teachers’ talk was influenced by the school settings in which the interviews took place and whether the data may have been different if the interview had been conducted in a more relaxed and neutral setting. Follow-up interviewing was not possible with all teachers. One had moved to another city, and two were no longer teaching. Member checking was therefore less thorough with the teachers than with the parents and some teacher interviews may not have the layers of personal reflection offered by the parents.

**Summary**

The qualitative approach used in this study supported the investigation of the many dimensions of partnership. While discourse analysis was the main theoretical perspective, further insights into the different meanings, practices and issues of partnership were also gained through drawing on symbolic interactionism and a feminist perspective. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were the primary source of data. Chapter three examines the expectations and experiences of parents and chapter four examines the teachers’ perspectives. Both chapters show how discourse shaped teacher/parent interactions. Chapter five outlines the key factors participants found necessary for forming an effective partnership. The concluding chapter considers how barriers to forming effective partnership might be addressed and indicates areas where further research is indicated.
Chapter Three

“A Difficult Act to Balance”: Parents’ Perspectives of Partnership

Introduction

This chapter examines the expectations and experiences of the parents when negotiating and enacting partnership with their child’s class teacher. Parents found that working in partnership required the recognition of many dimensions. While some parents described a positive partnership others described a partnership where their knowledge had not been valued nor their child’s learning needs effectively met. For many parents partnership was “a difficult act to balance.”

This chapter begins with a brief profile of the parents involved in this study. The first section contrasts the kind of partnership parents had hoped to develop with their child’s class teacher with their actual experiences. The second section considers the factors that either hindered or supported the forming of an effective partnership and describes why most parents found that partnership was “a steep learning curve.” Factors that indicate why partnership could be considered “mother’s work” are discussed in the following section. This section also considers the challenges and personal costs of working in partnership, particularly for mothers. The final section identifies the discourses that shaped parent’s experiences and shows the strategies parents used when encountering discourses that conflicted with their own.

Introducing the Parents and Children Central to this Study

Trish and Tim: Before their daughter Gina had begun attending the local primary school, Trish and Tim had been associated with an Early Intervention Centre. Their previous
experience with professionals was clouded by the difficulty of finding acknowledgement and a diagnosis for their daughter’s disability. Gina was eventually found to have a rare syndrome. Trish and Tim found that the support of an Educational Support Worker (ESW), linked to the Early Intervention Centre, helped Gina establish a successful transition to school. They considered that they had a very positive relationship with Gina’s current teacher. Gina was seven years old at the time of the interview.

**Jen and Dave** had also been involved in the same Early Intervention Centre, which provided a range of therapies for their daughter, Beth. Jen spoke positively about her association with Beth’s teachers at this centre. She valued their holistic and flexible approach. During her transition to the local primary school, Beth was supported by an ESW. Initially Jen had experienced difficulties concerning the number of hours the school was prepared to accept her daughter. At the time of the interview Beth was eight years old and a full-time member of a composite year 3/4 class.

**Rita and Grant** shared their disappointment and grief due to the unsatisfactory contact they had experienced with their son’s previous class teacher and head teacher. They considered that his individual needs were not being met within the class programme. He had been bullied and physically assaulted and this had not been adequately resolved by the school. Rita’s relationship with the class teacher had broken-down and a letter to the Board of Trustees, raising her concerns about Sam’s treatment in the playground, had been “ignored.” Sam had been withdrawn from school and home-schooled until being “accepted” at another school. Sam has Aspergers syndrome and a difficulty with auditory processing. Unlike Beth and Gina, whose disabilities were diagnosed in pre-school years, Sam’s disability was not diagnosed until his fourth year at primary school.

**Andrea and Andrew** also described their difficulties in working with their son’s current class teacher. Jordan has developmental dyspraxia. Andrea and Andrew wished to share information about the particular challenges of dyspraxia, but found that their knowledge was not valued. They found their relationship with the class teacher to be unproductive and they had, on occasions, withdrawn their son to provide the education at home that they considered he was not adequately getting in the classroom. Jordan was seven years old at the time of the interview. He was receiving private professional therapy.
Ellen and Hans found the first year of their daughter Eva’s schooling to be stressful and confusing. Eva was six years old and had motor planning, and poor fine motor skills, due to developmental dyspraxia. Ellen and Hans found that Eva’s challenges and needs were not understood by her first teacher. They found this teacher to be distant, and at times defensive, and considered that they did not develop a successful partnership with her. They described their daughter’s current class teacher as “very receptive” and “proactive” and considered that their relationship with her was a more positive one.

What did parents hope for?

Most parents expected to have an open, honest and mutually respectful relationship with their child’s class teacher. They wanted to be able to share their particular knowledge about their child’s individual needs and learning abilities and hoped that this knowledge would be respected and valued. Jen’s expectation of teachers was:

*that they respect and understand that we are the experts of our child as well. They are the experts on the education side but we also know how things work because we’ve been living with her longer.... So it’s respect from us to them and from them to us. There’s gotta be on both sides an understanding.*

Ellen had finally experienced such a relationship:

*This year we’ve got a different teacher, Raewyn, who’s much more open to people coming and chatting to her and um seems like a more organised person than the previous teachers ... She’s very receptive. She seems to have a better understanding of where Eva’s at. I get the impression she values my input whereas I don’t really think I was valued last year.*

Trish and Tim described their relationship with the current class teacher as “wonderful” and attributed this to her honest and open approach and ability to share “the negatives as well as the positives.” They appreciated the initiative that both the class teacher and special needs teacher teachers had taken to meet with them before their daughter began primary school. They also valued the way Gina’s teachers had set supportive systems in place, and kept them well informed about her classroom programme and progress.

For these parents, a positive and effective partnership had been possible because teachers had valued their knowledge and actively used strategies to support their child’s particular needs. Teachers who took the initiative to make contact and kept parents regularly informed about
their child’s progress were particularly valued. These partnerships I have characterised as proactive and collaborative.

However, other parents in this study found that their expectations of partnership were not adequately met. They were critical of the lack of clear and predictable communication, and processes and systems to support their efforts to work together with the school. As Ellen stated: “there seems to be no formal communication process: it’s all very haphazard and casual unless you bump into somebody.”

Parents identified several factors that created barriers to achieving the kind of partnership they had hoped for. Common concerns were:

- lack of arranged meeting times other than the formal Individual Educational Programme Meeting (IEP) for their child once or twice a year,
- lack of visible structures and procedures for sharing information, negotiation or making complaints,
- lack of information about their child’s educational programme,
- insufficient feedback about their child’s progress, and
- a lack of coordination concerning different approaches/programmes and professionals involved with their child.

Parents expected that their communication with the school would be more formalised, and more predictable. They considered that the school should be the proactive party, not the parents. A common concern was the poor relaying of information from one teacher to another. As Hans explained:

*It makes you wonder if any documentation has been handed on about our previous meetings ... We’d just begun to trust the system and now it’s like we’ve regressed ... Every year you’ve got to treat differently. You’ve almost got to start again. I would have thought that the IEP would have stopped that happening.*

Having relayed the same information many times Andrea stated: “you almost get to know it off by heart.” Another parent asked “does the new teacher actually read the documents?” Some parents were also concerned about the lack of coordination concerning programmes set by other professionals and class teachers. As Ellen explained: “I felt all these things were happening to Eva but nothing was being coordinated.”
Some parents did not succeed in developing a mutually respectful relationship with the class teacher. Nor did they find their knowledge sufficiently valued. Rita and Grant found that their relationship with their son’s teacher had “broken down.” Rather than continue to confront issues, they had withdrawn their son Sam from school for a time because they had been concerned about his “constant kind of drifting” throughout the year. This, however, was only a short-term solution. It disrupted Sam’s education and affected his social contacts and friendships at school. Andrea and Andrew had also experienced difficulty having their ideas about adaptive classroom practices implemented for their son. Having become resigned to the situation Andrea stated: “It’s gotten to a stage where I’m riding out the year.... I mean that’s what Jordan’s doing.” Although she looked hopefully towards a “better teacher” in the future, Andrea was, at the same time, concerned that each day precious time was passing for her son’s schooling and that these lost learning opportunities could never be reclaimed.

**Learning to do partnership**

Although parents had expected the school to be proactive and make clear what systems were in place for making contact and supporting their child, this did not always happen. Several parents described partnership as a “steep learning curve” requiring “figuring out” and learning skills they didn’t have at the outset. As Rita explained “all my training in special needs did not prepare me.” All parents in this study were first time school parents and therefore found that there was much to learn about the school’s culture and its ways of operating. As Anthony expressed, “everything is new to us and so we don’t know what to expect.” They needed to learn the discourse of partnership of their child’s school but this was not made explicit. Hans explained “If it’s your first child you’re not quite sure of your rights and what’s appropriate.” Ellen expressed her uncertainty about approaching teachers at her daughter’s school:

> I found that [it was] a really difficult thing to know quite when to go in and how to enter.... I guess most parents have to go through that learning process to actually achieve six months later what they really want. It’s a shame it’s not in place to start with.

Central to parents’ discussion about partnership was the quality of relationship they had with their child’s teacher. Many found the nature of this relationship to be quite different to their experience of professional relationships in their own spheres of work e.g. as Grant explained: “I work in a commercial environment where partnership tends to be a one-to-one or one-to-
few relationship.... In a class that intimate relationship is difficult particularly for a teacher who has so many people to relate to.” Difficulty in accessing and communicating with the class teacher was one of the main issues parents described.

**Mothers’ Work**

Research shows that parent involvement in schools is largely seen as mothers’ work (Biklen 1995; Henry; 1996; Smith, 1988; Soodak & Erwin, 1995). Biklen (1995) maintains that:

> the school, as a site of partnership, is not ‘gender-neutral’ but is instead a site which has been historically and occupationally structured around a particular understanding [and assumption] of women’s loyalties and time (p.2).

Similarly, all mothers interviewed in this study considered that they carried the day-to-day responsibility for liaising with their child’s teacher and advocating for their child’s needs at school. Their work involved transporting the child to and from school, attending IEP meetings, supervising homework and additional therapy programmes at home, responding daily in the home-school notebook and liaising with the teacher aide. Many mothers adjusted their working hours so that they could fulfil these roles.

However, in this study, partnership was not only the domain of mothers. Two fathers were also involved in their child’s schooling, although they described roles which were different to the mothers. While their wives worked mainly as the coordinator between the child and teacher, the fathers acted primarily as the mediator. When mothers were unable to resolve issues with the class teacher the fathers tended to step in. Grant had tired of waiting for an IEP to be arranged for his son and had therefore contacted the principal and initiated an IEP meeting himself. Hans also took on the role of “dealing with the principal” when funding and resources for his daughter were needed. Ellen indicated that this role was useful because Hans was “slightly detached” and able to “see things in a more objective way.” In contrast she viewed herself as “probably more subjective” and explained that for her this role was difficult: “I guess it’s probably because I’ve had three or four years of trying to gain access. I feel like I’ve got a real emotional commitment to this.”

Advocacy was found, by mothers, to be an essential part of their work. Like the mothers in the study of Erwin and Soodak (1995), they found they had little choice but to assume this role. For some mothers, however, this role was often challenging. Jen explained: “I found it
quite hard to articulate what I wanted…. You’ve got this emotional attachment, and you’re trying to be objective … you try to see it from all sides.” Ellen highlighted the need for “an independent advocacy service for children … to protect the child’s access to funding and relevant support.”

According to Nagel and Raxworthy (1999) “the risk of not being a skilled advocate is too great if the child is to be adequately provided for” (p.13). Being an advocate, however, requires particular skills for which parents generally have no specific training. Advocacy also requires appropriate structures to address issues, but the mothers in this study found that the structures they needed were not always visible or available. Because there is now no parent advocacy service, these mothers found that they had to act as individuals, a single voice against a system of collective knowledge and power.

A balancing act: Partnership from a mother’s perspective.

In order to fulfil their work as mothers of school children with a disability, all mothers in this study described the considerable cost to them personally. Their comments highlighted the personal conflict and stress that they experienced when advocating for their child’s needs, while simultaneously trying to maintain a harmonious relationship with their child’s class teacher.

A common concern for mothers was achieving the right balance in their relationship with the class teacher. This involved maintaining a certain school-mother profile: not being too visible or overly demanding, so as not to jeopardise the relationship with a valued teacher. Ellen explained:

It is quite hard to, for me anyway. I find it hard to get the balance right… and obviously Eva has special needs and its important for me to communicate with Raewyn [Eva’s teacher], but I don’t want to appear as over-anxious…. I mean Raewyn’s just wonderful and I would hate to jeopardise the relationship with her so I hope we’ve got it right. But I don’t know.

Some mothers had found it necessary to challenge certain practices and to insist that specific adaptations and/or programmes were available for their child. These mothers did not want to be labelled as a pushy, or interfering parent, yet at the same time they worried when they thought that their child’s needs were not being adequately met. Nor did they wish to cause disharmony because they perceived that this could have negative consequences for their child.
Reflecting on experiences with her son, Andrea explained “I didn’t want to be known as the mother who blew her stack because it was a small school and he still had a few years left and I didn’t want to alienate any other possible systems for him.” Similar experiences of tension and caution in dealing with teachers were found by Purdue, Ballard & MacArthur (2001), in their study of parents’ experiences in seeking inclusion for their children in New Zealand early childhood settings.

While finding the need to challenge teachers’ perspectives and practices, parents found that it was also necessary to keep on side with the teacher. In their efforts to maintain a positive relationship with the teacher, most parents in this study spent some time considering the teacher’s position. Both Rita and Andrea were careful not to overwhelm their son’s teacher with information about dyspraxia and therefore deliberately passed on information that they estimated would be condensed enough for a busy teacher to read. Rita had observed that:

*On the whole mothers have done an enormous amount of work to find out what’s going on with their children, but to go in and blind the teacher with their understanding ... this sets up a wall of resistance ... and it doesn’t help the situation. Rather than being helpful, which is what the parents want it to be, it’s perceived as overstepping the boundaries, something about telling the teacher their job.*

Some mothers disguised their own professional identity. Although a highly-qualified professional herself, Rita appears not to have revealed or used her own position to gain power with the teacher. Jen explained “I didn’t tell them I was a teacher” because she perceived her own position to be a possible threat to her child’s teacher.

Although most mothers in this study appeared to expend a lot of effort trying to understand the teacher’s position, they didn’t always perceive their attempt to understanding the teacher’s position being reciprocated. Andrea expressed “all round I was trying to understand the dynamics of their job, but I feel they weren’t trying to understand the dynamics of my role as a mother.” Soodak and Erwin (2000) maintain that “if schools are committed to promoting membership and building effective partnerships with parents, particularly women, then they must ‘hear’ what parents desire for their children and for themselves” (p.39).

While the ability to listen openly is a necessary factor in promoting partnership as Soodak and Erwin (2000) emphasise, comments by parents in this study also highlight the importance of visible and accessible structures e.g., scheduled meeting times and a structure which ensures
that the voices of both teachers and parents are adequately heard. Parents were particularly concerned about the lack of clarity in working with issues when disagreements occurred. Not finding an appropriate way to confront issues was a particularly disempowering experience for the mothers in this study. As Rita had found: “with each little encounter I have to take time to lick my wounds. Each time it gets harder … your self-perception gets toppled. The self doubt eventually wears you down. This year I actually got broken by it.”

These comments highlight the considerable personal cost, to mothers, of an unsuccessful partnership. This cost is seldom expressed publicly. Instead it is carried alone within the private world of the mother. Ellen explained:

Last year was very stressful for me. I had no one to talk to. I spent the whole day consumed with worry about Eva at school .... I couldn’t trust what they said. I got confused messages. I lived with confusion and I didn’t know who to believe ... I don’t regard it as a positive journey. I have found it incredibly challenging and it’s been very arduous.

Although difficult partnerships had a significant impact on the child and parent, teachers in this study seemed largely unaware of the extent of parental dissatisfaction and distress.

While many parents considered poor communication and lack of visible and predictable structures to be key barriers to effective partnership, I consider that there are other less tangible, yet equally powerful influences inhibiting effective partnership. The way that parents and teachers have described their particular experiences indicate that underlying competing and conflicting discourses may also have created barriers to achieving effective partnership.

Fulcher (1989) has asserted that discourses are the “sites of struggle” and are open to challenge from other discourses. With this perspective the following section examines parents and teachers difficulties and struggles for understanding.

Discourses of partnership

Particularly evident in the way parents and teachers described their experiences of partnership were the competing discourses of professionalism and democraticism. Parents’ expectations of partnership generally reflected a democratic discourse, yet the practices of teachers more
typically reflected a professional discourse. I will show how these discourses influenced the way parents and teachers attempted to work together; at times enabling an effective partnership, but in other circumstances creating barriers to understanding and effective practice. Additionally I will show how parents used discourse as a strategy to advantage their own position.

**A Democratic Approach**

All parents in this study expressed their wish for a partnership that enabled them to share knowledge about their child in an open and honest way and to know that their knowledge was valued by the teacher. A relationship that allowed for negotiation and involvement in decisions was also a common and highly valued dimension of partnership. Parents’ expectations reflected a democratic discourse, which is the view that “those affected by decisions should take a genuine part in debating the issues and making these decisions” (Fulcher, 1989; p. 15). This discourse is clearly reflected in the *Special Education 2000 Policy Guidelines* which state:

> It is vital that early childhood centres, schools and families decide together how the special education of students should be met... [and that]... this principle [partnership] will be visible in practice when information about barriers to learning and provision of resources is shared between common parties (Ministry of Education, 2000; p. 3).

These goals are also reflected in the consumer model of partnership developed by Cunningham and Davis (1985) cited in Dale, (1996). Arguing for a shift of power from professionals to parents, these authors maintain that parents should be considered as a consumer with the right to share in resource power and to be involved in decision making through a process of two-way dialogue and negotiation: “negotiation within the context of a mutually respecting relationship is the foundation. By negotiation we mean a process by which the professional and parent attempt to reach the mutually acceptable agreements” (Cunningham & Davis, cited in Dale, 1996; p. 13).

According to Dale, negotiation is possible only if the professional has spent time listening and understanding the parents’ aims, views, expectations and their current situation and resources. Parents in this study spoke about their wish for sharing information and understandings concerning their child. Frequently, however, they found that the structures and appropriate
approaches necessary for an effective partnership were not in place. Hans, a business manager, described his normal style in dealing with people as negotiation, yet with his interactions with the school, found that a different approach was needed:

*I have had experience in actually setting other people's objectives with them and so I would approach something like an IEP the same way and certainly early on I did and then I backed off because I could see that it was not the way they were doing it ... we are clearly working from a different discipline here.*

For Rita, negotiation and respect were particularly important when there were different perspectives about the child. She wanted teachers to recognise that “we are all coming from different perspectives, we are all bringing our different perspectives to this and that allows people permission to see things differently.”

Three parents were critical about the lack of consultation concerning their child’s funding and classroom programme. Although consultation has been recognised as an important dimension of partnership (originally in the *Handbook for School Trustees, 1989*), some parents found that many key decisions were made without their involvement. The process of sharing information, beyond the formal structure of the IEP meeting, appeared to be largely unplanned and unstructured. Decisions regarding funding, resources and programme planning seemed still to be the prerogative of the school.

Most parents found that decisions concerning pedagogical practices were controlled by the class teacher. Despite their requests for curriculum and classroom management practices to be adapted to meet the specific needs of their child, some parents had found that their requests were not taken into account. Teachers did not always implement adaptations suggested by other professionals. Grant’s experience illustrates this issue concerning his son’s need to sit near the blackboard:

*His desk had shifted and he finds change very difficult you see. He was upset. He’d gone to his class and couldn’t find his desk and plus he’d just gone to the OT [occupational therapist] who had said “don’t move his desk around, leave it right in front of the class”.*

Hans was critical of the way he perceived the school’s planning for his daughter: “the school does quite a few things, like its planning, in what I think is a token way...they are not rigorous like I would be.” Other parents found that teachers made a token attempt to introduce
classroom adaptations and planning to meet the needs of their children. They found that teachers often reverted to their previous classroom practices within a few weeks. Having observed many teachers, in her position as a Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour (RLTB), Anne found that resistance to change and sharing power was not uncommon amongst teachers.

Anne’s comments also revealed the multiple and contradictory discourses within which a teacher can operate. Although class teachers may appear to operate from a democratic discourse (through talking about the equal valuing and sharing of information with parents), they can practice in contradictory ways, typically from a professional discourse that positions them as the classroom expert, and therefore the one who has the power to make pedagogical decisions. While trying to operate as professionals with a degree of autonomy they are often required to meet the expectations of other professionals associated with the child with disability, as well as the child’s parents. Teachers can therefore be positioned between the democratic wishes of parents and the professional discourse of their own training and other professionals.

**Encountering Professional Discourse**

Although attempting to develop a partnership which was based on a democratic approach, parents found that their efforts were frequently thwarted by others operating from a professional discourse. Within the discourse of professionalism, parents’ knowledge is evaluated as experiential and therefore not intrinsically reliable, while the knowledge of professionals is represented as disinterested and supported by technologies of testing, assessment and clinical evaluation (Skrtic, 1991). Parents cannot be equal partners with teachers in this model, because the sharing of knowledge and decisions is not reciprocal. It is a one-way process dominated by the professional. It is therefore important to consider how parents and teachers have inter-related in the past, because many of these influences are still visible in current practice.

Historically, according to Dale (1996), parents of children with special needs were mostly unsupported and had little involvement with professionals: “the focus was predominantly on the child and the dominant training model and practice of the professional as expert tended to work against establishing cooperative relationships” (p.8). Parents may have been informed
by the professionals, but not necessarily involved in the decision-making process. Nor were their views, wishes and feelings generally considered. Parents, therefore, had a very limited role. Dale (1996), argues that the tradition of professional as expert continues to influence interactions between professionals and parents.

Many parents in this study found that their own detailed knowledge of their child’s disability was frequently devalued by teachers. Ellen explained “it’s almost as if they disbelieve you as a parent .... that it [knowledge about her daughter’s disability] needs to be reinforced by another professional who is working with the child.” Rita had been distressed by the attitudes of her own colleagues working in the area of special needs. She had observed that in clinical discussions parents’ knowledge was often devalued. Knowledge of specialists and teachers was generally preferred because the knowledge of parents was considered merely anecdotal. Rita had also observed that parents were often viewed as “the fly in the ointment” and even pathologised as “neurotic” or “over-anxious.”

Professional discourse can subordinate parents to such an extent that they feel patronised. When describing his experience of an IEP meeting for his daughter, Hans stated:

> I have to be completely honest. It was like we were being lectured by Hilary and Neil [teachers] about our expectations of Eva ... our expectations were too high .... I mean this is almost in their words. I felt incredibly patronised following the meeting.

After reflecting on her own experiences as a school parent, Rita suggested that schools should:

> allow them, both parties, to present their knowledge as if is part of the jigsaw puzzle rather than the school is right or the parents are right ... they both can’t be right .... and that the parents are not necessarily bringing their own pathology to the experience but their own experiences and they are all valid.

Hans and Rita highlight an important distinction between professional discourse and democratic discourse i.e., that professional discourse reinforces the notion of preferred knowledges, which are placed hierarchically according to the status of those employing them, while democratic discourse can offer more opportunity for the mutual sharing and valuing of knowledge.

Three other parents in this study were also distressed because they found that their knowledge of their child’s particular needs was not valued or utilised by the class teacher. After finding
that their attempts to communicate were unsuccessful, each of these parents brought in outside professionals to the school to explain their child’s disability and needs. Andrea paid her son’s occupational therapist to come to an IEP meeting to reiterate the same information she had previously tried to share. She described issues related to this event:

\textit{Andrea: I got Kim [OT] along to it [IEP] so she could explain.}

\textit{E.E. (Researcher): Can I ask you ... had you tried to explain it to the teacher?}

\textit{Andrea: Yes, yes I had.}

\textit{E.E: What kind of response did you have?}

\textit{Andrea: Um, pretty much the same as the response we get to everything. I don’t really get a response, I, even right down to, um I took all the papers down to the school...}

\textit{Andrew (Andrea’s partner): They lost those papers.}

Other parents had also found it difficult to have the particular learning needs of their child acknowledged by teachers. As Grant had experienced: “there is a tendency to say the child is OK, its just neurotic parents.” In another instance a child’s disability had been disputed by the teacher. Therefore, these parents had used the technologies of assessment of other professionals outside the school and deliberately sought a diagnosis, a written report and a disability “label” for their child, to get teachers to recognise and address their child’s specific educational needs. In this way parents used a medical discourse of disability (often associated with a professional discourse) to advocate for their child’s needs. Ellen, Grant and Rita had found that a written diagnosis and disability label helped teachers to recognise that their child’s atypical behaviours were not the result of poor parenting.

Although labels are currently criticised for reinforcing a medical view of disability, parents in this study had found that labels were empowering. Rather than remain passive in their response to teachers, parents had deliberately used the specialised knowledge and status of other professionals to reinforce their own position. As knowing and active agents (Giddens, 1984) they attempted to utilise the professional discourse of one professional as a tactic and strategy for the changes they sought from another (the child’s teacher). Although able to mobilise some positive changes for their children through this strategy, mothers still, however, remained devalued and disempowered within the discourse of professionalism. Their need to use other professionals continued to reinforce their subordinated position.
Summary

For the parents in this study, effective partnership with teachers appeared to be more often a fortunate coincidence than a deliberately planned practice. Barriers to effective partnership were created when teachers did not value and utilise the particular knowledge they wanted to share. Parents found it distressing when their knowledge was not valued and the educational needs of their child were compromised. Despite the Ministry’s promotion of a more democratic approach to partnership, some parents found that their interactions with teachers did not reflect this approach. Parents’ experiences show that if effective partnership is to reflect the democratic discourse that the SE 2000 Policy Guidelines suggest, then the professional practices of teachers need to be reassessed. Genuine attempts at partnership need to address the barriers that teachers create when operating primarily through professional discourse.

Through reflecting on their experiences, parents were able to articulate other dimensions of partnership they had not seen so clearly at the outset. Their understandings of partnership had expended from an earlier vision of an open, honest and mutually respectful relationship to one which also valued and utilised their knowledge to support their child’s particular educational needs. They also found that an effective partnership needed to be made visible through clearly written procedures and to allow them to negotiate different perspectives. Many parents had developed many strategies to achieve this kind of partnership. Some parents however, were less successful. For these parents the costs of an ineffective or unsuccessful partnership were considerable.

In the following chapter I consider the experiences and understandings of teachers in working towards partnership. I discuss how messages from their training have reflected on their professional practice and show that for teachers, partnership is also a difficult act to balance. Like the parents in this study, the teachers were also caught between competing and conflicting discourses in their efforts to meet the needs of children with disability, the expectations of parents, and Ministry policy.
Chapter Four

“Caught Between”: Teachers’ Perspectives on Partnership

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the perspectives of teachers: how they viewed partnership, their awareness of the SE2000 policy and its relevance to their classroom practice and interactions with parents. This policy has been promoted by the Ministry through the distribution of information packages and booklets to parents, teachers and Boards of Trustees. However, the Massey review of SE2000 (2002) showed that the SE2000 policy had made limited impact on teacher/parent relationships. In this chapter I consider the impact of the SE2000 principles of partnership on the teachers and parents in this study.

The first section begins with a brief profile of the teachers interviewed in this study. The second section examines their perspectives on partnership, how they described partnership and how they thought they enacted partnership with parents. The following section highlights issues concerning the implementation of the SE2000 policy and considers why the SE2000 policy documents concerning partnership did not reach the teachers in this study. Finally, I examine the conflicting messages and competing discourses surrounding teachers in their training and practice.

Introducing the Teachers

Simone  Before training and working as a primary teacher for the last eight years, Simone was an Early Childhood Teacher. She considered her Early Childhood training, with its emphasis on a holistic approach to learning and the importance of parent partnership, to have been particularly valuable in her primary school teaching. Simone has experience
teaching other primary school children with disability. At the time of this study she was the teacher of a year 3 and 4 composite class.

**Raewyn**  During her 18 years working as a teacher in primary schools, Raewyn has worked with several children with a disability. She has had no specific training in special needs. While this study was in process she was teaching a year 1 and 2 composite class.

**Pip**  Has taught for five years at primary level. She spoke of the importance of establishing positive parent-teacher relationships and of her growing awareness and confidence in this area as she became a more experienced teacher. She also described a very effective network of support from the teacher aide and special needs coordinator at her school. Pip has had no pre-service training in special needs.

**Anne**  Although currently working and training as a resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) Anne has also been a class teacher and has had previous training in working with children with hearing impairment. Anne has been associated with several schools in an RTLB cluster and therefore had observed a wide range of teaching practices and attitudes towards children with special needs and their parents.

**Greg**  As a deputy principal at a large primary school, Greg has had experience working with policy and programme planning. He has taught for several years, mostly at a year 7 and 8 levels.

**Tui**  Is a specialist teacher at an early intervention centre as a member of a multi-disciplinary team that works closely with parents of pre-school children with a disability. She also helps support the transition of these children into primary school.

**How did the teachers perceive partnership?**

Teachers, like the parents in this study, emphasised the importance of honest and open communication as the basis of effective partnership. Tui viewed partnership as “a willingness to meet halfway to talk to each other and listen to each other and that both [parents and teachers] have a role for the child at school, that it’s shared.” Simone reflected on her early childhood training and considered that her approach to working with parents had been shaped
by messages in *Te Whaariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) which she recalled “stressed the attitude that parents know their children best”.

For Raewyn, partnership was not only about a mutually respectful relationship and shared knowledge, but also to do with accountability and responsibility. She saw the teacher’s role as setting, with the parents, “realistic and mutually agreed goals” for each child and matching these to the goals of the national curriculum.

At a surface level teachers and parents appeared to have similar ideas and shared meanings about partnership. However, closer analysis of the discourses used by teachers to describe and enact partnership reveals practices that did not always align with the Ministry *SE2000 Policy Guidelines*. Although teachers recognised the benefits of listening to parents, they also admitted their tendency to use parents’ knowledge to confirm their own perceptions about the child. Greg stated: “I’m using that information [from parents] to confirm what we think and that’s a habit as opposed to good practice.” He saw this as particularly evident with teachers at higher levels (year 7/8) and explained that “when pupils come to that level they’ve got a history of their learning needs behind them.” Other teachers appeared to include parents in a democratic way, yet their language indicated otherwise: parents were referred to as their “back-up” or as a means to support “follow through” with home-work. Greg’s reflections also illustrate this:

> [partnership] would probably mean initially to gather the information that I most value i.e., pupils’ school records, talk to the class teacher, look at testing ... looking at it from the educational expert’s side of things and then it’s a matter of communicating the perceptions with the families ...

With this view of partnership parents’ knowledge is being treated as secondary to the quantifiable knowledge of the educational experts. Greg’s view reflects a professional discourse i.e., claims to a level of professional expertise and the use of parents’ knowledge as merely supplementary.

A substantial review of research on parental involvement in early childhood education (Hughes & McNaughton, 1999) showed that practices based on professional discourse can create barriers between parents and teachers. This review indicated that problems concerning parent-teacher relationships were largely caused by the constant “othering” of parental knowledge by teachers. As noted in the previous chapter, research by Purdue et al. (2001) has
shown that similar tensions are evident in New Zealand early childhood centres: “a professional view dominates and parents’ views are not heeded” (p.42).

Biklen’s (1995) research on the interactions between white middle-class mothers and teachers in the USA has revealed similar tensions and conflicts. These, she maintained, were also related to professional discourse. She found that parents tend to become categorised and positioned by teachers and that:

teachers resist mother’s interference in the classroom because they see it as a challenge to their professionalism. They [teachers] argued that they were professionals who made good clinical judgements about children, but felt humiliated that mother’s activities, viewpoints and words had the power to affect them so deeply (p.139).

Biklen found that many women teachers felt that distancing themselves (and their professional credentials) from the mothers would enhance their own professional credibility.

Although teachers in this study appeared to attempt partnership their practices were not specifically aligned to Ministry guidelines but more typically based on their assumptions about partnership. As Greg, a deputy principal, stated:

_The honest answer is I guess if people have a reflection it’s within their own minds. We haven’t gone through ... and said this is how we view our role in partnership, this is what we expect from our families, this is how we’ll go about doing it. Are there areas of strength and weaknesses in what we are doing? I think there are habits that are ingrained here in terms of trying to involve families and making sure there is a commitment to meet with them ... But in terms of the changes in special education I don’t think that we’ve considered the word partnership or our functions in the partnership in terms of those changes .... There is a special needs policy but it hasn’t been altered or reflected on in the light of those changes._

Another teacher, (Simone), stated that teacher/parent partnership was not something she had deliberately thought about or discussed with her colleagues. It was more typically based on assumptions and habits of practice. For Simone, the research interview had provided a valuable opportunity to reflect on her professional practice. She stated; “you think you are doing it [partnership] but it isn’t until you talk about it you realize what you are actually doing.”
Reaching the Teachers

The class teachers in this study seemed to have little knowledge of their own school policy concerning partnership. None were aware that any formal policy review in their school had incorporated the principles of SE2000. Analysis of the “Coordination of Special Needs” policy at Greg’s school showed no reference to partnership, nor to working together with parents. Principals had not given a clear lead in creating a culture of partnership.

As an RTLB, associated with several schools, Anne observed that teachers aware of the SE2000 policy tended to view the policy as a document rather than a process of change:

*I think the difficulty with SE2000 when it first came in was that it took a very long time to reach the teachers.... Even now, to some teachers, it is quite a foreign document to them... they still don’t see it as being applicable to them.*

Anne had also noted that they had little sense of ownership or relationship to the policy, but had instead the view that policy is something imposed and coming “from the top” but not reaching them “down here” in the classroom. Anne spoke of the difficulty in getting the information and concepts of SE2000 to the classroom teacher:

*What’s written in the document is not always happening down here. In theory, its discussed probably at management levels, but it doesn’t always match what teachers are implementing and doing in their classrooms.... It takes more than a legal requirement for people to change: it takes convincing.*

The comments offered by Anne and Greg reveal a considerable gap between policy implementation and current classroom practice.

For the class teachers in this study, the SE2000 policy was clearly “a foreign document.” Despite many publications by the Ministry highlighting partnership as fundamental to best practice: *Update for Schools Issue 9, October, 1999; Special Education Policy Guidelines, 2000, Sharpening the Focus Issue 6, May 2001; Meeting Special Education Needs at School, 2002*; teachers, in this study, had not read these publications and were therefore unaware of the expectations they contained. During one teacher interview I observed a large pile of the Ministry guidelines *Information for Parents, Caregivers and Families, Whaanau* (2002) on a book-shelf. Clearly these booklets had not yet reached the parents. When I inquired about the
process of passing on information to parents, the teacher agreed that, as in this case, this did not always happen.

As shown in Chapter One, research (Bassica & Hargreaves, 2000; Evans, 1996; Fullan, 1993; Lovett, 2002; Wehlage, Smith & Lipman, 1992) has frequently highlighted the problem of policy being poorly implemented in educational settings. Ramsay et al. (1993) reflect the findings of Wehlage, Smith and Lipman (1992) who emphasise the importance of ownership by those required to implement policy change. From her investigation of the effects of policy change in schools Lovett (2002) highlights the pressures that teachers can experience. She views teachers as:

caught between pressures from two directions as they endeavour to comply with legislative requirements and at the same time develop skills in their own change agency which develops commitment, shared purpose and relevance to the school’s culture (p.67).

Contradictions within the model of partnership itself are clearly evident in the way it has been delivered to schools. While expected to enact the guidelines of this document, the teachers in this study had not been involved in any sense of partnership i.e., in any form of collaboration in policy making or implementation. Nor had they had any training or experience of structures and systems in their school being reviewed to support this policy. A top-down approach towards policy delivery does not encourage teachers to have a sense of ownership, which Nicholls (1997) and Ramsay et al. (1993) have shown to be a necessary dimension of collaborative practice.

**How do teachers learn partnership with parents?**

While the *Special Education Policy Guidelines* (Ministry of Education, 2001) promote partnership as a key principle, most teachers in this study considered that their training had not adequately prepared them to work with parents, or to appreciate the value of parents’ knowledge, child development and the broader social ecological contexts of learning. If teachers are expected to practice partnership and work with children with a disability, then where do they learn the complex of skills essential for the task? Is there enough understanding and genuine reflection on the process required to achieve partnership, or is partnership viewed merely as a required outcome?
Although required to work in partnership, the teachers in this study had no professional training in working with parents and only one had any training in working with children with special needs. Many felt that they left their pre-service training unprepared in this area. Simone reflected on the lack of training for supporting children with a disability in a regular classroom: “mainstreaming was a brand new term and so there was basically nothing talked about, in College, at all.” Not only do many teachers finish their training without any contact with parents, but many have had no contact with children with a disability. Therefore Raewyn suggested: “every trainee should have a section at a special needs school to work with a special needs child just to get some experience because its something that’s never talked about.”

Greg reflected: “there is a lack of development of what I call the professional skills beyond planning processes [and] classroom management.” Two other teachers in this study described the lack of preparation they had in working with parents. Raewyn recalled: “when I look back at myself as a first year teacher I was just so naive and I think I never listened to the parents at all.” Pip expressed the fears and anxieties that teachers and teacher trainees can have:

When I started I was only 22 .... I can remember starting the first year and thinking “God, I’m so nervous and all these parents will be expecting these wonderful things from their children.” But I’ve always thought: “Well, parents are such a key in any school environment that I’m going to have to make an effort and sort of step outside my comfort zone and get to know these parents.”

Now an associate teacher, Raewyn had observed that anxiety about dealing with parents is not uncommon among teacher trainees: “some of them are absolutely petrified of the parents.”

In their study of collaboration between teachers and parents, Ramsay et al (1993) noted that teachers expressed insecurity about their professional role and how parents might be judging their teaching ability. According to Lazar and Slostad (1999), “teachers’ fears and apprehensions stem from a fundamental flaw in teacher education” (p.3). In their review of teacher education literature they found that “very little attention is given to preparing teachers to work with parents” (ibid) and cite Epstein (1995, p.21) who found that “most teachers enter schools without an understanding of family background, or the framework of partnerships ... most teachers and administrators are not prepared to understand, design, implement, and evaluate practices of partnerships with the families of their students.” Lazar and Slostad argue that:
Given the lack of attention to those in both graduate and undergraduate education, teachers cannot help but feel uneasy about parents and unprepared to invite parent collaboration. Teacher educators must consider revamping the curriculum to include parent involvement projects as part of field experiences. For those already teaching, professional development is urgently needed (p. 4).

The research of Hedges (2001), involving early childhood students in a family practicum during their early childhood training, shows that involvement with parents was an important aspect of their professional development. From this experience

students were challenged to re-examine their beliefs and practices through confronting the realities of families they were not familiar with. In doing so, they start to develop the necessary repertoire of beliefs, thinking and practice that characterize effective teachers who value partnership (p.24).

Simone, a teacher in this study, has trained both as a primary teacher and an early childhood teacher. She considered that her early childhood training in the 1990’s gave her a better base from which to practice partnership than her primary training from 1980-1981: “much of my knowledge and attitudes have come from there [early childhood training] rather than my primary training.

**Conflicting messages in teacher training: “Completely trained otherwise.”**

Teachers in this study had found themselves caught between the differing paradigms underpinning their training and current professional practice. Tui stated: “we have the legislation; we are told that we work in partnership. We are told that parents are the first educators, are to be consulted, and then we are completely trained otherwise.”

Tui highlighted the issues she perceived in current teacher training:

*It appears teachers come out with huge pressures around curriculum and outcomes for curriculum but they are required to operate quite differently day-to-day. They are required to understand much wider issues than what is contained in the curriculum.*

While teachers are left with the responsibility of the outcome they often have little guidance of the process:
Tui: We’ve been trained to produce outcomes but we don’t understand what process truly means. We think we do, but we don’t. We are all the time trying to put in a measurable outcome.

Researcher: Because that’s how we’re judged?

Tui: It’s exactly how we are judged and the societal benchmarks that are put out there actually go against working in process for a child’s truly holistic development.

Teachers also reflected on their lack of preparation in understanding an ecological model of child development and teacher-family relationships. There was little attention given to the value of understanding children’s development or the valuing of parent’s knowledge about their child. As Raewyn reflected “we were always taught at college you know, assess, do it like this, do it like that, but they never really tell you what the parents bring is the child’s whole history.” Tui had also observed that many teachers lack an understanding of the developmental stages of learning.

Despite the emphasis on the delivery of curriculum and learning outcomes in their training, teachers reported that they did not learn how to adapt the curriculum for a child who learns differently. In Greg’s view, learning achievement objectives and matching strands were over-emphasised in current teacher training. Instead, students needed to learn more about effective teaching strategies and different learning styles. He considered that recently trained teachers lacked practical knowledge about ways to adapt the curriculum for children with disability and consequently adopted “a path of least resistance.” Although inclusive educational practices have been required since 1989, Greg and Raewyn considered that their own training had not prepared them adequately to work with children with special educational needs.

Clearly teachers can be caught between many conflicting discourses and expectations that in turn shape and limit their attempts at partnership and inclusive education. While teachers are frequently blamed by parents for poor partnership, this study illustrates the need to consider the broader socio-political context of their work. As Nesper (1987, p.323) has argued: “to understand teaching from teachers’ perspectives we have to understand the beliefs with which they define their work…. so that we can make more sense of the complex, ill-defined and deeply entangled contexts within which they work.”
Summary

If teachers are expected to work “in partnership” with parents, then the complexity of this task needs to be recognised. Teachers in this study have expressed the need for more training in developing more professional skills to work with parents and in working with children with a disability. They have suggested that more contact with children with a disability and with parents during their training would help them develop the understandings and skills they need. Teachers have also identified the need for learning about adapted curriculum practices and teaching strategies so that they can more effectively meet the diversity of children’s learning needs in the classroom.

The practices of teachers in this study show that partnership, (as described by the Ministry’s Special Education 2000 Policy Guidelines), was more often a fortunate coincidence than a clearly managed process within schools. Because this policy was primarily a top-down approach, teachers had little involvement in its implementation and therefore continued to interact with parents without a clear idea of what partnership meant.

Teachers were frequently “caught between” a range of competing and conflicting discourses as they attempted to work with parents. The following chapter considers how, through partnership, these issues can be addressed.
Chapter Five

Towards Effective Partnership

Partnership is not an unattainable illusion; rather it is a process that requires a road map to assist all participants to move in a common direction with the same destination in mind (Roberts, Rule & Innocenti, 1998; p.4).

Like Roberts et al. (1998), the parents and teachers in this study have suggested that partnership requires clearly articulated guidelines so that both parties can work more effectively, with shared understandings, towards a common goal. In the previous chapters I have shown that partnership also involved negotiating different viewpoints within competing, and often conflicting, discourses. Parents of children with a disability had particular views and particular knowledges that they wished to share and have valued. However, some parents found that they lacked the resources to negotiate partnership when they were interacting with others who had different perspectives and positions. Some teachers found that their training had not adequately prepared them for working with parents and children with a disability. Implicit (and sometimes explicit) within their attempts at partnership were issues of power.

This chapter considers how parents and teachers might work together towards a partnership that ensures that there is a common understanding of the child’s learning needs so that barriers to learning for children with a disability can be overcome. Drawing from the experiences of the participants in this study, and the findings from recent research on partnership, this chapter will suggest four essential conditions for an effective teacher/parent partnership that effectively meets the learning needs of the child.

**What does effective partnership require?**

From their study of partnership, in a variety of New Zealand educational settings, Timperley and Robinson (2002) identified three conditions for effective partnership: partners had clarity about the specific tasks, roles and responsibilities involved, attention was given to the management of working relationships which supported mutual learning, and the partners
negotiated how power was to be shared. Successful partnerships, according to Timperley and Robinson, *(ibid)* depend on each of these conditions being effectively met. Participants in this study have clearly indicated a fourth condition: the need for written guidelines that provide information and clearly articulate procedures so that the process of enacting partnership is made more visible.

**Defining tasks, roles and responsibilities**

The Ministry *Special Education Policy Guidelines* (2000) indicate that parents and teachers have joint responsibility in defining the learning needs of the child. They state that the responsibility of the parents or caregiver is to “work with your school to identify your child’s needs, develop appropriate programmes and monitor their progress” and to “take part in the development of Individual Education Programmes (IEPs), goal-setting, specific learning programmes and follow-up activities at home” *(p.19)*.

Timperley and Robinson (2002) highlight the importance of clearly defining the goals and tasks in such a partnership. They maintain that “when a task is poorly defined or the partners define it differently, they are likely to make different assumptions about their responsibilities within it” *(p.19)*. Furthermore, Timperley and Robinson *(ibid)* highlight an issue which is often overlooked in literature concerning partnership in educational settings i.e., that parents and teachers may be expected to take responsibility for tasks for which they do not always have the necessary expertise. Defining the task (e.g. the specific learning objectives for the child with special educational needs) is necessary for shared understanding between teachers and parents, and clarifying areas of responsibility, yet often “the implicit definitions of the task may not be made explicit” *(Timperley & Robinson, 2002; p.16)*.

For parents and teachers in this study, finding a common definition of the child’s needs and the necessary adaptations for successful learning outcomes, was frequently problematic. When their views differed it was difficult for parents and teachers to agree on learning objectives and outcomes for the child. Some parents found that teachers did not understand the implications of their child’s disability and did not have the knowledge necessary to implement adapted classroom programmes. As shown in chapter four, some teachers were critical of the lack of preparation given to working with children with special needs in their teacher training.
Parents also wanted the class teacher to be specific about the type of support they could (or could not) provide for their child. As Rita explained:

*I’d like clarity. I’d like from the very onset of the relationship, clarity of the parameters of the relationship so it was understood from the outset just how much we were allowed to be part of what went on in the school and what wasn’t the school’s responsibility. So I’d like that to be absolutely specific, or absolutely clear from the very outset that this is our role, this is your role and do we need to look at what happens in between ... So there is room for negotiation, or if there needs to be negotiation, very clear as to whether it can or can’t be done.*

Rita wanted to be told clearly by the school what could *not* be provided to meet her son’s learning needs. This meant that she had the possibility of seeking services outside the school to address his needs.

Some parents found that teachers did not always provide accurate information about their child’s learning needs. Andrea and Andrew considered that their son’s teacher had a higher estimation of their son’s reading and spelling ability than they did, and had therefore set schoolwork where he was not succeeding and homework which was too demanding. This led to frustration for both the child and the parents. In their study of home-school partnership Timperley and Robinson (2002) found that teachers reported inflated achievement levels, and their comments about students often lacked detail. Parents found that the lack of specific information about their child’s learning needs and achievement level obscured areas of accountability and responsibility between teachers and parents. For Andrea and Andrew a temporary solution was to redefine their sons’ learning needs themselves, and to teach him at home.

In three cases, parents reported that teachers did not seem to understand the implications of their child’s disability. Nor did teachers appear to know how to adapt their classroom practices to help the child learn more successfully. Rita and Grant were concerned that their son’s teacher had not recognised the less visible aspects of his disability. Rita explained:

*Sam’s difficulty is that there are aspects of his abilities that place him ahead of his peer group and they [teachers] are very clear that’s what Tim is able to do, but what he really struggles with she [the class teacher] hasn’t seen.*
Because Sam’s auditory processing difficulties had not been acknowledged in the classroom, no adapted programme had been given and his parents were concerned that valuable learning opportunities were being lost.

Valuing different perspectives

The Ministry *Special Education Policy Guidelines (2000)* suggest that effective partnership can work when each person is able to express their view on how the child’s needs could be met. Encountering the different perspectives of others is considered not only a valuable opportunity for learning, but a necessary condition of effective partnership (Dale, 1996; Henry, 1996; Fullan, 1999; Leuder, 2000; Nicholls, 1999). In order to learn from differing viewpoints, Timperley and Robinson (2002) suggest that partners must seek information about each other’s perspectives and adopt a critical stance towards their own views. However, “partners may fail to do this because they may have entered into the partnership for non-learning reasons” (Anderson, 1998; Fine, 1997). Alternatively, partners who are unaware of their own biases and dominance may define the task and process on their own terms and disregard the other’s views (Lipman, 1997, p. 21).

A key issue for some parents in this study was the lack of opportunity and clear procedures to allow them to express their own viewpoints and know that their knowledge was valued. Although parents wished to bring particular knowledges to the school, teachers did not always take the opportunity for sharing this knowledge and developing new understandings of the child. Some parents found that there were no structures in the school to adequately allow them to express differences of opinion or particular issues concerning their child. In one instance a teacher/parent relationship had broken down. Contrary to the Ministry’s *SE2000 Guidelines for Parents* (2002), stated in Chapter One, conflicting personalities had superseded the needs of the child and problems had not been dealt with as they arose. Rita had found that serious issues concerning the bullying of her son were difficult to resolve because there were no clear procedures for mediation. She had written a letter to the Board of Trustees but had not received a response. Therefore she had to go outside the school for support.

Valuing different perspectives, for parents, includes the recognition of their own particular knowledge of their child’s learning needs and abilities. Parents wanted teachers to understand that, although their children’s disability was not always visible, it may still be significant.
Trish wanted teachers to understand that “she [Gina] does have a special need; she doesn’t look like she does, but she truly does.” Jen explained that some of her daughter’s behaviours were due to tactile defensiveness. However she found that Gina’s teachers had not been trained to recognise this. Parents also wanted teachers to know that children with the same disability label may also present differently and that many of these children appear to “manage” their disabilities unless tired or stressed. Rita also wanted her son’s teacher to understand that, for children with disability, participating at school can demand skills and strategies that are not always visible to teachers. She emphasised the particular effort that her son had expended at school in order to appear as if he was managing as well as his peers. She wanted teachers to recognise that children with a disability can become adept at masking their lack of achievement from the teacher. For parents, an effective partnership was one where the teacher valued these frequently devalued parental knowledges.

**Forming proactive relationships**

For the parents in this study, developing an open, honest and mutually respectful relationship was a key factor in achieving effective partnership. Although parents referred to the provision of adequate funding and resources for their child as an important aspect of effective partnership, their talk frequently centred around the nature of their relationship with their child’s class teacher. When anticipating a change of teacher each new school year the reputation of the individual class teacher was paramount. As Rita and Andrew expressed: “we think it will be a good year because of the individual teacher; not that [it] will be a good school.” They were reassured by knowing that their child would have a teacher who had a reputation of being empathetic, accessible and skilled in working with children.

The study of collaboration in New Zealand schools by Ramsay et al. (1993) showed that the role of the principal was pivotal in achieving change: this involved being visible to staff, students and parents being committed to a collaborative model. A school principal, interviewed during the field work for this study, also emphasised the importance of being visible and available to parents. To show this he walked around the playground and school buildings before and after school, so that any parent, uncomfortable with formal meetings, had the opportunity to speak with him informally. This school principal also highlighted the importance of being proactive and developing positive relationships with the parents of a child with a disability:
Good rapport must come first. It is like having money in the bank. It is easier to deal with issues if there is a good relationship with parents first. When this hasn’t been established you have to work backwards to get it.

Through attention to the relationship dimension of partnership, this principal had developed a positive reputation for working with parents and children with a disability. This, he considered, was a factor in becoming a magnet school and drawing children with special needs from out-of-zone areas.

Parents in this study considered that effective partnerships also depend on teachers being proactive in the relationship. Parents described a proactive partnership as one where the teacher took the initiative to set up meetings, provide written information and anticipated the child’s needs in new situations, such as going on a class camp. For Trish, the proactive approach of the school ensured that her daughter’s needs were made clear before she began school and this helped support a successful transition from kindergarten. Proactive teachers were described by other parents as those who informed them immediately of issues concerning their child and attempted to resolve them.

While relationships to a large extent determine the success of a partnership, relationships do not occur in isolation. They are determined by the way in which power and organisational structures operate (Timperley and Robinson, 2002). Partnership between parents and teachers requires the management and development of several relationships: the child central to the partnership, and all the teachers and specialists involved in the child’s education. The way these relationships are structured and shaped can have a strong impact on how information gets shared, how decisions concerning the child’s particular needs are made and who gets to be accountable.

The IEP meeting has typically been a site and structure for this. However, not all children with a disability or special educational needs have an IEP. This was a particular concern for three parents in this study. Despite having a diagnosed disability and an occupational therapist’s report giving specific recommendations for addressing their educational needs, their children did not have a current IEP. Parents raised questions about who was responsible for coordinating the information necessary for meeting their child’s particular needs. Grant’s solution was to be the initiator. He contacted his son’s principal and organised an IEP with the relevant specialists. Although Grant’s intervention may be uncommon, it does indicate the
need to investigate how many children with a disability and particular learning needs are currently without an IEP or adapted learning programme.

**Addressing power differentials**

Before beginning any genuine parent–teacher partnership it is necessary for power differentials to be recognised. Yet, as Fine (1993) Timperley & Robinson (2002) and Sarason (1990) argue, power relationships are embedded and reproduced throughout our entire educational system. How to address the layers of power within school settings implications is a critical issue for developing a genuine and effective partnership.

Fine (1993) argues that issues of power, authority and control must be addressed head-on within debates about parental involvement in schools. She maintains that the presumption of equality between parents and schools and the refusal to address power struggles has systematically undermined real educational transformation. It is the very assumption that it is possible for teachers and parents to interact as if they were social equals which Fine (ibid) highlights as being problematic. The findings of this study highlight the need for parents, teachers, and other professionals to be alerted to the different discourses which create inequalities between them, and the need to find ways to address the imbalance of power these discourses maintain.

Fine (1993) addresses the issues of labelling and disempowerment of mothers within home-school partnership. She warns that “if unacknowledged, power may hide, cloaked in the ‘needs’ or ‘inadequacies’ of disenfranchised mothers, and schools may persist unchallenged, employing practices that damage” (p.465b). These issues were familiar to many of the mothers in this study who perceived that they were labelled e.g., as “over-anxious” or “pushy”, and positioned as secondary, by those with professional status. Some parents perceived that their ability to effect change was limited because of their position as parents, particularly as mothers. From her experience Ellen explained: “you’re taking your child to an institution [that] you’re not totally confident in and you know that you’re not in a position to change a lot.” As single voices within, and against, a hierarchical and bureaucratic system they had experienced the consequences of disempowerment.
A particular problem of enacting partnership between parents and teachers of children with disability is the differentiation of interests between both parties. Teachers are required to operate within a system that demands their detailed attention not only to the individual child with a disability (and their parents), but to the remaining children in the class and their parents. While parents have considerable knowledge about the child’s disability and specific needs, some teachers feel disadvantaged by their lack of experience and training to work with children with disability and adapted classroom practices. Competition for resources, funding, teacher-aide time and limited time for teacher/parent meetings add to the unequal basis and tension of this partnership.

Experiences of these parents show that partnership is primarily a relationship between individual families and an individual teacher, with occasional and often fragmented support from other professionals. A struggle for the recognition of differing viewpoints is a common issue in the interface between parents and professionals. Fine (1993) exposes the limitations of partnership based on an individual model, and argues that without relentless attention to the power issues involved, partnership may simply surface the needs of individual families. Clearly there is a need for an approach that could help teachers and parents overcome this power differential.

From her work and research in parent-school relationships Henry (1996) argues for an approach that allows for negotiation and difference of perspective to be used in a productive way. She considers a feminist approach to be a useful framework for “redefining school organisation and leadership, and encouraging collaboration, teamwork, and a concern for the inclusion of diverse needs” (p.20). She contends that schools have “traditionally developed an elaborate hierarchy and a chain of command that prevents decision making at a grass roots level” (p.21). In her view, a feminist framework can help to “reframe the competitive and hierarchical relations in the educational system toward more inclusive and interconnected relations that will benefit the learning potential of students” (p.20).

This approach has particular relevance for the implementation of partnership between parents and teachers of children with a disability. First it addresses the need for recognition of the diverse needs of students. It also acknowledges the qualities that mothers seek in their relationship with the school and class teacher. Henry’s model also emphasizes the importance teachers and parents being included in policy-making therefore encouraging a sense of
ownership which Fine (1993), Nicholls (1997) and Ramsay et al (1993) have argued as being a necessary factor in the implementation of policy and change.

**Making partnership visible through written policy and procedures**

Parents in this study wanted a partnership which had more “visible” and “predictable structures” to help define the tasks and responsibilities, so that they were not, as Ellen expressed, left wondering “when to go in and how to enter”. To address the assumption that parents know how to work together with the school, parents in this study have suggested that each school provides written guidelines that outline the procedures for contact and the parameters of their relationship. This would require all schools to have a written policy on how they intend to work in partnership with parents. The need to make the processes of partnership more visible appears to have been recognised by the Ministry’s attempt to provide guidelines for parents and Boards of Trustees. However, as shown in Chapter Four, these booklets had not yet reached the parents or teachers in Anne’s school, and nor is the information specific enough to help parents know who to contact, and what procedures to follow.

Parents have also articulated the need for clear and visible information about their child’s educational programme and progress. This would involve regular and formalised meetings that were initiated by the class teacher. While the IEP serves as a site for discussing and defining their child’s needs and setting common goals, typically twice a year, parents and some teachers stated this was not adequate. Some teachers also recognised this need. Raewyn (a class teacher) reflected: “I think in an ideal world, a meeting perhaps every fortnight would be really good, with perhaps half an hour you could sit down with parents and say what you’ve done and what you’d like to do next.” Although teachers identified lack of time for more meetings as a major issue none could suggest how their school could make changes to address this problem. There seemed to be little facility for teacher release time during school hours to meet with parents. Clearly there is a need to address each of these issues if partnership is to be effective.

**Summary**

Findings of this study show that partnership is a multi-layered process, requiring the integration of many dimensions to be effective. These dimensions include: clear definition of
the tasks and responsibilities involved and clear guidelines and structures for the tasks and responsibilities to be achieved. Findings also indicate that each school could support positive changes towards more effective partnership by making a policy and structure for partnership more visible to parents and teachers. Also necessary is the recognition of varying power differentials and provision of structures that support negotiation, so that different perspectives can be acknowledged. For parents in this study, a key factor of effective partnership was the recognition of their knowledge about their child's disability and particular educational needs. Parents wanted to know that this knowledge was valued by the class teacher and used to help overcome barriers to learning for their child in the classroom. The key dimensions of an effective partnership, based on the findings of this study, are summarised in the following model:

VALUING PARENTS 'KNOWLEDGE
Using parents' knowledge to support the child's educational needs

ADDRESSING POWER DIFFERENTIALS
• Recognition of conflicting discourses
• Processes which allow for the negotiation of different perspectives

CLEARLY-DEFINED ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES
• To support mutually agreed learning outcomes for the child.

A MODEL FOR EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN TEACHERS AND PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH A DISABILITY

VISIBLE PROCEDURES
Each school to provide parents with written guidelines to outline how partnership is to be enacted

PRO-ACTIVE RELATIONSHIPS
• Teachers to arrange meetings with parents
• Anticipating children's changing needs and planning accordingly
Chapter Six

Overcoming the Barriers

This study highlights the many challenges teachers and parents can encounter when working together. Both teachers and parents showed that they were caught between differing expectations and understandings. For these participants, effective partnership involved negotiating and finding common understandings within a complex of competing discourses. Their experiences highlight the multi-dimensional nature of partnership and the importance of each of these dimensions being recognised, so that the learning needs of children are addressed appropriately.

Findings of this study indicate that the interactions between parents and teachers seldom reflected the kind of partnership outlined in the SE 2000 policy guidelines. Few parents had found clear structures, or procedures, to adequately guide them in enacting partnership with their child’s school and class teacher. They found that partnership was mostly discovered and learned in the process of their day-to-day encounters with the school. For many parents the uncertainty of this process had been stressful.

Partner that values the parent’s voice

Through experiencing barriers to effective partnership parents in this study have suggested what might make partnership work better. Foucault (1981) has argued that it is essential to acknowledge the experiential knowledges of clients and practitioners because it is through “these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges that criticism performs its work” (cited in Skrtic, 1991; p.51). This view I consider to be particularly relevant to the domain of partnership in education, because it is the criticisms of parents that can alert schools to the changes that are necessary to make partnership more effective. As Fine (1993) has urged “we need to hear the critique parents carry, and mine their concerns for the rich possibilities they embody” (p.469a). Difficulties parents and teachers have experienced could be viewed as an opportunity for learning how to do partnership better.
Parents wanted to work with the teachers in a democratic way. This involved being able to share the experiential and particular knowledge they had concerning the nature of their child’s disability and ways to meet their particular educational needs. However, many parents found that teachers operated in ways that treated their knowledge as secondary and minimised the opportunity for negotiation. Devaluing parents’ knowledge, through the use of professional discourse, was frequently a barrier to effective partnership.

Parents in this study have highlighted the need for their knowledge to be valued. Through having more opportunity to share insights into their child’s needs, and particular ways their success in learning, parents could make valuable contributions to pedagogical knowledge. Parents can also help teachers recognise the less visible aspects of disability. If valued, their experiential knowledge could contribute to further understanding of the adapted classroom practices necessary to meet the diverse range of learning needs. In this way teachers could move towards an ecological model of disability, where changes in the teaching environment are made to ensure that each child is enabled.

Participants in this study have indicated that if partnership is to be effective, each school needs to define its own approach towards partnership and develop a working model that provides clarity and structure to both parents and teachers. Investigating partnership, using symbolic interaction as a theoretical perspective, showed that although participants entered partnership with certain understandings and expectations of partnership, other meanings of partnership evolved through their interactions. Further meanings of partnership were created through the process of enacting and negotiating partnership. The process of interviewing gave participants the possibility of reflecting on their experiences and reviewing their understanding of partnership through the lens of their experience. When reflecting on their experiences parents highlighted the need for a partnership that clarified the roles and responsibilities required of each partner so that both parties could work more effectively together to meet the child’s educational needs. They suggested that partnership needed written guidelines to clarify the steps both parents and teachers should take when entering and developing such a partnership. Parents have also stated the need for more regular meetings, organised by the school, to inform them about their child’s learning programme, progress and any particular issues. Schools may also need to reconsider their organisation and structure to create more time for the level of parent/teacher interaction needed to develop partnership.
Parents, in this study, found that their power to effect change was minimal, because they were operating as single voices within a school system which they had to learn “how to enter”. For some parents there was no clear mediation process to support the negotiation of different viewpoints. They found that this was particularly disempowering and as a consequence recommended that a parent advocacy service be re-established. Parents valued teachers who were proactive in seeking information about their child before commencing in a new class. They also valued teachers who took the initiative to arrange meetings and inform them about their child’s needs, progress, and resources that could support their learning.

**Recognising the personal cost to partnership**

Attempting to work in partnership frequently involved a high personal cost, particularly for mothers. This cost was seldom acknowledged or expressed publicly, yet it had considerable consequences. Mothers reported feeling stressed and isolated. Their roles, as mediators between home and school, were complex. Most mothers had found it necessary to challenge many teaching practices and different perspectives concerning their child, but at the same time perceived that it was necessary to maintain harmonious relationships with the school to avoid jeopardising opportunities for their child. When teachers and parents were unable to reach common understandings and set mutually agreed goals, there was also cost to the child. Some parents perceived that their child’s educational needs had not been met and that valuable opportunities for learning had been lost. In some cases these children had been home-schooled.

While the costs and issues of ineffective partnership are viewed merely as the problem of a few individuals, then these concerns cannot be effectively addressed. Those with the problems will be left to find their own solutions. This study shows that problems concerning partnership need to be considered in a broader context. Some of the parents and teachers in this study perceived that solutions for achieving more effective partnership lay at a social level and structural level and suggested that schools could be more proactive in working with parents and making partnership more visible.

Further attention needs to be given to the process of implementing policy. It was evident, in Chapter Four, that the SE2000 goals had not been effectively transmitted to the teachers. Nor had the SE2000 policy documents and booklets reached parents. It is therefore pertinent to ask
how such documents might reach the parents and other teachers, or is there, instead, a more effective way to disseminate this information? It is also necessary to consider the format and accessibility of the written information provided to parents. With over seventy specialised terms included in the glossary of the Ministry booklet for parents, *Meeting Special Education Needs at School* (2002), it is also necessary to ask how “user friendly” is a booklet with such a high level of technical and specialised language?

**The need to reconceptualise teacher training**

Teachers have suggested that their training could focus less on curriculum, but instead give more time to developing professional understandings of disability, the broader social/political influences on education, and how to work with parents. Conditioned by teachers in their own schooling, and through the professional discourse of their own training, the practices and interactions of teachers are also shaped at a structural level. This study has raised many concerns about the adequacy of current teacher training. How well does it prepare teachers to work with parents and inclusive educational practices?

Hedges (2001) shows that contact with parents can have benefit during pre-service training, yet primary and secondary sectors of teacher education do not appear to incorporate skills for parent interaction and partnership into their current training. It is not clear whether there is merely an assumption that student teachers know how to work with parents, or if this area is conveniently ignored because of funding exigencies within teacher training institutions?

Beyer (2000), Rathgen (2000) and Snook (2000) contend that there is a need for a reconceptualisation of teacher training which involves alerting students to the complex socio-political nature of their work and the discourses that operate within it. For issues of partnership this is highly relevant. How can teachers be alerted to the social and political influences implicit within the different discourses that shape their interactions with parents and children? Could such training help teachers develop and heighten their awareness of their role and potential agency in effecting educational change?

However, like parents and teachers, teacher training institutions are also caught between competing discourses. A post-graduate Diploma of Special Needs is available in one New Zealand teacher training institution, and Special Needs courses in other teacher training
institutions tend be considered “extra.” What implicit messages are being given to teachers and student teachers through the provision of such courses which are entirely separate from other aspects of teacher training? Why is the education of children with particular (“special”) needs still segregated from other aspects of teacher training, when inclusive education, using adapted curriculum is our current educational policy?

Also evident in teacher training institutions is competition between differing policies and courses for funding priority and hours, perpetuated to a large extent by the present government’s EFT system of funding tertiary institutions. With such a diverse and vast range of requirements to meet, but with such limited time and finance to do so, teacher training can be likened to an attempt to cram a ship into a bottle. Courses, skills and learning objectives deemed necessary in the current economic and socio-political climate, must inevitably be at the expense of those given priority in the past. Because it is historically, politically and socially encircled by constraints and contestation, teacher training is destined to remain an unfinished and compromising approach towards preparing future teachers for working with parents and children. If learning about working in partnership is not considered a priority in pre-service or in-service training, then it will continue to be left to teachers to learn “on-the-job” through “trial and error”. There will be a high likelihood that teachers may continue to maintain barriers to partnership.

**Limitations of this Study**

The use of a particular methodology and sample group naturally define the scope of a study and how the findings can be interpreted. Because in-depth interviews were the main source of data for this study the sample group had to be limited in size to six teachers and ten parents (five couples). This study was also limited to the teachers and parents of children with a disability in primary school settings. Different populations and settings e.g. children with a disability in a secondary school may present different issues. Although both parents and teachers, in this sample group, were asked to describe both positive and difficult experiences of partnership, their discussion more typically centred on the difficulties they had encountered, rather than the positive interactions and outcomes.

This study is based on the reported experiences of individual teachers and parents. I was not able to observe the interactions that the participants recounted; there are many missing
dimensions and perspectives this study has not been able to present. A different methodological approach, such as participant observation of an IEP meeting, may have highlighted themes additional to those represented in this study. A focus group, as an opportunity for observing shared dialogue between teachers and parents, could also have provided valuable insight into teacher/parent interaction.

As a particular site of partnership, IEP meetings could have also given valuable data for examining teacher/professional and teacher/parent interaction. Although included in the original research design, I perceived that this topic was beyond the scope of this study and that it warranted in-depth investigation in a further study.

Parents in this study may appear to be presented with a “louder” voice than teachers. As the primary advocates for their child, parents naturally had high hopes for what partnership could offer. They also had strong feelings about their experiences concerning partnership. However, for teachers, partnership appeared to be merely one of many professional requirements, and not an urgent matter for debate. Teachers may have benefited from more time to reflect on the interview questions and the opportunity to discuss these with their colleagues before the interviews were conducted. There were clearly differing positions and interests between teachers and parents. My position as an interviewer also needs to be considered when evaluating the findings of this study. Because my interviews were first with parents, I may have appeared to some teachers as “on-side” with the parents. This may have modified what teachers said concerning their experience with parents. Teachers may have also monitored their talk to fit their perceived professional role.

This study lacks the perspectives of the “problem” teachers. These are the teachers who were not interviewed because parents had found the relationship too sensitive. What were the particular challenges for these teachers? What suggestions could they offer to support more effective partnership with “problem” parents?

Because this is a qualitative study findings are not generalisable in the way that findings from a quantitative study can be. However, it is hoped that the issues discussed in this study may stimulate other parents, teachers and professionals to reflect on their own experiences and practices of partnership and provide insight into the challenges which working in partnership can provide.
Implications of this research

This study has emphasised that ineffective partnership can not be ignored, because the personal costs to both parents and children are considerable. For parents, difficulties in partnership can be stressful and have a long-term effect. Difficulties can also negate the possibility of positive experiences in their child’s schooling. If parents do not have access, within the school, to a mediation process that allows for the “safe” negotiation of different viewpoints, their issues may remain unknown to the school and continue to be unresolved. Because disempowered parents do not readily share their personal difficulties in public, teachers may not be aware of the extent of parents’ distress. Teachers need to recognise the position of power they hold and to consider what steps they can help to minimise this power differential so that more effective partnership is possible. This needs to be done in practical terms, for example: inviting more collaboration with parents, ensuring that parents get to speak first in meetings concerning their child, and showing that they value parents’ knowledge about their child, by acting on this knowledge. This study can offer to teachers, and parents, insight into the many dimensions they need to consider if they wish to achieve an effective partnership. To teachers, professionals working with families of children with special needs, and trainers in professional development, this study can offer a basis for critical analysis of their current practices.

While issues between teachers and parents remain unresolved, the child’s learning needs may not be adequately met. Barriers to a child’s learning may be unrecognised. If partnership is the means to help overcome barriers to learning, then further research, which examines the barriers to achieving effective partnership, is required.

This study indicates that teachers and parents, in each school, could benefit from working together to identify the factors that can create a partnership suited to their own school culture. Giles (2001) urges that “we need schools that will allow parents and educators to develop relationships that enable us to create new knowledge together” (p.145). A collaborative approach to research (as shown by Nagel & Raxworthy, 1999), could allow parents and teachers to define and explore their own research questions concerning partnership.
However, it will also be necessary to look beyond the individual level of interactions and relationships in school settings, to the complex of social and political factors that shape these interactions. As stated by Bastiani, (1993):

Home/school partnership cannot be left to quietly evolve unaided, in its own good time. Neither should it be left to individual schools, teachers and parents to foster on their own, without help. It is a major task that calls for imagination and commitment, initiative and direction; it also needs management, understanding and support (p.61).

Teachers in this study have indicated that the professional skills required for effective partnership need to be developed during teacher training. Further research could investigate how teacher training might prepare teachers to work in partnership with parents of children with a disability. Such research could examine how teachers can be alerted to the different discourses of partnership and disability that shape their practices and interactions.

This study has also highlighted the need for teachers to learn what inclusive educational practices require. They have suggested that training should be less focused on the detail of curriculum content. Some teachers have indicated the need for learning ways to adapt the curriculum so that they are better prepared to meet the diverse range of learning styles and needs within their classroom. Further research could usefully investigate the skills, teaching strategies and resources which teachers have found effective in helping children overcome barriers to learning.

Although a model or definition can suggest the necessary conditions to bring about the changes needed to achieve partnership, habits of interaction and power relationships within schools need to be recognised. These, however, are complex processes to change. If effective partnership is to be achieved, further research must continue to ask critical questions e.g., how can habits of interaction between parents and teachers be changed? This study has shown that a critical examination of the discourses that operate between parents and teachers can give further insight into the power/knowledge dimensions that can either hinder or support effective partnership. Further research could usefully investigate how teachers and parents can be alerted to the different discourses and power differentials implicit within their interactions and how, together, with this knowledge, they might find new ways to work more effectively together. Partnership also offers to all teachers and parents, of children with a disability, valuable opportunities for learning together, how the educational needs of these children can be more successfully met.
References


Appendices

1. Information to participants:
   a) Parents
   b) School Principal
   c) Teachers
   d) Participant consent forms

2. Interview Questions:
   Parents (sample)
   Teachers (sample)
   Follow-up interview questions (sample)

3. Typology of Approaches to Partnership

4. Meanings of Partnership

5. Coding Categories

6. Sensitising Concepts
INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO PARENTS

Elizabeth Elsworth
28 Locarno Street
CHRISTCHURCH 8002
Tel: 337-0945
E-mail: elsworth@inet.net.nz

22nd June 2001

Dear

Thank you for considering to participate in my study concerning the partnership between teachers and parents of children with a disability. Your experience and participation will be a most valuable contribution to further understanding in this important field of research. This project is being undertaken as part of my study for a Master of Teaching and Learning degree at the Christchurch College of Education. Throughout the entire study I will be supervised by Missy Morton and Alan Scott, who are lecturers at the College of Education.

The general aim of my study is to develop understanding of how effective partnership between teachers and parents of children with disability can be promoted. The study will involve semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers, and a focus group discussion following the interviews. I am seeking your permission for an interview where we will look at issues concerning partnership e.g., what has worked well for you as teachers or parents of a child with a disability, what has been difficult, and what partnership means to you. Following the individual interviews I would like parents and teachers to meet together to share their views. I would also like to attend an I.E.P. meeting to learn more about the process of partnership.

All data gathered from these interviews will be strictly confidential to myself, my supervisors and the typist transcribing the interviews. The data will be stored securely on my computer and on back-up discs. Any quotation used in published work will not be directly attributed to persons interviewed. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

The interview will take approximately 45 minutes of your time, and will be scheduled at a time and place most convenient to you. The interview will take place during the third term of
this year. After it has been transcribed, two copies will be sent to you so that you may check to the text for accuracy and add any corrections or comments which may be necessary. If you prefer we could meet to go over the transcript of the interview together. I would be grateful if you would return this copy to me soon after you have made your comments and corrections. You may keep the other copy.

Following the interview, a focus group meeting will be arranged so that you will have the opportunity to meet with other parents and teachers to discuss issues concerning partnership. The focus group meeting will be scheduled in the fourth term of this year.

If you are happy about the procedures I have outlined then please could you confirm the proposed meeting time i.e., Wednesday 5th September at 12:45pm. I can collect the form when I meet you, if you are unable to return it sooner.

If you have any question regarding this study please contact one of my supervisors or myself. If you choose to participate I will be extremely grateful for the consideration and time you offer to this important issue. I look forward to hearing your views.

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Elsworth

Supervisors: Missy Morton
Christchurch College of Education
Tel: 3437780 ext 8312

Alan Scott
Christchurch College of Education
Tel: 3437780 ext 8286
INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO TEACHERS

Elizabeth Elsworth
28 Locarno Street
CHRISTCHURCH 8002
Ph: 3370945
E-mail: elsworth@inet.net.nz

6 November, 2001

Dear

Currently I am interviewing teachers concerning their experiences of inclusion with children with disability. I am especially interested in the partnership required between the class teacher and parents. My interest in this area has arisen from many years of working in private practice with children with disability and listening primarily to the parents’ perspective. I feel that the perspective of teachers in not well represented in research and that there is much to gain from hearing about their experiences. While I am aware that this is often challenging, I have also met some very successful examples. My interest is in identifying the factors which help make this partnership work so that others may learn from these positive examples.

I am interested in knowing:
➢ What ways/structures the school has in place to support teachers and parents to work together,
➢ What challenges/issues teachers have experienced and
➢ What suggestion they can give to other, often less experienced teachers, who often feel insecure in this area.

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to interview you and or another teacher from the middle or upper school syndicate. This would involve about 45 minutes of time within the next two weeks. The interview would be taped and transcripts sent to the teacher for verification. Further ethical and procedural issues are outlined in my proposal.

A focus group meeting with parents and teachers is also intended, but the date for this has not yet been set.

If you or another teacher from ............... School would be interested in participating in this study please could you contact me this week.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Elsworth
INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO PRINCIPAL

Elizabeth Elsworth  
28 Locarno Street  
CHRISTCHURCH 8002  
Ph: 3370945  
E-mail: elsworth@inet.net.nz

20th June, 2001

Dear

Thank you for considering to participate in my study concerning the partnership between teachers and parents of children with a disability. Your experience and participation will be a most valuable contribution to further understanding in this important area of research. This project is being undertaken as part of my study towards a Master of Teaching and Learning degree at the Christchurch College of Education. Throughout the entire study I will be supervised by Missy Morton and Alan Scott, who are lecturers at the College of Education.

The general aim of my study is to understand how effective partnership between teachers and parents of children with disability can be promoted. In addition to my interviews with individual parents and teachers, I would like to gather further information by attending I.E.P. meetings and being able to read your school policy on inclusive education.

All data gathered will be strictly confidential to myself, my supervisors and the typist transcribing the interviews. Names of any schools and personnel who are included in the research will be given pseudonyms.

If you have any questions regarding this study please contact one of my supervisors or myself. If you choose to participate I will be extremely grateful for the consideration and time you give to this important issue. I look forward to hearing your views.

Yours sincerely,

Elizabeth Elsworth
CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

Promoting Partnership between Teachers and Parents of Children with a Disability

I understand that by participating in this study, I agree to:

- An individual interview which will last approximately 45 minutes,
- The interview being audio-taped and transcribed,
- The opportunity to read, comment and return a transcript of the interview,
- Attend a focus-group meeting with parents and teachers to share perspectives and discuss issues concerning partnership, during the 3rd term of this year,
- The attendance of Elizabeth at an I.E.P. meeting concerning my child.

I understand that by being involved as a participant in this study:

- I can withdraw from the study at any stage,
- The data I give will be treated confidentially,
- The data I give will be retained for up to 3 years during which it can be used by the researchers for any conference paper, journal articles or reports drawn from the data,
- My identity will be protected i.e., my name will not be published or attributed to any quotes or comments used in publication. (Pseudonyms will be used where appropriate).
- All information will be stored securely, and available only to the researcher, the transcriber and the supervisor.
Interview Questions for Parents

What kind of relationship did you expect with your child’s class teacher when he/she started school?

What kind of a relationship did you develop?

Are you aware of the SE 2000 guidelines for parents? Have you been given these to read by the school?

What does partnership mean to you?

From your experience what are the factors which make partnership work?

What were the factors which made partnership/working with your child’s teacher difficult?

Do you have suggestions which could make working in partnership with your child’s teacher better?
Interview Questions for Teachers

What does partnership mean to you?

What skills do you need when working with patents of children with a disability?

How have you learned these skills?

Do you have a school policy on partnership with the parents of children with a disability?

Are you aware of the SE 2000 documents?

Have you discussed these with your colleagues?

Did your pre-service teacher training prepare you to work with parents?

Did your pre-service teacher training prepare you to work with children with a disability?

Can you suggest ways that teachers may be better prepared to work with children with a disability?

Can you suggest ways that partnership could work better?

Are there any changes in the school structure that could support better partnership?
Follow-up Questions for Parents

Did you know that this word partnership was stated in the SE 2000 documents? Have you seen/read any of these documents?

How did you receive information about (child’s name) rights e.g., funding from the school?

How can parents do partnership better with teachers?

How can parents be more adequately informed about disability, their rights and structures/agencies of support?

Where would be appropriate and visible places for parents to easily access information?

How often do you meet parents who are not well informed about their child's disability?

What are the most supportive experiences you have had regarding your daughter’s schooling?
Typology of Approaches to Partnership

I  Proactive  anticipates needs of the child and possible issues and
does something about them

II  Supportive  follows up on teacher/parent requests
shows empathy for the others position

III Coincidental  unplanned, just happens

IV Collaborative  parents and teachers share information and make decisions
together
willing and able to negotiate

V Reactive/personalised  labelling the other e.g. the neurotic mother

VI Comпрimsung  holding back on issues, not wanting to rock the boat

VII Expert specialist  using professional potion to assert power

VIII Gendered  parents take roles in dealing with the teacher and the school

VIII  Open and honest  teachers and parents share relevant information about the child
and each others strengths, concerns and challenges in dealing
with the needs of the child
Meanings of Partnership

1a Valuing parents’ knowledge

1b Requires cooperation and willingness

1c A process which is learned and evolves over time

1d Trying to understand the position of the other: respecting their world view

1e Sharing Knowledge: each person contributes a piece of the jigsaw

1f Shared goals Common goals

1g Involvement of other personnel e.g. ESW

1h Requires trust and openness

1i Requires reflexivity/ reviewing practices to consider if they are effective or not

1j Structured e.g. arranged meetings and communication systems
   Knowing who to approach

1k Visible progress of child

1l Predictable

1m Frequent communication
Coding Categories

Pd  Professional discourse
Dd  Democratic discourse
Dk  Devalued knowledge
Tt  Teacher Training
C  Communication issues
Ta  Teacher attitude
S  Structural influences
Ag  Agency
P  Positioning
L  Labelling
N  Negotiation
K  Knowledge: accessibility
I  Information to parents
Rd  Recognition of the disability and associated needs
Rp  Role of the principal
Mw  Mother’s work
Pc  Personal cost when partnership is ineffective
Sensitising Concepts

Discourses of partnership re-inforce and re-enact positions of power and knowledge

**Professional Discourse**  Teachers assume expert knowledge over parents and view parents knowledge as as back-up to their own.

Parents’ knowledge is not always valued because it is seen as merely anecdotal. Foucault refers to this as “disqualified/buried knowledge.”

**Democratic/participatory discourse**  Parents wish to have a more democratic approach e.g. sharing knowledge and making decisions concerning their child.

Parents wish to have the particular knowledge they have of their child **valued.** This knowledge involves understanding the child’s particular educational needs.

**Discourses of disability (Fulcher)**  medical, social, rights, charity

Parents and teachers may operate from one or more of these discourses.

**Agency**  Parents and teachers often act as knowing agents e.g. parents employ professional discourse to advance their own position. Parents use diagnostic tests and reports from professionals outside the school to reinforce their own position.

**Structure**  Systems, or lack of systems, within the school influence how a parent is able to enact partnership with the teacher. For some parents this may mean “not knowing how to enter.”

Partnership involves the interrelationship of both structure and agency.

**Poor dissemination of information:**  Partnership documentation and information booklets “not reaching the teachers” or parents.

**Partnership is a process:**  Learned on the job/ trial and error.
Parents evaluate partnership more in terms of process than outcome.

Parents have roles within the partnership Fathers as the adversary: stepping in when there are major problems to sort out with the school.

Partnership as mothers work Mothers tend to carry the day to day responsibility of partnership with their child’s class teacher.

Keeping the balance Mothers are very aware of the need to keep on-side with the teacher so that they don’t jeopardise opportunities for their child.

Trying to work in partnership often involves a high personal cost for the mother Trying to maintain a harmonious balance, with the class teacher, while simultaneously advocating for their child’s needs is often stressful.

Parents use strategies to manage the teachers:
catching the teacher at the classroom door
bringing in the experts e.g. using other professionals opinions and diagnostic measures to reinforce their own views of their child’s particular needs
monitoring their profile at school e.g. not being too visible trying not to overstep the boundaries e.g. tyring not to tell the teacher their job

Teachers have habits of interaction with parents

Teachers are caught between conflicting discourses in their training and practice

Many teachers lack training in working with children with a disability

Teachers have little training to work with parents