

# Practising Power: Parent-Teacher Consultations in Early Years Settings

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University of Stirling

Rhona Isobel MacKinnon  
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## **Abstract**

This research explores parent-teacher consultations in a range of early years settings. Data were collected from eighteen audio-recorded parent-teacher consultations from six different settings and from follow up interviews with parents and teachers. The data related to the consultations and participants' direct experience of these and revealed the practices of power within these consultations.

Using a Foucauldian approach to analysis, the exercise of power and its impact on the parent-teacher relationship was explored. The analysis revealed the ways in which surveillance, normalising judgements and the 'examination' of all involved in the reporting process to parents, constitutes an exercise of power. Within the consultation parents, teachers and children are positioned as subjects who are homogenised and judged accordingly. Conversely, the presentation of observations and assessment information leads to the individualisation of children, allowing classifications and comparisons to be made in relation to a particular set of 'truths' about what it is to be a child, a parent and a teacher. Throughout the consultations parents and teachers assert and defend their positions and in doing so, attempts at resistance are evident.

The findings of the research open up new possibilities for challenging existing modes of practice in parent-teacher consultations. These include implications for initial teacher education and CPD programmes, in order to develop awareness of the way in which power is exercised through parent-teacher interactions and the effects it can have. The need for policy makers to take greater account of the exercise of power when developing policies in relation to partnership with parents, and indeed in evaluating the impact of existing policy is also identified.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This thesis examines the discourse that takes place within parent-teacher consultations in early years settings and in particular, is concerned with an examination of the power relations that are enacted between participants and the subsequent effect of these. The research is situated within the wider field of home-school partnership and the role that the parent-teacher consultation plays as a source of face-to-face communication within this context is considered.

I have specifically chosen to use the term ‘parent-teacher consultations’ throughout this thesis instead of ‘parents’ evening’. A primary reason for this is that it was the term used in literature sent out to parents by the schools involved in the study. While I recognise that the term ‘consultation’ can hold different meanings for different people, for me a consultation connotes a discussion and sharing of views where both parties are able to input into the topic of discussion. In contrast to this the term, the alternative ‘parents’ evening’ conjures up a more one sided picture in my mind which is focused less on a dialogic relationship between parent and teacher and more on providing information directly to parents. As a parent and teacher, I favour ‘consultation’ as a more desirable term.

Parent-teacher consultations have been of interest to me since I was a student teacher. They are somewhat unusual events in that they bring parents and teacher together in a formalised encounter framed by particular constraints of time, place and agenda, in order to discuss a child’s progress, often in their absence. Usually these are private events only open to those directly participating in them and obscured to the gaze of those positioned outwith. As a parent and teacher I have experienced parent-teacher consultations from both sides of the fence so to speak, and have been aware of

underlying tensions within these meetings. Speaking to colleagues I realised that these tensions usually went unquestioned, simply being accepted as part of the process. I wished to examine the discourse in these encounters more closely looking at how the talk was constructed and what function it served.

Researching the effects of collaborative professional enquiry on professional re-formation and development, Fox (2009) examined relations of power that were observed between chartered teachers and their managers. She identified that tension was created when there was a ‘clash of the discourses of participation and accountability’ and noted that this clash ‘positioned both teachers and managers in very ambiguous ways’ (p.112). I wondered if any similarities could be drawn between this and the way in which parents and teachers were positioned, and positioned themselves, within the consultation talk leading to the generation of tension I had experienced and if this could be evidenced in the discourse produced. By exploring the active construction of these encounters in more depth I hoped to be able to identify what, if anything, could be changed in order to make these more enjoyable, collaborative and productive events for all concerned.

While research has been carried out into parent-teacher consultations in secondary schools (Walker, 1998; MacLure and Walker, 2000; Power and Clark, 2000), there is very little research relating specifically to an early years context. In recent years, the focus of my career has very much been on early years education and, as such, the specific level of engagement that parents and teachers have at this stage of education has been at the forefront of my practice. I wondered whether the increased level of informal contact experienced by parents and teachers in early years settings would be

reflected in the format of the consultations and the way in which partnership was enacted through the consultation discourse.

Although my original intention in carrying out the research was to consider the effectiveness of the consultation process as a primary source of communication between home and school, as the research progressed my engagement with theoretical literature widened, influencing the methodological framework I ultimately chose to adopt. My interest began to focus more on the enactment of power within the consultations and the effect this had on parent-teacher relationships and perceptions of roles and identities within this process. Thus, the main research questions I set out to answer became:

1. How is 'partnership' constructed and practised by participants during parent-teacher consultations in early years settings?
2. How do power relations operate within parent-teacher consultations?
3. What are participants' expectations and perceptions of the consultation process?

As I will discuss further in the methodology chapter, the early stages of data analysis also led to the development of the following sub questions:

- a. How are identities constructed and defended within the talk?
- b. Which specific strategies of power are used within the consultation discourse and what effect do these have?
- c. What features of institutional discourse are present and what purpose do they serve within the encounter?

## **Early Years Education**

Traditionally, pre-schools and schools have held different approaches to learning and different constructions of the teacher and child (Moss, 2013). In considering how these could be brought closer together in ways that ‘maximise the pedagogical possibilities’ Moss (2013, p.24) suggests that this is best achieved through the development of shared understandings of ‘the child, learning and knowledge’. Curriculum for Excellence aims to achieve this by presenting conceptualisations of learning, pedagogy and practice which encompass pre-school and the early stages of primary education. Accordingly, early years education in Scotland now has active learning at the heart of its philosophy with recognition being given to the value of purposeful, well planned play combined with carefully judged adult interaction to extend learning in an effective way (Scottish Executive, 2007). Learning is centred on the development of children’s interests and experiences and they are encouraged to make decisions and choices regarding the direction that their own learning will take. Curriculum for Excellence combines the first two years of preschool and primary into one level, emphasising the seamless progression that is expected to take place between the pre-school and primary sectors.

In Scotland, every three year old has the right to a free pre-school education place. This entitlement starts from the beginning of the school term immediately following the child's third birthday and continues until they are eligible to start primary school. Although each child is offered a pre-school place it is not a statutory requirement and parents can opt not to send their child to pre-school provision. Scotland’s early education settings are extremely diverse and provision is available in pre-school settings in the public, private and voluntary sectors. Within the local authority where

this research took place, the majority of funded pre-school places were provided within local authority nursery schools or nursery classes in primary schools.

When children begin primary school they are taught in a variety of settings ranging from small rural schools consisting of composite classes, to large primary schools where there is more than one class at each primary stage. *Building the Curriculum 2* (Scottish Executive, 2007) recognises this variance in children's experience stating that the principles of continuity and progression in learning and teaching apply to all settings and should occur between pre-school and primary 1. Ideally, parents should be central to this transition process and the continuity and progression provided to children should be informed by children's previous experiences at home and in pre-school. Therefore, meaningful dialogue between home and school is essential.

Schools provide information to parents in a variety of ways; through informal exchanges, newsletters, curriculum evenings and perhaps most prominently, through an annual written report and formal parent-teacher consultations. It is usually the case that parental involvement at the early stages of the education process is greater than at other stages (Power and Clark, 2000) and there are generally more opportunities for parents and carers to interact with staff informally on a regular basis.

The educational settings sampled in this study held parent-teacher consultations twice a year and the typical time allocated to each meeting was ten minutes. Consultations were audio-recorded in six early years education settings consisting of nursery schools, nursery classes and primary 1 classes. 19 follow-up interviews were then carried out with parents and teachers regarding their expectations and perceptions of the parent-teacher consultations process. The responses were illuminating and revealed valuable 'insider' accounts which sat alongside the analysis of the consultation discourse. Using

a Foucauldian framework, the exercise of power that occurred between parents and teachers and the effect it had on the consultation discourse was explored. While I refer to these meetings throughout this thesis as parent-teacher consultations, in two settings nursery practitioners participated in the consultations alongside teachers which provided an interesting dynamic which is discussed further in Chapter 7.

### **Parental Involvement**

Teachers have recently been encouraged in educational policy to develop greater partnership working with parents. Within Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2007) parents are acknowledged as being the most influential educators of their children. It is made explicit that ‘staff across all early years settings recognise the interests and experiences children bring from home and use these as a starting point to extend learning’ (P.19). Teachers are expected to encourage parents to become involved in all areas of their children’s learning, starting in pre-school education and continuing through the transition into primary and beyond. Building positive relationships between parents and teachers is a crucial aspect of developing partnership between home and school where parents are positioned to take on a more prominent role in the education process. Parent-teacher consultations could form a central part of this process as opportunities for face-to-face communication where the potential exists for knowledge to be shared, opinions expressed and goals constructed collaboratively. However, this potential is not always realised and instead they can become frustrating encounters (Clark and Power, 2000). This research will examine what takes place within these encounters and ultimately, identifies possible areas for improvement which could assist teachers in making parental involvement in this process more meaningful and engaging.

## **Structure of the Thesis**

In Chapter 2 I discuss the literature that influenced my thinking in relation to my research topic. I specifically consider the literature on parent-teacher consultations, home-school communication and parental involvement discussing the contribution it makes to current conceptualisations of these areas and identifying gaps and omissions that my own research fills.

In Chapter 3 I discuss the development of the policy context of parental involvement in Scottish Schools considering the impact of policy implementation on professional practice and discussing how home-school relationships have changed in relation to this. Within this chapter I also provide a reflexive account of my own involvement in the construction of policy at local authority level.

In Chapter 4 I introduce the theoretical and methodological framework central to this research and contemplate my own position within the research process as a whole. The Foucauldian approach which frames the data analysis is discussed in detail with particular reference to the concepts of hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and the examination.

The following three chapters are concerned with analysis of the research data and provide different perspectives on the parent-teacher consultation process. Chapter 5 offers an analysis of the parent-teacher consultation discourse looking at the discursive strategies employed by participants. Chapter 6 provides an analysis of participants' accounts regarding their involvement in this process and the perceptions and expectations they hold. Chapter 7 pulls the previous two chapters together, providing an

interpretation of the exercise of power within the parent-teacher consultations discourse and interview data, with particular reference to the Foucauldian concept of disciplinary power.

Finally, in Chapter 8 I reflect on the research reviewing some of the methodological decisions made throughout the process. I consider how the findings have led to change within my own practice and consider the possible implications of this research for the future development of parent-teacher consultations and partnership working between home and school.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This research lies within the area of parent-teacher relations and is specifically concerned with the parent-teacher consultation process as a primary site of communication set within the wider context of home-school partnership. While a large amount of literature exists relating to home-school relations within the broader context of parental involvement in education, research which looks at the parent-teacher consultation process itself and more specifically, explores this within the context of early years, is more limited. The chapter reviews the literature relating to parent-teacher consultations in different settings and which use a range of methodological approaches. Different forms of communication between home and school and the role they play in the development of partnership is then considered before a discussion of the literature surrounding parental involvement is presented in the final section.

### **Parent-Teacher Consultations**

Within the existing literature on parent-teacher consultations, very little is presented within a pre-school context. One piece of research which does focus on a pre-school consultation is offered by Harner and Davis (1991). They assert that the interests of children can only be served through the constructive collaboration of parents and teachers and as such, they identify parent-teacher consultations as key sites where the opportunity for such collaboration exists. However, within their study recognition is also given to the fact that these can be tension-filled encounters where underlying issues are often only partially addressed through the active construction of negotiation strategies between parent and teacher. Harner and Davis attempt to fill a gap existing in

much literature on parent-teacher communication which, they assert, fails to represent the ‘voices’ of parents and instead focuses on technical and procedural elements of the consultation process. They claim that it is only by viewing parent-teacher consultations through the perspective of the participants themselves that an illuminating discourse can actually be created between schools and families.

Within this piece of research several issues are identified as affecting the negotiations which took place between parent and teacher during the consultation. These include misalignment between the pattern of collective classroom communication and the personal style of mother-child interaction; the limiting effects of ideas of professionalism; the culture of curriculum packages; and the reluctance of a child to become fully acclimatised to the institutional nature of the school. While claims made by the authors relate to the specific conference presented, any generalisations made beyond this context are linked to the format and institutionalised practice of parent-teacher consultations of similar structure and purpose and as such are justifiable.

Harner and Davis identify parent-teacher consultations as events where the ‘boundaries between two worlds can be negotiated’, (ibid., p.59). By providing an ‘insider’ account of events, their approach provides a rare insight into the subjective meanings of a parent-teacher consultation derived from direct experience. However, the retrospective accounts provided are highly subjective and having been carried out a year after the consultation took place, are very detached from the actual discourse of the consultation itself. Thus, an interesting but incomplete picture is provided with regard to the complexity of the negotiations that took place or the way in which these were actually enacted.

An alternative approach is provided by Walker (1998) who presents an ethnographic study of secondary school parents' evenings in four secondary schools in England involving observation of parent-teacher consultations and transcription of follow up interviews. Walker claims that the findings correspond with Bastiani's (1988) view that parent-teacher consultations involve 'mismatched expectations and mutual incomprehension' (Walker, 1998, p.174). Within the research, parents' evenings are presented as 'unique interactional events which create a problematic interface between the power bases of home and school concentrating on the assessment of an individual' (ibid., p.163). Walker suggests that this appraisal of student performance is often approached from different view points and agendas which is in keeping with Harner and Davis' (2001) claim that within parent-teacher consultations two different worlds are brought together.

Throughout the interviews teachers were seen to express opinions about the value of parents' evenings, stating that they provide an opportunity to meet parents, to explain changes in educational practice, to share concerns, or to request parents' support with particular matters. This can be seen to relate to the negative appraisal of parents' evenings presented in Power and Clark's (2000) study, in terms of the one-way dissemination of knowledge they provide. However, in addition to the positive aspects identified by teachers in Walker's (1998) study, 11 out of 12 teachers interviewed described parent-teacher consultations as exhausting, resenting the extra time that they added to their working day. Importantly, some teachers also reported that they had received insufficient training on how to engage in effective communication with parents and consequently, skills which they perceived as being integral to the success of parent-teacher consultations, such as diplomacy, had to be learnt on the job.

While Bastiani (1993) and Bridges (1987) suggest that parents are content to 'leave it to the professional', Walker, (1998, p.169) claims that her findings show little evidence of this. The interview data presented in the paper, often powerful in its emotive nature, is used to evidence the tensions that can underlie the coming together of parents and teachers at these events. It suggests that there can be emotional implications from the reliance on professional trust that often come to the fore as the two different roles adopted by parents and teachers interface.

As well as examining the role of parents and teachers, Walker's (1998) study also touches on the experiences of students involved in the parent-teacher consultations. This fills a gap in much literature where the voice of the child goes unheard both in the consultation itself and in the research relating to the interactional process. Walker found that some of the students interviewed felt undermined by parent and teacher discussions of issues outwith academic achievement, such as behaviour. While students in the early years of secondary school seemed concerned about the outcomes of these meetings, it was clear that they mattered less to older pupils. Walker suggests that this may be due to students learning that in the long term 'nothing ever changes' (Walker, 1998, p.171) as a result of parent-teacher consultations themselves. This therefore, brings into question the effectiveness of parents' evenings as events where issues can be addressed by parent and teacher together.

What can be drawn from the analysis of the data in this study is that a general confusion about the purpose of the consultation process exists. Although in theory parents' evenings provide an opportunity to discuss serious matters, the 'limitations imposed by time, timing and lack of privacy are not conducive to this' (Walker, 1998, p.174). The importance of effective communication between home and school is acknowledged by

teachers in the study but this is interpreted by Walker as simply being a public relation exercise which is carried out to fulfill schools' obligations of accountability which are set down in policy. Similarly, parents are seen to view the evening in symbolic terms, believing that the main outcome of their attendance at these events is to indicate to teachers that they are interested in their child's education. However, it is claimed that when parents do attempt to progress beyond this symbolism within the interactions, their attempts are often unsuccessful (Walker, 1998).

Walker's (1998) study successfully presents the views of participants in the consultation process but it also raises questions regarding the nature of the negotiations that take place within these encounters, which cannot be answered through the type of data collected. As Walker refers to these meetings as 'unique interactional event(s)' (Walker, 1998, p.163), it would be illuminating to examine the structure of the consultation talk and to compare this to other examples of institutional interactions in different contexts.

MacLure and Walker's (2000) account of parent-teacher consultations takes this forward by focusing on the construction of the talk within the actual consultation itself as opposed to surrounding events or people's subjective experiences of them. A main claim of the research is that within parent-teacher consultations issues of identity, moral conduct and responsibility are 'negotiated and defended' (MacLure and Walker, 2000, p.21). The research is presented as an alternative approach to what the authors suggest is the prevailing view held by many researchers and practitioners (Walker, 1998) that the specifics of the talk which occur during consultations are irrelevant in comparison to the representational importance of the event. Instead, MacLure and Walker (2000) assert that it is within the fine detail of the interaction itself that student, parents and

teachers become the subjects of power, status and responsibility (p.21). Accordingly, the authors adopt the fine-grained approach of conversation analysis to examine the interactional structure of parent-teacher consultations. The use of conversation analysis provides an appropriate method through which to examine the fine details of the interaction, shedding light on the way in which power and status is reflected and acted out within the structure of the talk itself.

Within the research particular focus is placed on the dynamics within the talk which permit participants to present themselves in a particular way. From the findings, specific similarities are drawn between the interactional structure of parent-teacher consultations and doctor-patient consultations. They assert that teachers conduct the consultation in a particular way; they provide an uninterrupted diagnosis at the outset of the consultation, use specialised vocabulary throughout the interaction, and ‘downplay’ parents’ contributions in terms of their knowledge of the student (ibid., p.6). What emerges from the findings is that teachers use particular strategies during consultations to shape and control their development. The first of these is the control exercised by teachers over personal information. While teachers often ask parents for personal information about a student’s work habits, home circumstances and emotional welfare, they often overlook such information when it is volunteered by parents. The second area of control appears to arise during the establishment of what constitutes a ‘problem’. Parents often face difficulties in getting teachers to acknowledge that a problem exists concerning their son or daughter if this problem has not already been identified in the first instance by the teacher. Control is found to be an enduring feature in the establishment of any agreed follow-up action. While parents are expected to take action over problems raised by teachers, for example by checking homework or monitoring attendance, they often have difficulty in securing similar commitments from

teachers. Occasionally parents do challenge the teacher's authority and from this, blaming sequences emerge in which each participant attempts to shift the responsibility for a problem either onto one another, the student or the external circumstances. In doing so, lengthy explanations of teaching methods or educational values are often provided as justifications by teachers in the face of challenges from parents. These justifications are seen as the only occasions where extended educational dialogue takes place. This is the case throughout the consultations recorded, which raises doubt over the value of parents' evenings as successful partnership events.

MacLure and Walker (2000) suggest that it is only by attempting to explore the complex negotiations over power and identity which occur during the consultations that insight can be gained into their 'precarious location on the boundaries between home and school' (ibid., p.5). The extracts of the consultations presented in the text are used to illustrate the imbalance of power that is strongly seen as being in favour of the teacher as 'professional' during the majority of interactions. This expert status of the teacher is jointly constructed by parents, students and teachers, particularly during the initial stages of the interaction, and consequently, the resistance of any subsequent challenges to the teacher's authority during the consultation is largely 'defined and constrained by the terms of engagement set by these openings' (ibid., p.11). While this finding would seem to suggest that the concept of 'partnership', frequently promoted as an effective and necessary component of good home-school relations (Bastiani, 1988), is absent from parent-teacher consultations, their contribution to the development of home-school links should not be judged on this 'power imbalance' alone. Power and Clark (2000, p.44) acknowledge that 'parents and teachers will never be equal partners in dialogue' maintaining that they have different responsibilities and interests. Therefore, the nature of the different roles occupied by each participant will define to a

large extent the agendas they wish to address and the methods and strategies adopted by each in attempting to do so.

Taking a different approach to the examination of parent-teacher consultations, Power and Clark (2000) explore their function as part of wider research into home-school reporting procedures. This exploratory study investigates the usefulness of a variety of home-school reporting practices for different communities of parents in four secondary schools in England and as part of this, examines parents' evenings. A primary aim of the research is to gain insight into the way in which different reporting procedures are experienced by diverse parent groups and data collected for this purpose focuses on the analysis of audio-taped parent-teacher consultations and semi-structured interviews with parents.

Although data from teacher interviews is not presented in the report, we are nevertheless told by the authors that those spoken to displayed an awareness of accountability to parents, acknowledging the need to involve them as partners and referring "positively to the new discourse of 'client' and 'consumer' responsiveness" (ibid., p.43). However, very little evidence is presented from the interviews to show that schools had attempted to address parents' needs in terms of the client-consumer responsiveness to which they refer. Instead, what does emerge strongly from the data relating to parents' experiences, is universal criticism of the organisation of the parents' evenings studied.

The majority of parents interviewed reported that they found parent-teacher consultations frustrating and unproductive encounters. This was especially found to be the case for those who had little or no English, or those whose children had learning difficulties. As Power and Clark (2000, p.44; original emphasis) state, "for some

parents...school remains 'another country' with its inscrutable professional discourse'. However, regardless of this, the general view among the parents interviewed was that parent-teacher consultations were 'crucial encounters' (Power and Clark, 2000, p. 39) as they often provided the only opportunity for face-to-face communication with teachers to discuss their child.

Many parents felt that a positive aspect of these events was that they allowed them to put a face to the teacher's name, while for some parents, the consultations allowed them to underscore their child's presence. Often it was believed that without doing this, there was a danger that their child would just become another face among many. In schools where students were permitted to attend the consultations, parents felt that they provided a valuable opportunity to directly observe the relationship between teacher and child. However, despite their perceived importance, there was criticism of the events from parents interviewed in terms of finding out what they wanted to know. In relation to this, many parents felt that the consultations consisted of one-way dissemination of knowledge as opposed to meaningful discussion and that teachers failed to translate 'problem issues' highlighted during the consultations into meaningful strategies.

In addition to this, an annual parents' evening was not considered to be sufficient by the majority of parents and many felt strongly that they were not taken seriously or welcomed by teachers on these occasions. These findings are particularly concerning since the schools involved in the study had all developed reporting procedures which they felt not only fulfilled Government requirements, but which also met parental needs. The responses from Power and Clark's (2000) study, however, would suggest that they in fact fell far short of the latter.

A major claim made by Power and Clark (2000) is that the evidence collected shows that:

... a desire for participation was widespread but frustrated through lack of awareness and resources of time and money on the teachers' side and a sense of inadequacy from parents. (ibid., p.45)

By highlighting the limits of recent education policies which provide parents with greater choice between schools, Power and Clark (2000) suggest that enabling parents to have greater involvement within schools might be a more effective way forward. They assert that it is only by addressing the differences between parents that increased parental participation across the board can be achieved. They claim that their research seeks to examine how reporting procedures were experienced by a broad spectrum of parents. However, their study is focused entirely on secondary school processes with no cognisance being given to reporting procedures within pre-school or primary school settings, other than the suggestion that these are more constructive events in primary schools due to the greater level of 'informal contact' (ibid., p.26) parents have with teachers. However, there is a need for more research to be carried out within the other sectors of education before such assumptions can be made.

Walker's (2002) study of parent-teacher consultations refers specifically to the role played by students within these meetings. As discussed in other literature (MacLure and Walker, 2000; Power and Clark, 2000) the enactment of 'partnership' that is required at home-school events such as parents' evenings can be difficult for parents and teachers to negotiate. Walker's research suggests that this can be an even more complicated task when students are present. Her focus of examination is on the difficulties encountered by participants in attempting to integrate the student into this process.

Walker (2002) uses discourse analysis to explore the institutional practice of the parent-teacher consultation and in doing so analyses the sequential aspects of the interactions taking place within the consultation discourse. Blaming sequences are identified as areas where extended dialogue occurs and questioning sequences are used to illustrate the asymmetrical nature of the consultations in terms of participant contributions. Walker (2002) claims that within the consultations the balance of power can be seen to lie with the 'professional' rather than the 'client' (ibid., p.470) and successfully shows the ways in which parents and teachers contest authority within the consultation.

Throughout the consultations the students' role was usually passive, where they listened silently to discussions of their achievements and inadequacies. A distinctive feature of the dialogue was teachers' frequent attempts to obtain answers from students to questions which were carefully structured to 'enlighten' the parents as 'onlookers' (ibid., p.473). Other aspects of the consultation talk were also seen to deviate from the 'norm' of everyday conversations. For example, when teachers addressed comments to students it was often the parents who responded as if the students were absent from the meetings and the comment had instead been addressed by them. Similarly, a shift in addressee often occurred during dialogic episodes.

Walker (2002) attempts to address the imbalance of student representation displayed in their relative silence in the transcribed extracts by giving students a voice through the interpretation of selected interview extracts throughout the text. Most students viewed their attendance at the parent-teacher consultation as purely symbolic in that in order to show interest, they had to be seen to attend. They also suggested that their parents felt obliged to attend for the same reason. Other students felt that their attendance served a disciplinary purpose, believing that being present at the discussion of their progress

between parents and teachers was intended to emphasise the importance of what was being said.

What the interviews also highlighted was that that some students chose not to let their parents know that the consultations were taking place at all, again regarding them as merely symbolic events that would only tell parents what they already knew. Therefore, it could be the case that some parents who would potentially have been judged as uncaring by the teachers due to their lack of attendance, may simply not have known that the meetings were taking place at all.

Walker claims that students' attendance at parent-teacher consultations does not afford them a 'greater voice' (ibid., p.477) in the discussion of their progress and future plans, and questions whether the results that the consultations achieve are actually 'worth the effort' (ibid., p.478). However, while the findings provide a rare insight into student involvement at parent-teacher consultations, no suggestions are offered as to how student participation could be adapted to make these more productive events.

Silverman, Baker and Keogh (1995), also consider the role of students within parent-teacher consultations but look specifically at children's silence within these interviews. These silences were seen to occur even when teachers made direct invitations to the students to speak. While in ordinary conversation ignoring such an invitation would be considered a display of rudeness, Silverman et al (1998) argue that this is not a display of defiance or deficiency in the child but is instead an illustration of 'interactional competency' (p.220). Lack of response from the student can, they claim, be viewed as a reaction to the rhetorical and ambivalent nature of the teacher's questions. They state that:

...silence (or at least lack of verbal response) allows children to avoid implication in the collaboratively accomplished adult moral universe and thus... enables them to resist the way in which an institutional discourse serves to frame and constrain their social competencies. (ibid., p.220)

Silverman et al (1998) claim that the most surprising feature of their interview data was that advice given by teachers usually went completely unacknowledged by students and that this was accepted in a routine and unproblematic fashion. While it is reasonable to assume that one purpose of parents attending parent-teacher consultations is to actively seek advice and information, Silverman et al assert that there is nothing to suggest the students are there for the same reasons. Therefore, within this context their reluctance to receive advice or respond to questions and comments is perhaps more understandable.

In some cases where students are making very good progress at school the parent-teacher consultation can be viewed by participants as a formality or courtesy encounter (Silverman et al, 1998, Baker and Keogh, 1995). However, in consultations where discussion of student progress is not entirely positive, research shows that teachers deliver bad news or address contentious issues in a very sensitive and carefully judged way (Baker and Keogh, 1995; Silverman et al, 1998). In such cases the contributions made by teachers can often be interpreted as having a 'moral' feel to them. This theme of morality and pastoral responsibility is in fact, recurrent in the analysis of parent-teacher talk. Silverman et al (1998) claim that parents attend parents' evenings to gain information but also to discuss how any apparent issues can be resolved. However, if parenting practices are observed as being part of the link between home and school, as is suggested in the study conducted by Silverman et al (1998), then there is the possibility that home practices are identified as being part of the problem (ibid., p.235).

This carries with it moral implications in terms of what is implied and inferred from the parent-teacher discussions concerning these areas.

In Sweden, it is specified within the pre-school curriculum that teachers must carry out consultations with parents annually and it is intended that these meetings follow a specific routine which focuses on the child's development and co-operation rather than educational attainment (Markström, 2010). A regular feature of the meetings in these contexts is the way in which teachers characterise children or evaluate their progress in general terms. Markström (2010) explains that teachers describe children's attitudes and personal characteristics and categorise them within certain 'types', providing anecdotal evidence of this to support their claims. Her study looks at the talk which occurs between parents and teachers in these meetings, specifically focusing on the different roles parents play in the process when discussion is centred on teacher concerns about children's 'inappropriate' behaviour.

Markström states that 'the implicit and explicit utterances about pre-school children seem to be embedded in a somewhat rational and instrumental focus or ideal' (ibid., p.311) which she claims is situated within institutional normality. Through the construction of the 'proper' child, teachers implicitly attempt to provide guidance to parents on how children need to behave and what they need to learn in order to succeed within the pre-school context. This is seen to involve compliance with teachers' ideas and the socialisation and regulation processes that exist in the pre-school setting. Therefore, the involvement of parents in the consultations can be regarded as a form of governmentality (Foucault, 1979). The norms and values that are an integral part of the pre-school discourse are intended to promote the social order (Sarangi and Roberts, 1999) as well as working towards the pedagogisation of the parent (Markström 2010;

Popkewitz, 2003). Within this approach, parents are expected to uphold the values of the institution through being informed of what is acceptable and what is not.

This piece of research offers a view of pre-school parent-teacher consultations in relation to Foucauldian conceptualisations of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977a) and highlights how the institutional order is promoted within this framework. However, as the research is primarily concerned with characterisations of the child it does not focus on interactions between parents and teachers beyond the implications they have in building up a picture of the child. Markström (2010) claims that her study offers knowledge about how pre-school consultations ‘can be constructed in practice’ (ibid., p.312) but without analysis of the interactions between parents and teachers and the work done in their construction, this picture seems somewhat incomplete.

The above discussions illustrate that parent-teacher consultations are key sites of communication between home and school where the potential exists for the mutual sharing of information. While parents value the opportunity to meet with teachers face-to-face, the literature suggests that these encounters do not readily allow for the reciprocal flow of information and sharing of expertise. Instead, what is constructed through the talk is the normalisation of the child in relation to a set of institutional ideals and values. This process is intended to ‘educate’ parents about the school’s expectations and goals in the hope that they carry these forward at home.

While much of the literature relating to parent-teacher conferences often considers participant perceptions of the process, research which focuses specifically on the construction of interactions between parents and teachers is rare and limited mainly to secondary school settings. In particular, a gap exists in the study of pre-school and primary consultations in the United Kingdom. However, the parent-teacher consultation

is just one form of communication that occurs between home and school. The following section discusses different formats, both written and face-to-face, and considers these in relation to the development of parent-teacher relationships.

### **Written Communication**

Keogh (1996) presents an examination of home-school communications viewing them as practices where relationships are built and institutional identities actively constructed. The research is set within the context of changing educational policy which had moved at the time of the study, towards the implementation of devolution in the governance of Australian schools. While ‘official rhetoric emphasising the importance of “good” home-school relationships’ was abundant (ibid., p.119), Keogh asserts that little research existed concerning the ‘actualities’ of parent-teacher relationships. Highlighting Foucault’s assertion that it is only through the analysis of ‘micro-sites’ that power and governmentality can be identified (Foucault, 1977a), she legitimises her analysis of home-school communications by establishing them as institutional sites wherein the enactment of power takes place between individuals (Keogh, 1996, p.120). The research presented offers an interpretation of what is achieved by the discourse contained in a variety of home-school communications and makes a relevant contribution to understanding the enactment of ‘partnership’ between home and school by highlighting the active positioning of participants within that process.

Keogh, citing Foucault (1979), defines governmentality as:

..a form of power exerted on and through the social populace by the ensemble formed by institutions as agencies of social regulation and control. (Keogh, 1996, p.120)

In addition, Keogh's discussion of power/knowledge sets out the way in which parents' and teachers' conversational practices can be thought of as relative and changing when viewed within a Foucauldian framework. Keogh is not concerned with asking questions of 'what' or 'why' in relation to the discourse analysed but instead seeks to establish *how* 'governmentality is enacted and documented within home-school communications', (Keogh, 1996, p.119), which is consistent with the Foucauldian approach she sets out to adopt. The formulation of communication between teachers and parents is a key site where power is played out through the micro discourses of school and home.

Within written communication between home and school, conceptions of 'parent', 'teacher', 'school', 'home' and 'partnership' are built up through the language used and the receiver's individual interpretation of it. The focus of Keogh's analysis is the central role played by language in the construction of identities, positions and subjectivity. She shows how teachers are discursively positioned, and indeed actively position themselves, as 'school experts'. Similarly, parents are positioned, and position themselves, as 'home experts'. This results in the production of 'institutional discourses' (Keogh, 1996, p.121) in which participants question and examine each other's expertise, discursively opening up different areas of responsibility. Keogh asserts that what the different forms of communication achieve is a 'connection and a reconnection of home and school discourses' (ibid.).

In interpreting the communication sampled, Keogh claims that schools can be viewed as 'agencies of regulation and control of homes' (Keogh, 1996, p.130). Within the texts examined, parents are positioned as being responsible for the social regulation and control of students and are portrayed to a large degree as teachers' 'agents' in respect of

this. The identity of 'good parent' is implied through the home-school discourse as being someone who conforms to the regulatory practices of the school by upholding what is regarded as the school's 'moral order' (ibid., p.130) in areas beyond the physical space of the school. Viewing parents as 'adjunct teachers' (ibid.) whose role it is to exercise the teachers' 'expert' ideas, sheds light on the way in which 'partnership' is played out within the actualities of home-school relationships. What can be seen is that parent-teacher relationships, as evidenced in home-school texts, exemplify subtle tensions between the discourses of home and school.

Foucauldian research such as that adopted by Keogh has been criticised for portraying discourse as the driving force of social life with human agency and choice being largely neglected as subjects find themselves caught in the 'available positions' (Wetherell et al, 2001, p.195). Hollway (1984), however, argues that it is considerably more contingent than this as contradictory discourses construct different positions, providing flexibility and the opportunity to 'interrogate' one position from the perspective of another. Such approaches have also been criticised as lacking a 'textual analytic' dimension that explains how meanings, subjectivity and power relations are revealed in the specificity of 'what people actually say and actually do' (Poynton and Lee, 2000, p.6). However, alternative approaches to discourse analysis such as conversation analysis, which focuses on the structure of talk through a fine grained examination, could not shed light on the way in which power/knowledge is constituted in the talk in the way that Keogh has done.

School reports are not always regarded as effective forms of communication between home and school. A survey of 328 secondary schools in England carried out by Clark and Power (1998) indicated that many parents found written school reports inadequate

in terms of providing information needed to fully understand their child's progress. They claim that the content of reports sent to parents by schools was often seen by parents as confusing or over generalised. Some schools in the study used computer statement banks to construct their comments and viewed these as beneficial. They felt they promoted good presentation, helped to increase teacher efficiency in writing the reports and allowed comparisons in performance to be made across curriculum areas. However, parents believed it was important that written information from teachers displayed an individual knowledge of their child and while some parents found that the reports did convey this, others regarded them as 'vague and formulaic' (ibid., p.36). One comment illustrated in Clark and Power's (1998) study brings the intended audience of school reports into question, highlighting that although progress reports are written to parents, the professional language used often indicates that the content is instead intended for other professionals to read. Clark and Power (2000) found that inconsistencies and teachers' reluctance to be completely open and explicit about performance resulted in parents having to attempt to decipher reports themselves for important pieces of information. They claim that this could potentially place working class and ethnic minority parents at a disadvantage over professional middle class parents who may be in a better position to decode such information effectively.

The above research raises questions about the purpose and effectiveness of written communication with parents and whose needs it serves. The studies discussed below provide an insight into verbal communication between parents and practitioners and consider its contribution to the enactment and development of parent-teacher relationships.

## **Face-to-Face Communication**

Verbal communication in face-to-face meetings is an important aspect of the construction of the relationship between parents and teachers. While analysis of what is said within meetings can provide valuable insight to the processes at play, examination of other communication devices used within these encounters can also be revealing.

Alasuutari (2009) uses a discourse analytic approach to examine the function of laughter in the interactions that take place between parents and practitioners in pre-school parent-professional meetings in Finnish day care settings. In particular, examination takes place of the way in which laughter is used in conjunction with descriptions of the child. What purpose it serves and what it says about the nature of parent-professional collaboration in the planning process is considered. The research findings indicate that throughout the meetings, ongoing negotiations take place over participant positioning. Within these negotiations, the validity of participants' views and claims to expertise (*ibid.*, p.116) are highlighted through the use of laughter.

While Alasuutari's (2009) findings are in many ways consistent with the use of laughter in other examples of institutional talk (Glenn 2003, Hakaana, 2001), there are also distinct differences. These relate to the amount of shared laughter which Alasuutari claims is particular to the context of the communication between parent and practitioner in the practice of collaborative planning. While shared laughter is predominant in this study, other studies of institutional talk show that solo laughter is usually more common (Adelswärd, 1989; West 1984) and is associated with an asymmetry of power. Alasuutari (2009) argues that the informal feel of the planning meetings between parents and professionals who see each other on a daily basis, contributes to the more symmetrical discursive relationship that is present between parent and practitioner in

these meetings and indicates that a 'partnership' approach to collaborative planning is indeed evident. However, the subtle negotiations that are shown to take place within the interactions concerning participants views and their positioning as experts illustrate that considerable skill is needed to make these consultations successful. Nevertheless, the informal structure of the discussion could be considered to be more conducive to the establishment of 'equal footing' between participants within the communication, Alasuutari suggests that the collaborative purpose of the consultation requires the professional to be fully aware of the aims of the discussion and to have the communicative competence to monitor the dynamics of the interaction effectively (ibid.).

The ability to communicate effectively is a skill which is highly relevant to parent-teacher consultations in any setting and is essential to the development of partnership working. While Alasuutari's study sheds light on one particular aspect of interactions between parents and teachers, the way in which such face-to-face meetings present challenges to existing professional practice is not fully considered.

If collaboration between parents is to be effective then an element of trust within the parent-teacher relationship is essential. Adams and Christenson (2000) assert that trust between parents and teachers is crucial in building positive relationships between home and school. They argue that ideally, family-school relationships should be based on collaboration consisting of shared goals, responsibilities and a relationship where contributions can be made to the process by each party on equal terms (Vosler-Hunter, 1989. p. 15). Adams and Christenson (2000) argue that a positive family-school partnership recognises the objective of the relationship as being the development of a long term association intended to meet the needs of students, rather than consisting of a

series of individual meetings aimed at addressing immediate concerns in isolation. Within this process, effective face-to-face communication plays a central role. When looking at factors impacting on levels of trust across school grades, they suggest that trust remains at a very low level when there is a minimal communication between home and school. They claim that trust between parents and teachers is highest in the lower grades of schooling and diminishes as the child progresses through school. It is suggested that this could be attributed to structural differences between pre-school, primary and secondary school settings. In pre-schools parents have the opportunity to meet with teachers on a daily basis as they drop off and collect their child each day. In primary schools, contact is usually less frequent but there is typically only one teacher with whom the parents have to communicate and build up a relationship. In secondary school however, parents are faced with the mammoth task of having to establish relationships with several teachers if trust is to be built up effectively. In addition to this, students are expected to develop a more independent role when they reach secondary school. The decrease in opportunities for face-to-face communication between parents and teachers can be seen to lead to the lower levels of trust identified as children move through the school system as indicated in Adams and Christenson's research

The literature reviewed above illustrates the way in which notions of identity and responsibility are disseminated and established through the discourse of home-school communication. One obvious way to increase levels of communication between home and school is through the development of parental involvement. The section below discusses the different types of parental involvement that exist and considers the part they play in the development of partnership between parents and teachers.

## **Parental Involvement in Education**

Although parental involvement comes in many shapes and forms Crozier (1999, p.219) claims that it is often 'regarded as a unified concept and accepted unproblematically as desirable by all concerned'. In reality, what this term actually means and how it is played out is interpreted in different ways by people in different positions. Similarly, its appeal to teacher, parents, students and politicians relates to a variety of purposes at different times.

Lack of parental involvement can be viewed as a weakness in schools but blame often appears to be attributed to parents rather than being identified as shortcomings in the systems and approaches that schools have in place for the development of this area (Power and Clark, 2000). Within the literature on home-school partnership, non-involvement of parents can be seen to be especially prominent within particular groups of parents such as ethnic minorities, parents from working class backgrounds and parents whose first language is not English (Power and Clark, 2000, Bastiani and Wolfendale, 1996). The literature relating to this field discusses different approaches to parental involvement and critiques the various levels of success achieved by these in promoting greater partnership between home and school. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, policy developments have certainly secured a more prominent role for parents in the involvement of their children's education at least in rhetorical terms, although the literature would suggest that the reality of how this is enacted within schools is a different matter (Vincent, 1996, Crozier, 2000, Power and Clark, 2000). As Lysaght (1993. P.197) states:

The issue of parental involvement/partnership in education, as in other professions, is highly charged... Traditionally, change has been endorsed in theory and resisted in practice.

As will be discussed below, expectations of what is meant and indeed sought in terms of involvement vary greatly.

Beresford and Hardie (1996) assert that the primary school environment is more conducive to the development of parental involvement and, together with Adams and Christenson (2000), note that there is a drop in parental involvement when children go to secondary school. However, in secondary schools such a focused and defined approach as that found in primaries is not often adopted and the secondary structure of numerous departments within a larger establishment, does not always make a co-ordinated approach to involvement easy. In the above section on face-to-face communication it was discussed that contact between parents and teachers is usually greater in the pre-school and primary sectors. In keeping with this, Crozier (1999) found that parents identified that the relationships they had with their child's primary school and secondary school were different and as a result, so too were their levels of involvement with each. Many factors such as geographical location, not knowing their child's teachers or other parents, or starting work, were all found to impact on the contributions made by parents.

Vincent (1996) and Reay (1998) concur with this view and go further by suggesting that a lack of involvement is linked to feelings of disassociation. In secondary schools the curriculum is more complex and prone to change, often making many parents feel distanced academically. They point out however, that not all primary parents feel included and able to contribute, and highlight the alienation that is felt by many working class and ethnic minority parents across sectors. Interestingly, many teachers

seem unaware of this and Crozier (1999) asserts that when she asked teachers how parents were made aware of expectations of them in terms of involvement, they were very vague as to how, and indeed if, this actually occurred within their own establishment. Within Crozier's study parents also cited their children's desire to develop a sense of independence as a contributing factor to their lack of involvement (Crozier, 1999). However, while most literature focusing on parental involvement considers the experiences of parents and teachers, very little is presented regarding the views of students and the impact that this may have on levels of parental contribution.

Vincent (1996) identifies four main roles which parents fulfill in terms of parental involvement – that of supporter/learner, consumer, independent parent and participant. She argues that the first of these is the option preferred by many professionals and therefore most frequently adopted by schools. The function of this role is to support teachers as professional experts by 'assimilating their values and beliefs' (p.45). This view is also shared by Crozier (1999) who found that secondary teachers view positive parental involvement as being an approach which provides them with 'back up' (p.221). It is usually seen as something practical in which parents are expected to adopt the teachers' goals and ideals, rather than being actively engaged as the term 'involvement' suggests. However, although these tasks may appear 'superficial' in terms of their contribution to partnership working, Crozier (1999) asserts that such activities can also have a positive impact on parent-school relationships. In addition to assisting the smooth running of the school by freeing up teachers' time, they provide parents with the opportunity to develop networks and gain knowledge about school processes, thus gaining valuable cultural capital (Crozier, 1997). From the schools' perspective levels of involvement which support them in their work can affect teachers' views of parents and likewise, of their children (Beresford and Hardie, 1996). Vincent (1996), however,

argues that many home-school curriculum programmes are quite rigid in approach and aim to make the home function like the school rather than seeing it as a unique space where different types of relationship and values may exist. While she acknowledges that home-school curriculum programmes do provide a more active role for parents than the traditional positions of ‘audience or fundraiser’ (ibid., p.48), they still represent a curriculum-centred rather than a parent-centred approach. Torkington (1986, p.14.) comments that the latter reflects:

Parents’ knowledge of their individual children is far greater than that of a teacher, and that the teacher’s knowledge and skills about children and learning in general should merely complement and build on the specific knowledge that parents hold...

Torkington asserts that the problem with most home-school programmes is that they can be implemented by teachers without them having to examine their own beliefs or without considering the possibilities that could be opened up for their own professional practice by working with parents.

The literature suggests that teachers are very much positioned as experts and their dominance in the implementation of home-school programmes is not always conducive to meaningful parental involvement where expertise from home can be brought into the school arena and used to promote the learning of all involved. Tomlinson (1991) and MacBeth (1995) propose that one way this can be achieved is through the establishment of group meetings where parents and teachers come together on a regular basis to discuss matters relating to the curriculum pedagogy within particular class groups.

Recognising that the implementation of such a process would require a huge shift in parent-teacher relationships, Vincent (1996) states that ‘changes in both structures and relationships are necessary if there is to be a discernable increase in participative

processes in schools' (p.57). This, however, is not something which can be brought about easily. Crozier (1999) suggests that teachers can be reticent about engaging with parents in relation to professional issues, seeing it as a personal attack on their 'expert' position. It could cause them to defend their professionalism thus adding to the 'professional-lay divide' (p.225). Her study showed that teachers felt parents had no right to contribute in terms of knowledge of the curriculum or the teaching methods that were employed.

Many teachers feel that topics of dispute which in some way challenge aspects of professionalism should be 'no-go areas for parents' (Crozier, 1999, p.225). This was also found to be the case by MacLure and Walker (2000) who, as discussed previously, discovered that parents often encountered problems in getting teachers to acknowledge issues that they raised during parent-teacher consultations. This exemplifies the potential contestation and resistance that exists in crossing the boundaries of 'professional' and 'lay person'. However, Silverman et al, (1998) state that while teachers work hard at displaying knowledge and moral competency (p.238), parents gather a lot of information about teachers and what goes on in the classroom from their children. Therefore, potentially parents are well placed to question what goes on in schools to the same extent that teachers can question what happens at home (Baker and Keogh, 1995; Silverman et al, 1998).

An approach which attempts to move away from deficit thinking in relation to parental involvement, through recognition of the rich and diverse backgrounds that parents hold, is developed by Moll et al (1992). Here, the historically and culturally developed 'bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being' (Moll et al, 1992, p.133) are viewed as 'funds of knowledge' (ibid.) which

can be tapped into by teachers. By stepping out of their role as experts and instead adopting a willingness to learn from the families with whom they engage, teachers can gain access to a wealth of resources that can help them to understand their students in new ways. Through this approach, encounters between parents and teachers are also likely to become more engaging and purposeful, leading to the development of a less asymmetric parent-teacher relationship.

To conclude, gaps identified in the literature reviewed above suggest that there is a need for further research to be carried out in order to investigate the work done in parent-teacher consultations in early years settings. In particular, a focus on the construction of the discourse within these encounters, and the impact of this on the development of parent-teacher relationships, would contribute to existing knowledge of the consultation process providing a more comprehensive view than is currently available. While methods of communication between home and school are diverse, so too are their levels of effectiveness. Similarly, approaches to parental involvement vary greatly although there is strong evidence presented that these often meet the needs of schools rather than those of the parents.

The following chapter examines the development of the policy context in which this research is situated.

## Chapter 3: Policy Context

Within this Chapter, I intend to discuss the chronological development of parental involvement in education from the 1960s to the present day, looking at how perceptions and expectations of the home-school relationship have changed over this time. I will then provide a reflexive account of my own experience of involvement in the policy making process at local authority level, considering the rhetoric of parental involvement at that time and how it played out in practical terms.

Before moving on to discuss the political development of home school partnerships in the UK, it is useful first to consider what is meant by the term ‘policy’. Ball (2006) provides a definition of policy, derived from a Foucauldian perspective, which states that policies are constituted within wider discourses that ‘are about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where, and with what authority’ (ibid., p.48). Thus, it is important to be conscious of the way in which power is enacted through the construction of related policies ‘that produce “truth” and “knowledge” through discourses’ (ibid.) when considering any political context. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) refer to the normalising effects of policy and provide a somewhat more pragmatic definition arguing that:

policies are designed to steer actions and behaviour to guide institutions and professionals in a certain direction... above all policies are designed to ensure consistency in the application of authorised norms and values across various groups and communities: they are designed to build consent, and may also have an educative purpose. (ibid., p.8)

Taylor et al (1997) recognise policy as being more than the written text of the policy document itself and provide a definition which refers to the ongoing nature of policy development:

...policy is much more than a specific policy document or text. Rather policy is both process and product, in such a conceptualisation, policy involves the production of the text, the text itself, ongoing modifications to the text and processes of implementation into practice. (ibid., p.24-25)

Policies can be written in a number of different ways for a variety of purposes. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) explain that they can be symbolic, arising as a direct response to political pressure; they can be material with a strong focus on implementation; incremental, in that they are built on previous policies; and rational, being extremely prescriptive and practical (ibid., p.9). The texts examined in this chapter consist of all of these different types of policy and my interpretations of them take cognisance of the above definitions of the term 'policy'. However, for the purpose of exploring the policy context within which this research was situated, I define 'policy' as being the adoption of specific courses of action at Government, local authority or school level. This includes particular strategies and guidelines which, although not officially entitled 'policy,' were nonetheless expected to be complied with and implemented in professional practice.

Throughout this section the discussion of political context is centred primarily on Scottish policy with reference being made to English and Welsh policy implementation where significant differences or similarities were identified in relation to the advocacy of specific parental involvement approaches.

## **Performativity**

Performativity has become a key component of recent educational policy (Ball 2003, Donaldson 2011, GTCS 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). Ball (2003) defines performativity as ‘ a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change’ (p.216). He asserts that this in part serves to bring the public sector in line with the ‘methods, culture and ethical systems of the private sector’ (Ball, 2003, p.216) through the production of monitoring systems and the generation of information which places teachers at the centre of the bureaucratic gaze. As responsibility is placed on practitioners to align their practice with specific targets and indicators used as a measure professional competence through for example, the Suite of Professional Standards (GTCS, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c), performativity can be seen to govern their actions ‘in an “advanced, liberal” way’ (ibid., p.215). Ball argues that it is important to see beyond the ‘objective façade’ (ibid., p.217) of performativity to recognise the subjectivities on which it impacts. The performativity agenda can result in underlying tensions as teachers are faced with a potential shift in, or at the very least questioning of, their values and beliefs. This may lead to changes in self-perception, professional identity and relations with pupils, parents and colleagues. Exactly how teachers respond to this and the extent to which performativity regulates their actions will vary between individuals and settings.

## **Parental Involvement**

While policy on parent-teacher communication is often limited to the level of individual school procedures, the wider field of parental involvement provides a rich and diverse ground of legislation, guidelines and policy from which the impact upon professional

practice can be carefully considered. Since the Plowden Report (1967) parental involvement has formed an integral part of the rhetoric, if not the practice, of educational professionals throughout the country. Changes to policy and consequent approaches to parental involvement over the years can be tracked across a number of directives and initiatives at both a national and local level. This has produced a gradual shift in the relative positioning of parents and teachers within educational policy which can be seen to have gathered pace considerably in recent years. This change can be seen as a move away from the parental role of governance within the school system towards an expectation of partnership in progressing children's learning. The bearing of legislation on parent-teacher relations and the resulting impact of such policy on professional practice is relevant to any study of parent-teacher interaction as it feeds into the development of identity, role perception and power relations within these encounters. Consideration of some of the common features of policy in this area, followed by a more in depth examination of the impact of specific policies on key areas of professional practice and the implications of these for parent-teacher relations, provides insight into the contestations of power and authority inherent in such policy development.

### **Language**

A common feature of education policy centred on parental involvement is the use of terms such as 'partnership' and 'empowerment'. It is often the case that these blanket terms are presented in the text without any clear definition being provided of what is intended by their use. Instead, the reader is left to draw upon his own values, experiences and assumptions to ascertain their meaning. However, in practical terms this can result in vastly different interpretations of the same terminology. Thus, while at

face value a common language may be shared, in reality a common meaning is not. The use of such terms could be viewed as innocuous oversight or, alternatively, seen as a deliberate device used to obtain the widest possible support and acceptance of a policy from those professionals charged with its implementation. Vincent (1996, p.73) suggests that their use is often intended to 'edit tension and conflict out of the relationship' that exists between parents and education professionals. In this way, such words can be seen to play a powerful role in constructing what is regarded as the 'norm' for home-school relations.

The use of the term 'partnership' implies that one party should not simply be regarded as an agent of the other's will and alludes to mutual responsibilities which may be put at risk through any conflict. However, while partnership denotes obligations, formal powers and interaction, it cannot automatically be assumed to be synonymous with 'equality'. This can be illustrated by considering business partnerships, where the distribution of power and influence is not always equal. However, the use of the term 'partnership' in policy surrounding home-school relations can be seen to emphasise the importance of developing greater equality in the partnerships between home and school. MacBeth (1993) argues that if education is seen to equate with schooling then it is improbable that parents could be equal partners with teachers as they are unlikely to have the same skills, knowledge and expertise. If schooling is seen as only part of education then he asserts that teachers are likely to be the 'junior' partners as a relatively small proportion of children's education takes place at school. However, the latter view does not reflect how things are usually seen. Indeed, Leichter (1985) argues that local and national education policy should take into greater consideration the rich and diverse processes by which education within families takes place. As will be

discussed later, greater cognisance has been taken of this in more recent policy developments.

While the term ‘partnership’ is still often used in a general way with no clear definition being provided as to what it actually means, emphasis is certainly placed on increasing contributions from home. In the *Guidance on the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act (2006)* it states that:

Schools can benefit from developing positive partnerships with parents by involving them in all decisions affecting their children's education and learning. A relationship of mutual trust and respect can enable effective communication that supports both parents and teachers... Successful parent partnership is often due to informal face to face contact and this should be encouraged. (Scottish Executive, 2006, p. 28)

It also goes on to say that:

The Act’s intention is that there should be a strong working partnership between schools and parents. It reinforces parents’ voices in the standards and quality of education provided by the school. (Scottish Executive, 2006, p.45)

However, ‘partnership’ in this context is still very much presented as a school based process focusing on increasing parental involvement in the school system rather than placing greater value on family learning.

Inclusion of the term ‘empowerment’ in policy implies a fairness and equality which at face value it would seem reasonable and desirable to accept. In *The Early Years Framework* a focus on engagement and empowerment of children, families and communities (Scottish Government 2008, p.22) is presented as a key element of transformational change in maximising positive outcomes for children in Scotland. In

this context ‘empowerment’ is very much associated with fairness and equality and is talked about as something which has measurable impact. Adoption of the concept of empowerment in policy discourse rests on the assumption that power is a ‘quantifiable property’ (Vincent, 1996, p7). It implies that power is something that can be ‘given’ to a disadvantaged group and which is simultaneously relinquished by those formerly in possession of it. However, this is an over-simplistic view of home-school relations which in reality are complex and varied. The autonomy and power experienced by each party within the home-school relationship is very much dependant on the dynamics actively constructed within the specific context of engagement. As Foucault (1980, p.98) argues, power operates at many levels within society. It is used and experienced by individuals in a multiplicity of situations at different points and in different relationships, therefore they ‘are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power... Individuals are the vehicles of power not its points of application’. Power is actively disseminated at a macro level through policy discourse which then spreads through the rhetoric of home-school communication down to the micro level enactment of strategies and practice between individuals.

### **From Parents to Consumers**

Over the past 30 years policy initiatives have been introduced in the United Kingdom which have readjusted the relationship between professionals and parents by transferring the power from ‘producers’ to ‘consumers’ and by changing the nature of accountability. The *Education (Scotland) Act 1980*, *Education (Scotland) Act 1981*, the *Education (No2) Act 1986* and more significantly the *Education Reform Act 1988* all refer to the relationship between home and school and have had profound implications

for home-school relations and the public perception of teacher professionalism. Parental rights of access to information were gradually increased and an element of 'choice' was provided with the introduction of the right of parents to choose the school they would like their child to attend.

In the early 1980s established professional interests became a target of the Conservative Government. It was asserted that education should be reformed to recognise the wishes of parents as consumers. Accordingly, the *1980 Education Act* and the *1981 Education (Scotland) Act* contributed to a change in parent-teacher relationships through the provision of parental choice. A move was witnessed from an authority wide approach to school admissions and towards a parent-centred approach in which parents' concerns in relation to what was best for their child were given priority over those of the education authority. Section 28 of the Act indicated that in general, 'children should be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents'. Market-like relationships between parents and schools were established and replaced 'bureaucratic and political forms of accountability' (Adler, 1993, p.47). Under this legislation parents were given the statutory right to request a specific school and the conditions under which the local authority could refuse this request were limited. As school budgets were very much determined by the pupil roll, it was intended that the introduction of parental choice would contribute to a rise in standards as schools would in effect be placed in competition against each other in the market place in order to secure 'clients'. However, this notion of competition seems to be set against the concept of 'partnership' provided in the accompanying political discourse of that era.

Up until this point teachers' claim to professionalism had largely been based on their perceived autonomy and status and was underpinned by the extent to which the

profession had in previous times been held in public esteem. With the introduction of such policy changes as those outlined above, the traditional model of professionalism was seen to encounter:

a serious sociological attack upon its public service ethic and an equally serious epistemological attack upon its assumption of specialist knowledge and expertise. (Nixon et al, 1997, p.12)

Within Nixon et al's (1997) description of a learning profession, teachers may be seen as having a professional duty to stand in opposition to policies that are aimed at increasing such competition. This relates strongly to the view within this model of professionalism that the recognition of difference is important.

### **School Boards**

The *Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973* made provision for school councils which had parental representation. School councils had no financial power and their functions were subject to the discretion of individual education authorities. As such, their roles were usually broad and did not tend to involve decision making or involvement in managerial issues. Ultimately, they only succeeded in achieving a small degree of parental involvement. In response to this, the Government aimed to develop a framework that would provide parents with an established forum for expression of their interests and concerns (Pickard and Dobie, 2003). Thus the establishment of School Boards was introduced as a body which would connect strongly with the life of the school and have a central role in its management.

The *1988 School Boards (Scotland) Act* provided for every local authority school in Scotland to establish a School Board. Their role as a prime channel of parental

influence is reflected in the requirement that the majority of board members were parents. Government accounts of the purposes of School Boards set out that they should serve three main functions: the first of these was to promote greater parental involvement in school affairs; the second was to strengthen school links within the local community and the third intended function was to progressively free education authorities from the business of routine school administration (Munn, 1993). However, in reality the formal powers bestowed upon School Boards were very limited. While the power was given to potentially exert influence by asking questions of the headteacher and the local authority, no real managerial power was provided in fundamental areas of school life such as the curriculum, homework, discipline or admissions policy. The function of such policy is perhaps best understood when contextualised within the wider Conservative Government aim of realigning the balance between producer and consumer rights in order to improve public services. Thus, School Boards can be regarded as an attempt to increase consumer influence on education against the autonomy of the producers namely, the schools or local authorities, although the sphere of influence was limited.

A School Board's powers to ask the education authority for information on almost any educational matter, and to receive an annual report from the headteacher, can be seen as a shift towards explicit recognition of the legitimacy of consumers' interests through the increased accountability of education producers. However, greater consideration of the ways in which education professionals and parents engaged within the School Board framework highlights a different purpose of such involvement. Munn (1997) asserts that while the power of School Boards was only in respect of accountability, the Government's suggestion that they should request reports about the school curriculum and levels of attainment implied that School Boards were to perform a monitoring

function for the Government. That is, the Government's interests would be served through boards actively ensuring that schools were kept 'up to the mark'. In this way consumer interest could be seen as very much shaped by the producer's own agenda. Integral to this was the assumption that parents as consumers would share the Government's interest in improving school quality and accordingly be in agreement with the policy adopted by them to achieve this. However, attempts by the Government to secure support for its policies were not as successful as had been anticipated. Instead, the parent-professional relationship was strengthened as boards formed an alliance with schools in order to challenge education policy. Data collected from pilot School Boards (Munn and Holroyd, 1989) showed that the majority of board members were found to be strongly supportive of their schools. While School Board legislation provided boards with the opportunity to increase their power when, and if, they felt ready to do so, it appeared on the whole that such bodies had been reluctant to challenge professional control. It has in fact been suggested that in many cases School Board members were 'socialised into loyalty to the board rather than committed to a philosophy of representing parental interests' (MacBeth, 1993, p.35)

What the establishment of School Boards succeeded in providing was a role of greater importance for parents in the policy-making process in education. Board members were consulted on policy development and were able to exert influence through direct involvement in the policy making process itself (Munn, 1993). As a result, School Boards were seen by teachers' unions, local authorities and central government as a vehicle for the legitimisation of policy.

## **Accountability to Parents**

At the same time as this legislation was being introduced, the *1988 Education Reform Act* came into being. This provided extensive powers to governing bodies in England and Wales, however, perhaps the most striking aspect of the Act was that it established for the first time a prescribed national curriculum for all state schools from the age of 5 upwards. Thus, the autonomy of teachers was greatly diminished and the power of parents increased. Lawn (1990) argues that from this point, the emphasis on performance and productivity in the market-place led to the ‘redesignation’ of the idea of teacher as professional (ibid., p.108). Parents’ rights and the emphasis on efficient service combined with a regulated curriculum and a decentralised external school market had begun to redefine professionalism as ‘a form of competent labour, flexible and multi-skilled...’ (ibid., p.112).

The *Standards in Scotland’s Schools Act 2000* further strengthened schools’ accountability to parents with the requirement that schools produce an approved development plan and consult annually with parents on progress. However, at the same time the role of parents as supporters of the school was firmly emphasised through the stipulation in section 26 that they should ‘support the endeavours of those managing the school to secure improvement in the quality of education which the school provides’. Here the difference between parental rights and power is clearly illustrated. While policy provides parents with the right to access information such as the school prospectus or development plan, this does not equate with the power to contribute to its content.

The extent to which individual parents were able to exercise the rights contained in the legislation outlined above was very much dependant on knowledge of how to navigate

the education system. Whitty (2002) argues that the transference of key aspects of the decision-making process from the collective to individual realm undermines the potential to defend the interests of those who are most disadvantaged and instead may serve to increase such a disadvantage. As Giroux and McLaren (1992) state:

competition...getting access to information, dealing with bureaucracies...are not simply resources every family possesses in equal amounts (p.87)

### **Parents as Participants**

In August 2004, the Minister for Education and Young People, Peter Peacock, announced his intention to further promote and improve parental involvement in the education process. A key element of this strategy was the launch of *Making the Difference*, a series of support packages aimed at encouraging parents to play a more active role in their children's education. A total of seven leaflets were published entitled *Homework*, *Parents' Evenings*, *Starting a New School Year*, *Healthy Choices*, *Sharing Information*, *School Holidays*, and *Out of School Learning*. These were issued to parents through schools and were also available to download online. While the principle of providing parents with information intended to increase their confidence and skill in participating more fully within the education process may have seemed a move in the right direction, what was actually provided in the leaflets themselves was a rather simplistic account of the parent-teacher relationship broken down into a series of bullet points and step by step guides to involvement. The comments provided within the documents were criticised by some parents and professionals as patronising. For example, the *Parents' Evenings* step-by-step guide suggested that by attending parents evening it might be possible for parents to 'pick up some practical advice... to support [their] child' (Scottish Executive, 2005, p.5). Likewise, teachers were reminded that

parents had a crucial role to play in helping children to achieve their potential in school. What was not provided however, was any real assistance in practical terms to break down the barriers to involvement that existed on both sides. For example, some parents may have had prior negative experiences of school which would impact on their willingness to engage in school activities. Likewise if the parental role is perpetuated as being primarily one of a 'supporter' rather than an 'educator' within policy literature, then the nature and extent of parents' involvement in the life of the school is unlikely to change.

An example of a policy initiative developed at local authority level in 2005 was *Succeeding in Partnership*. This policy document was sent out to all parents in the region in response to the growing prominence of the parental involvement agenda within the Scottish Executive. Within *Succeeding in Partnership* a number of 'statements of intent' were specified for all 'partners' in the education process namely, parents, schools and pupils. In the introduction to this document parents and staff were asked to sign up to the partnership approach presented by the Director of Education. This approach could be likened to the type of home-school contracts which were the focus of attention and debate in the early 1990s (Labour Party, 1991). Within *Succeeding in Partnership* the importance of partnership is presented to the reader throughout the text in assertions such as:

It is important that each person involved in our school communities has a clear understanding of individual rights, roles and responsibilities. (Local Authority, 2004, p.3)

and

All parents... play a vital partnership role with schools in the education of the child. (Local Authority, 2004, p.5)

However, closer examination of the 'statements of intent' themselves showed that while partnership was referred to in the wider body of the text, the actual balance projected in terms of the expected rights and responsibilities of each stakeholder was not, as the term would imply, an equal one. Of all the statements contained within *Succeeding in Partnership* 42.5% were applicable to schools, 47.1% referred to the Local Authority and only 10.4% related to parental involvement. Statements relating to schools were very much focused on the provision of appropriate learning and teaching experiences. The only responsibility stipulated towards developing partnership with parents was that staff should aim to maximise attainment through leadership which:

...engages parents and formal parent bodies such as School Boards/ Parent Teacher Associations (Local Authority, 2004, p.3)

However, the way in which parents were expected to participate in the education process was very much located within the supporter/learner model of involvement (Vincent, 1996). This was illustrated in *Succeeding in Partnership* by statements asking parents to support the school by:

Fully supporting the school's discipline policy and dress code...

Helping your child...through compliance with the homework policy of the school

Attending Parents' Evenings and acting in partnership with the school to support your child's learning.

(Local Authority, 2004, P.5)

It has been argued that home-school contracts ‘veer towards “support for the professionals who know best” rather than equality between equally informed partners’ (Tomlinson, 1991, p.13). Teacher discourse has often been found to emphasise professional superiority (MacLure and Walker, 2000) and to position parents in a supporting role. Vincent (1996, p.51) argues that a fundamental flaw in the concept of home-school contracts was that they proposed a ‘partnership’ through mutual obligations between school and parent. However, the balance of power between both parties was so weighted on the school’s side that ‘it is arguable that it is the school’s duty to work towards gaining parental support without placing impositions on parents’, (ibid.). What is apparent from the above example of local authority policy is that while recent legislation had emphasised a stronger role for parents in the education process this had not yet filtered through at a more local level.

The draft *Scottish Schools Parental Involvement Bill* published in September 2005 aimed to further strengthen parental involvement in education. Up until this point much of the policy surrounding parental involvement could be seen to follow Vincent’s (1996) model of the parent as supporter/learner. Underlying the adoption of this model was the assumption that the purpose of parental involvement was to support professionals to adopt their concerns and approaches and to assimilate ‘their values and behaviour’ (ibid., p.45). However, this Bill aimed to move away from the notion of parent as supporter/learner towards a participant model of parental involvement which focused on all aspects of education on a range of levels, namely the individual child, the whole school, and local and national educational issues (Vincent, 1996). Under the proposed legislation parents would be free to choose the best system of parental representation for their school. New duties would be placed on Ministers and education authorities to promote parental involvement in education and new comprehensive

annual reports for parents on the school's performance and the headteacher's visions for school improvement would be provided. A broad new framework, within which education authorities were required to develop new appointment procedures which had to involve parents, would also be created. It was proposed that parents would be involved at every stage of the appointment procedure and not just at the final interview stage as was previously the case. Another important feature of this Bill was the proposed right of parents to raise issues of concern which they felt had not been fully addressed by the school or local education authority, to HMIe. This clearly demonstrated a greater emphasis on the importance of the parental voice being heard within the education process. However, in terms of developing 'partnership' the assertion made by McLeod (1989) that it is difficult to argue for partnership in a situation where one partner is perceived as having the legal right to hold the other accountable seems relevant. What was becoming clear through policy changes at this time was that professionals could no longer act as disseminators of unchallengeable information (Bottery, 1998).

This move away from regarding parents as supporter/learners to participants also required a shift in the existing model of professionalism if it was to be effective. Nixon et al (1996) state that in order to establish teaching as a learning profession it is necessary to involve teachers in a continuous process of learning. Within this model of professionalism relationships are informed at a number of levels namely, intra-professional, professional/student, inter-professional and professional/parent (ibid., p.16). The partnership relationship between professional and parent involves teachers working with parents as partners and recognising them in the role of complementary educator. Within such a model of professionalism, teachers might be expected to

contribute to the development of parent forums and to develop a strong parent-teacher consultation process.

### **Involvement in Children's Learning**

In 2006, the draft *Scottish Schools Parental Involvement Bill* was established as the *Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act*, with the aim of increasing the number of parents involved in their children's learning. Through this Act, the responsibility of improving parental involvement was widened beyond the realm of individual schools and was instead, required to be encompassed within strategic planning at local authority level. As such, each local authority was required to devise a specific strategy for the development of parental involvement within which plans for development were explicitly stated in relation to three key aspects - learning at home, home-school partnerships and parental representation.

In relation to learning at home, the Act formally acknowledged the vital role that parents play in their children's development and learning and aimed to encourage development of the wider learning that takes place at home and in the local community. Parents were given recognition of their role as their child's first and most enduring educators and the importance of the home learning environment was acknowledged.

Within this new law, the parent-teacher relationship was clearly defined as one of partnership, with emphasis being placed on the shared role that parents/carers and schools have in developing children's learning. While this perspective can be found in abundance within the rhetoric of previous policy documents and strategies, its inclusion in the *Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006* affirmed the importance of

partnership development and placed greater responsibility on schools and local authorities to be proactive in the implementation of appropriate approaches to progress this.

In order to encourage a larger number and wider range of parents to become involved in the life of their child's school, the Act saw the disbandment of School Boards. Instead every parent automatically became a member of their school's Parent Forum and could increase their involvement by opting to join the Parent Council. This change was progressed in an attempt to make involvement in the life of the school seem more informal and welcoming to parents than it had previously been, with the aim of increasing parent representation in the education process.

As a member of the Parent Forum, parents were now given the right to have a say in what happens in their child's school. They could expect to be provided with information on what their child was learning; receive advice and help on how best to support their child's learning; be given information about events and activities at the school; be informed about various ways in which they could become involved in the school; and have a say in selecting members of a Parent Council to work on behalf of the entire parent body of the school. Importantly, The Parent Forum itself, rather than the local authority or school, was able to decide how their Council would be set up in terms of size, membership, agenda topics etc. The Act made it clear that schools and local authorities must listen to what Parent Councils say and provide an appropriate response.

While the Act did not address parent-teacher consultations directly, it did attempt to readdress the home-school relationship and the power balance that lay within it. If this shift was able to permeate practice in schools then the possibility existed for it to affect

the parent-teacher consultation process as a whole since the nature of the relationship between parent and teacher would have altered. The way in which local authorities have interpreted the Act in relation to the development of their own parental involvement strategies can certainly be seen to reflect this change. The local authority in which I carried out this research introduced a new type of children's individual learning profile which encouraged parental contributions in relation to evidence gathered on their child's learning and progress. Through its implementation, the expectation was that teachers would take account of learning taking place in the home environment and value wider achievements presented by parents alongside their own professional assessments of children's learning. This definitely represented a major shift in thinking and approach. The way in which these documents were used in the parent-teacher consultation process is discussed further in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

In the following section I discuss my own experience of developing a policy for parental involvement at local authority level, in response to Government legislation.

### **Experiencing the Development of Policy Development at Local Authority Level**

Amidst the political backdrop of the *Parental Involvement Bill* in 2005, I was given the opportunity to have direct involvement in the policy-making process at local authority level. However, my experience of this process did not provide any indication of a move in the direction towards a more equal partnership based on an understanding of mutual expertise and experience as was the suggested model of partnership at that time. Instead, what I found was that the parents and teachers involved in the process appeared to operate from within relatively entrenched positions.

I was seconded to the role of Parent Support Development Officer as part of a local authority strategy developed to address one of the National Priorities in education by raising attainment in literacy and numeracy through increased parental involvement. This was a somewhat unique position as other local authorities used funding provided for this purpose of increasing parental involvement in other ways such as employing home-link teachers or providing schools with additional funding to run specific home-school programmes.

In this role, I was asked to lead two working groups in order to develop parent support policies for schools in the local authority encompassing pre-school and primary education. Involvement in this project provided me with a valuable insight into the power struggles and disputes over responsibility that existed between schools, local authorities and parents. While the participants of each group agreed that the aim and purpose of the policy should be to provide schools with advice and guidance on effective strategies to support parents and their children throughout the education process, views on the methods by which this should be achieved differed greatly.

The first of these working groups was established to write a policy specifically relating to the pre-school and primary sectors. The remit provided was that the policy should establish a minimum level of parent support to be offered in all establishments within these sectors. I was instructed that a representative sample of headteachers (representative in terms of size and type of school) should be invited to be members of the group. In addition to headteachers, an education officer and a union representative were invited to attend. Being newly appointed to the position of Parent Support Development Officer with the local authority, it seemed strange that while regard for teachers professionalism was ensured by the presence of a union representative, no

parents were invited to join the group. However, on tentatively raising this issue I was firmly reminded that while this policy was concerned with supporting parents in the education process it was intended for use in *schools*. This statement provided an early indication of a ‘one-way’ process in which the prevalent view held was that teachers as ‘education experts’ were best placed to inform policy on parent support.

The development of this policy ran relatively smoothly and there was little disagreement about the content other than the firm assertion from the headteachers that it should not be prescriptive but should instead allow schools’ existing individual practices to be continued. Accordingly, ‘blanket’ terminology such as that previously discussed above, was frequently used in the text and where possible, comments which could be interpreted as ‘directive’ were carefully phrased in such a way as to be left open to interpretation. Throughout this process, the education officer very much assumed the role of an overseer, ensuring that suggestions made would comply with national directives and were likely to meet with local Education Committee approval in terms of their relationship to Council Values, and to existing Education Service statements contained within the Local Improvement Plan and Standards and Quality Report.

My role in this process felt extremely uncomfortable as I felt pulled in four different directions. As a parent I had experienced first hand the type of support schools offered parents; as a teacher I was aware of the constraints and pressures placed upon schools; in my role as Parent Support Development Officer I felt a commitment to developing parental support in a way that would widen parental participation in the education process; and at the same time was obliged to work towards the vision of the local authority. The nature of this conflict is summed up by Vincent (1996, p.7):

Even when educational professionals are placed in apparent positions of advocates, speaking on behalf of, and in support of, parents, their actions are constrained by the norms and values of the professional roles and environments in which they work.

In the end, my role within the policy writing process at this time was very much confined to that of an administrator whose responsibility it was to ensure that Education Committee approval would be achieved through the wording, presentation and political relevance of the policy text.

A year later, I was instructed to develop a policy for parent support within secondary schools. Again I reasserted the view that it was desirable to have parental representation on the working group. At this time, Peter Peacock, the Minister for Education had launched his *Making the Difference* series and parental involvement in the education process was once more set high on the political agenda. On this occasion the suggestion of parental involvement in the policy development was met with approval. This however, did come with the suggestion that the parent asked to attend should be the Chair of a School Board as it was felt that someone in this role would be familiar with education processes. In addition to this, one school decided to send an administrative assistant rather than a member of teaching staff. The reason given for this was that while the school wished to be involved in the development of the policy, senior members of the school management team were at that time overloaded with other 'work commitments'.

The dynamic of this group was entirely different to that of the first. People quickly positioned themselves as experts within their own 'field' and an underlying tension and guardedness about each other's positions became apparent. What quickly ensued was a war of words with the inclusion of specific syntax being fiercely debated in terms of

each party's responsibility to 'deliver the goods'. The implications of using such terms as 'should' instead of 'will' became the focus of several hours of discussion and clearly illustrated the reluctance of each side to commit to what they saw as any additional responsibility in relation to promoting parental involvement. Regardless of what was agreed to be good practice or an effective strategy, each party was reluctant to relinquish any 'power' through the acceptance of responsibility for aspects of the policy implementation unless they could be seen to 'win' this back in another area. This is illustrated with the following example. The parent representative on the group wanted the sentence 'information *should* be issued to parents/carers who are unable to attend meetings' to be changed to 'provision *must* be made to ensure that information is issued to parents/carers who are unable to attend meetings'. In doing so, he felt that this wording spelled out in clearer terms the more proactive role that schools should adopt in communicating with parents. After much deliberation this change was finally agreed to by school representatives on the condition that the statement, 'A wide range of sources produced by the school, providing information or sharing achievements, should be *provided* for parents/carers to read' was changed to 'A wide range of documents produced by the school, providing information or sharing achievements, should be *available* for parents/carers to read'. In this way, a value judgement on the responsibility that parents should assume in the process of information sharing was made. The feeling among the headteachers was that parents should not be 'spoon fed' and that their key responsibility as professionals is to the development of learning and teaching. The parent representative, on the other hand, felt that not every parent possesses the ability or confidence to actively seek information and that schools should accept responsibility for dissemination of information.

It is important to recognise that in addition to affecting policy production, contexts often impact on policy aims in various ways and so can have a very significant impact on policy implementation (Taylor et al, 1997). Such struggles reflect the underlying tension that existed among a group of people who had come together to achieve a shared objective. While the overall objective, to develop a policy, was shared, the shared meanings, values, vision and a mutual respect for each other's professional and social position that is implicit in the term 'partnership' were often not apparent.

In both instances the professionals very much positioned themselves as 'experts' in the education process with parental involvement being seen as a means to an end namely, to raise attainment through compliance with school procedures. The parent representative, however, felt that parental involvement should be concerned with more open and accountable procedures and the onus on establishing communication should be placed on schools rather than parents. Thus issues of accountability and professional practice were hotly contested within this forum.

To conclude, while legislation and policy establish a minimum level of parental involvement in the education process, the value of this may be limited in the absence of any real change to the professional attitude of those most closely involved in its day to day implementation. The involvement of parents in their children's education is a complex and variable process which cannot be comprehensively addressed through the use of blanket terms such as 'partnership' and 'empowerment' which are so prevalent in the discourse of parental involvement.

Parents and teachers are now more readily recognised among policy makers as having different yet complementary areas of expertise. However, it still remains to be seen whether the new structure of parental representation in schools will actually lead to an

increase in, and attitudinal change towards, parental involvement and if so how powerful a force it is likely to be. What is clear is that parental involvement is not something which can be left to individual teachers or parents to develop on their own but instead requires careful planning, monitoring and direction. Policy and legislation undoubtedly play a key role in this development.

Nixon et al (1997), in discussing the changing nature of professionalism, offer an alternative paradigm within which a change in approach to parental involvement is more likely to be facilitated. This would see a move away from a professionalism which has as its focus the cultural capital of expert knowledge towards professionalism involving continuous learning (ibid., p.12). This can be seen to relate to the policy developments outlined above since professionalism is defined as focusing on the quality of practice in contexts that 'require radically altered relations of power and control' (ibid.).

While an analysis of the policy context within which my research interest lies has been provided in this section, it is important to acknowledge that my relative professional position will undoubtedly have influenced my interpretation of its effectiveness. As Henry (1993) states, policy analysis is a value laden activity which explicitly or implicitly makes judgements as to whether and in what ways policies help to make things better. However, I hope that I have presented a broad and balanced view of the impact of policy centred around parental involvement on professional practice.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

In this chapter I discuss the methodological approach adopted in my research and explain the journey I took in selecting and adapting its use throughout the analysis phase. I begin by discussing decisions taken about the adoption of a particular theoretical framework and discuss the conceptual underpinnings which drew me to its use. I then describe the specific methods employed during data collection and analysis including sampling procedures, consultation transcription, coding and approaches to interpretation. Finally, I present a reflexive account of my position within the research and the implications of this for the research process. Although these different methodological elements are presented separately in sequential order within this chapter, in reality the three processes developed in a synchronic and iterative way.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I was initially drawn to conversation analysis as a method which would allow the examination of talk to take place through a fine grained, methodical analysis, highlighting the ways in which participants jointly construct discourse through production and reaction. I felt that adoption of this approach could provide a valuable insight into the way in which participants oriented themselves to the systematic structure of the talk within each consultation. The idea of using such a well established, ‘formalised’ method, which could be worked through systematically, was appealing. I felt comfortable with the idea of working through the data, coding and categorising the consultation transcripts in a somewhat ‘technical’ way. This methodical approach had a ‘concrete’ feel to it and would provide a structure which I felt would verify that I was

on the right track. While conversation analysis is traditionally associated with episodes of naturally occurring talk, it has also been widely applied to the analysis of 'institutional talk' such as doctor-patient consultations or classroom interaction between students and teachers (Tannen and Wallat, 1987; Heath, 1992; Johnson, 2006). This was immediately appealing as I saw an obvious link between the structure of the parent-teacher consultations I wanted to analyse and other analyses of institutional talk I had encountered. In addition, I was able to envisage how such an analysis could illuminate the way in which one participant's utterance could shape and constrain a subsequent contribution. However, the more I began to consider exactly what I wanted to explore in relation to the discourse constructed within parent-teacher consultations, the more I realised that this approach may not provide me with the insight I needed. I felt it was important to take account of the consultation talk not just at face value, looking at the immediate happenings, but also to situate its construction within the framework of 'school' and a wider social and political context. I believed that doing so would help to provide me with a greater understanding of what was happening within the talk, how it was enacted and the effects it had.

While focused on examining the ways in which dialogue is constructed within the immediate situation, conversation analysis gives very little attention to the 'construction of a broader reality' (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, p.6). Thus, while context is taken into account to the extent of ascertaining meaning in relation to specific circumstances, the wider discourses that constitute that context are not considered. However, as with all social phenomena, discourse does not occur in a vacuum. Instead, discourses are built up and shared through interactions between social groups and social, cultural and institutional structures in which the discourse is entrenched. Therefore, in attempting to understand the effects that discourse has, it is also necessary to comprehend the context

in which these are constituted (Sherzer, 1987; van Dijk, 1997; Phillips and Hardy, 2002):

Discourse is not produced without context and cannot be understood without taking context into consideration... Discourses are always connected to other discourses which were produced earlier, as well as those which are produced synchronically and subsequently. (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p.277)

Having experienced parent-teacher consultations both as a teacher and a parent, I had always been aware (albeit at a very superficial level) of certain ‘tensions’ and power struggles that existed within these encounters. Although my interpretation of these events had, up until this point, only taken place in a very basic way, I nevertheless believed that analysis would necessitate a more complex approach than simply examining the relationship between parent and professional. Kress (1995, p.122) asserts that:

Texts are the sites of the emergence of complexes of social meanings, produced in the particular history of the situation of production, that record in partial ways the histories of both the participants in the production of the text and of the institutions that are “invoked” or brought into play, indeed a partial history of the language and the social system, a partiality due to the structurings of relations of power of the participants.

I recognised that examination of the relations of power at play within the consultation discourse would be integral part of any analysis I undertook of the consultation data.

Foucault regards the production of knowledge as being intertwined with questions of power and as such, a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis focuses on ‘the mutual relations between systems of truth and modalities of power’ (Davidson, 1986, p.224). From such a perspective it is the actual discourse, not the subjects who produce it, that is believed to constitute knowledge (Wetherell et al, 2001). Within this view power is regarded as being all encompassing; it is integral to everyday social practices and circulates through all aspects of social life. Discourse is considered to be of key

importance to the social processes we engage in daily, therefore exploration of its production is crucial to understanding the enactment of power within our social and institutional exchanges. As Fairclough (1992, p.50) states:

...the practices and techniques that Foucault places so much weight upon – interview, counselling and so forth – are to a substantial degree discursive practices. Thus analysing institutions and organisations in terms of power entails understanding and analysing their discursive practices.

The power of discourse can be identified in its ability to present certain methods of interaction or ways of conversing as ‘normal’ or ‘acceptable’ without acknowledging the wider social or historical framework which underpins their construction. For this reason, a discursive approach to analysis should not only examine what is said but also how it is said and, importantly, what effect this has. To fully understand the enactment of power at a micro level, some cognisance must also be given to the surrounding macro framework as one feeds off, and into, the other.

Fairclough (2001) identifies two main types of power in relation to discourse; power *in* discourse and power *behind* discourse. In considering the first of these, power in discourse is described as a place where ‘relations of power are actually exercised and enacted’ (p.36). This can often be observed in face-to-face interactions between participants of unequal status. In such cases, more powerful participants can be seen to restrict the contributions made by less powerful participants by various means. Power behind discourse looks at wider social and cultural practices and is concerned with the ways in which the ‘social orders of social institutions or societies, are themselves shaped and constituted by relations of power’ (ibid.). Although the enactment of power behind discourse may be less easy to identify than power in discourse, its impact on the structure of the talk is no less prevalent. Within consultation discourse, constraints may be placed on contributions in relation to certain widely accepted, yet largely ‘hidden’,

predetermined social and institutional practices. Such constraints relate to the content of the discourse, the relationships that are enacted within it and the social identities of those enacting them. As Fairclough (2001, p.61) asserts, it is through the regular enactment of such constraints that ‘long-term effects on the knowledge and beliefs, social relationships, and social identities of an institution’ become accepted as common practice. Expectations regarding structure, convention and roles within specific forms of talk are adopted into everyday practice with very little questioning of what cultural, social or institutional practices underpin these assumptions.

Although both aspects of power are undoubtedly interconnected, in that the micro structures of conversation are influenced by the macro structures of society, it was predominantly the exploration of power *in* discourse that I felt should form the main focus of this study. I believed that looking specifically at power in discourse would allow an examination of the effects of power to take place at the very site of such struggles. Adopting this position assumed that the enactment of power could be seen through the analysis of the transcript data in terms of what was achieved and the impact of power relations on the structure and content of the talk. I intended to look closely at participant contributions, how these were delivered and their immediate effect on subsequent contributions, exploring the bearing these had on the construction of the talk.

It was also important to me that exploration of the data would be carried out within a wider political context, taking account of institutional policy and its impact on practice. While acknowledgement of such a link to wider social discourses was important if interpretation of data was to be meaningful, it was not practically possible to link such extracts of talk to the multitude of wider discourses constructed prior, or subsequent, to,

the immediate context. What was possible was to carry out an in depth exploration of the extracts of consultation talk, recognising them as ‘selections’ which could provide valuable insight to the dynamics of power constituted within. As Phillips and Hardy (2002) state:

...our interest in the relation between discourse and social reality requires us to study individual texts for clues to the nature of the discourse because we can never find discourses in their entirety. We must therefore examine selections of the texts that embody and produce them.

However, the effects of power in discourse are usually not explicit and in fact are often hidden through necessity in our everyday encounters and relationships (Fairclough, 1992). As Foucault (1981, p.86) states, power ‘is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms’. I realised that this perception had implications for my research in that the most dominant enactments of power may be found in the least obvious places. These may not be immediately apparent in the transcribed dialogue but could be hidden within and behind what was said in the subtleties of how a contribution was delivered or received. In order to establish the workings of power within the consultations it would be necessary to look closely at the effects of what was said and to examine preceding elements of the dialogue as well as subsequent responses, in order to establish the effects of specific contributions on the development of the talk.

Discourse analysis as a methodology attempts to examine the ways in which socially produced ideas that we take for granted are established and maintained. Importantly, it strives to provide an understanding of how social reality is constructed through discourse rather than simply reflected by it (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). In particular, I felt that the adoption of a Foucauldian perspective, focusing specifically on power and

discourse, would provide me with the conceptual tools necessary to examine the ways in which power worked within each encounter.

Through further reading and discussions with my supervisor I began to see how Foucault's conceptualisations of power could provide me with the tools necessary to dig deeper in my analysis, moving away from simply asking '*what* was happening' to '*how* did it happen?', 'what strategies were employed in its enactment?' and 'to what effect?'

In particular, Foucault's analytics of power were particularly useful due to their focus on the micro-functioning of power relations at a local level. Several Foucauldian concepts that held specific relevance to the exploration of power within parent-teacher consultations were resistance, governmentality, surveillance, normalising judgement, the examination and totalisation. Below I shall explore each concept in turn explaining why it was of particular interest to me in relation to my research. I will discuss how I used these concepts during data analysis and my findings from this process in the following chapters.

### **Foucault's Concepts at Work on Parent-Teacher Consultations**

Foucault sees power as being everywhere, reaching into the '*...very grain of individuals*' synaptic regime of power, a regime of its exercise *within* the social body rather than *from above* it...' (Foucault, 1980, p.39). It is viewed as circulating through society, in a 'net-like organisation' (ibid., p.98) operating within every aspect of social life. As such, everyone is involved in its production and circulation to some extent

(Wetherell, 2001, p.77). Power should not just be thought of as an oppressive force but should also be recognised as something which can be productive:

[Power] doesn't only weigh on us a force that says no, but...it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be thought of as a productive network which runs through the whole social body. (Foucault, 1980, p.119)

Within discourse, power is seen to be enacted and exercised through linguistic processes and internal rules of engagement (Fairclough, 2001). The exercise of such power is defined by Foucault (1982, p.341) as 'a mode of action upon the action of others'. Institutional conversations in particular are governed by a set of specific rules and linguistic procedures which, to a large degree, determine what is expected, appropriate, relevant and possible within that particular framework. These processes within the talk work together and are built up through the joint construction of the discourse. In this way, the talk occurring within parent-teacher consultations can be viewed as a vehicle through which the enactment of power works to govern participants and affect their subsequent actions. Exploration of this was important to me as parents and teachers had both reported that consultation discourse had a different 'feel' to it in comparison to less formal parent-teacher interaction. I wanted to investigate the joint construction of the discourse to examine what was happening in terms of constraint within the talk and to look at how one participant's actions could affect those of others.

Foucault (1977a) claimed that 'disciplinary power' became apparent through the development of modern institutions such as prisons, hospitals and schools and spread through society in such a way that it now encompasses our everyday practices. Disciplinary power moved analyses of power from 'macro' structures and ideologies to the 'micro' interactions between people at a local level (Foucault 1977a, p.89). This type of power is particularly concerned with:

how to keep someone under surveillance, how to control his conduct, his behaviour, his aptitudes, how to improve his performance, multiply his capacities, how to put him where he is most useful. (Foucault, 1981, p.192)

Foucault claimed that this type of disciplinary power is particularly potent due to its individualising effects within local sites of production:

...as power becomes more anonymous and more functional, those on whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualised... In a system of discipline, the child is more individualised than the adult, the patient more than the healthy man... when one wishes to individualise the healthy, normal and law-abiding adult, it is always by asking him how much of the child he has in him. (Foucault, 1977a, p.193)

Foucault sees power as being both oppressive and enabling; although it can be constraining, there is always the possibility of resistance. He claims that resistance is itself produced by power:

Where there is power there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (Foucault, 1978, p.95).

He goes on to explain that:

Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart. (Foucault 1978, p.100)

Professionals such as doctors, lawyers or teachers often command our attention and respect through being viewed as holding 'some kind of exclusive expertise' (Shumway, 1989, p.161) and in this way can be seen to hold power over us.

In the same way that power is distributed across a network rather than being located at a specific point, resistance is spread out, existing wherever power operates (Shumway, 1989). Shumway asserts that it is only possible to resist such disciplinary power being exercised over us if we 'recognise that it is power and not truth that is spoken in each case' (ibid., p.162). When considering the power struggles existing within parent-

teacher consultations, I was interested in examining the ways in which participants displayed resistance in the construction of talk and how this was tied up with identity.

A further Foucauldian concept that appeared relevant to my analysis of the enactment of power within the parent-teacher consultations, was governmentality. This is concerned with the practices and techniques of power which guide and control people's behaviour both in regulatory and self-regulatory ways. Governmentality is defined by Keogh (1996) as a form of power 'exerted on and through the social populace by the ensemble formed by institutions as agencies of social regulation and control' (ibid., p.120). Although such power can be seen to pervade institutional discourses it is nonetheless unstable and open to change as it is enacted and constructed through negotiation. Through the analysis of micro sites of power such as the parent-teacher consultation, the practice of governmentality is seen to take place and the ways in which participants comply or resist can be examined. Agger (1991), referring to school based interactions, states that:

...it is not enough to analyse power relationships between teachers and students, mediated by the state apparatus. In addition, textuality itself must be interrogated for the ways in which texts become potent language games of their own in which power is encoded and through which it is transacted.

If power is something which is actively constructed through discourse and therefore, open to change, then analysis of how parents and teachers position, and indeed reposition, themselves within the consultation talk and the strategies employed by each to achieve this can provide a legitimate insight into the enactment of such power.

Surveillance is a key theme in Foucault's work whereby individuals are constructed as both subjects and objects of power under the constant 'gaze' of others. Hierarchical observation is a type of surveillance that operates from the top down and, Foucault

claims, occasionally functions from the bottom up or laterally (Foucault, 1977a). Thus, while subjects are scrutinised, so too are supervisors placed under constant supervision.

It is this pyramidal structure that makes disciplinary power so pervasive:

It has effects of power that derive from one another: supervisor perpetually supervised... it is the apparatus as a whole that produces 'power' and distributes individuals in this permanent and continuous field. (ibid., p.177).

Foucault viewed hierarchical observation as both 'indiscreet' and 'discreet' (Foucault 1977a, p.177). Its operation is overt in the sense that it is everywhere and continuous, but is also subtle in its permanence and mainly functions silently.

Through the operation of surveillance, individuals become agents of self-regulation in relation to specific institutional discourses of knowledge or 'truth' (Foucault, 1977a). Within parent-teacher consultations the way in which participants position themselves as agents of surveillance within the discourse on a micro level highlights the effects of such regulatory control. The concept of surveillance can provide a useful standpoint from which to view the ways in which parents and teachers constitute and negotiate responsibility for the child within the consultation discourse, providing an instrument through which to explore the effects of self-regulation. By examining the ways in which responsibility is claimed and distributed by each participant and how their respective expertise is 'talked up' and accepted or contested within the talk (Keogh, 1996), an insight into power at work at a local level can be gained.

Normalising judgement is a technique of power which promotes homogeneity while at the same time has an individualising effect on subjects:

The power of normalisation imposes homogeneity; but it individualises by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another' (Foucault, 1977a, p.184).

Normalising judgement occurs when the acts of an individual are judged not for their intrinsic value, but where they sit in relation to those of others. Normalisation as a means of control is widespread in our society (Gutting, 2005). Throughout our daily lives we refer to lists defining rank order to make ‘informed’ decisions such as which is the best restaurant to eat at, which school has the best exam results, and which car offers the best performance. By defining which elements of behaviour or achievement fit within the ‘norm’ we also, by default, identify the ‘abnormal’. People’s behaviour is regulated and often self-regulated through the deployment of normalising judgement. Foucault (1977a, p.184) states that ‘a normalising gaze establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them’. People are subjectified by being categorised in relation to what is defined as the ‘norm’. Usher and Edwards (1994, p.103) state that ‘in effect they become their capacities and it is through these capacities, or the lack of them, that they become ‘objects’ of surveillance, examination and governance. The power of normalisation lies within the fact that its apparent ‘objectivity’ presents it as a ‘neutral’ process; ‘a power/knowledge discourse always points away from power towards the ‘objective’ measurement of what is there ‘naturally’ (ibid.).

The normality and identity of individuals is determined by an array of ‘experts’ in society who make such definitions in terms of a person’s deviance from the ‘norm’ (O’Farrell, 2005). In parent-teacher consultations both parent and teacher can lay claim to expertise in relation to the child; the parent knows the child on a personal level better than anyone else whereas the teacher has expertise in relation to the child’s education and his/her performance within this realm. However, as participants in a conversation position themselves in relation to a particular identity or position of expertise, they also render themselves visible to scrutiny. Therefore the position of ‘expert’ cannot be

viewed as a fixed domain and does not necessarily guarantee the participant a dominant stance within the discourse.

A particularly powerful mechanism of disciplinary power is the examination. Foucault (1977a) explained that the examination has three key elements which combine to make it so effective as a form of control. Firstly, it imposes a visibility that ‘holds subjects in a mechanism of objectification’ (ibid., p.187). This visibility ensures that power held over them is sustained. Secondly, the examination individualises and in doing so, allows for categorisation, classification and measurement to take place, leading to the calculation of distributions and averages and the establishment of ‘norms’ (ibid., p.189). The third element is concerned with the way the individual is made into a case through judgement and comparison with others to then be trained, corrected or normalised accordingly (ibid., p.191). Foucault asserts that the examination:

indicates the appearance of a new modality of power in which each individual reviews as his status his own individuality, and in which he is linked by his status to the features, the measurement, the gaps, the ‘marks’ that characterise him and make him a ‘case. (ibid., p.192).

This, is highly relevant to the talk that takes places within parent-teacher consultations as assessments of children’s learning are discussed with parents at these meetings.

A ‘micropractice’ of power which works in a different way is ‘totalisation’. This is defined by Gore (1995) as a technique which works oppositely to individualisation by giving ‘collective character, constructing whole groups’ (ibid., p.179). While individualisation separates individuals by scrutinising them against certain ‘truths’, totalisation uses ‘truths’ to produce a will to conform. Thus, teachers may use knowledge based on these ‘truths’ to decide what all children of a certain age should be able to do. Gore (1995) points out that totalisation can work positively by providing

recognition and acceptance through a sense of belonging rather than individuals feeling singled out. However, it can also have a negative effect if individual strengths or characteristics go unacknowledged.

When considering how to surface the enactment of power through analysis of the research data, I found the framework presented by Bishop and Glynn (1999) to be useful. They offered a conceptually different way of exploring power relationships within specific discourses which I believed would sit well with the examination of parent-teacher consultation discourse. Their study examined dominance prevalent within the discourses of educational institutions in New Zealand by asking what purpose the enactment of such power served in this context. Within this framework five different dimensions of power were identified which allowed the discourse to be examined in terms of who initiated the discourse, who benefited from it, who or what was represented, what authority did the text have, and to whom were participants accountable? This approach facilitated a link between micro and macro levels of power enactment, allowing the 'work done' locally within the discourse to be contextualised within wider political and social goals and agendas. This opened up possibilities for exploring the construction and effects of power on different levels. As will be discussed further in the methods section, this conceptualisation was particularly useful to me at a turning point in my analysis as it allowed me to approach the examination of the data in a new way.

## **Methods of Sampling and Data Collection**

### **Sampling**

Sampling involves much more than making practical and methodological decisions about whom to observe or interview and the best way to go about this. It also requires careful consideration of the contexts, events and social processes which would be appropriate for data collection (Miles and Huberman, 1994). As such, choices are made in relation to a conceptual framework and research questions which set boundaries and help to identify a clear focus for sampling procedures.

In selecting potential sites for data collection it was necessary to consider the types of early years settings which were available to me. While certain parameters became immediately clear in terms of people to interview, events to be recorded and the general type of setting to be sampled, other dimensions presented a number of choices which had to be systematically worked through in relation to the research focus, methodological approach and practical constraints. These issues will be further discussed in the section below.

### **Negotiating Access**

In order to explore and examine the talk contained within parent-teacher consultations within an early years context, I decided to sample a range of pre-school and primary 1 settings to allow comparisons between and within different types of provision to be made. As the research was being carried out on a part-time basis, it was necessary to ensure that any fieldwork could be fitted around my full time job and family

commitments. Therefore, the practical aspects of various data collection methods became a prime consideration. I concluded that the most time efficient way to implement the data collection phase of my research was to approach the education authority within which I worked to seek permission to access schools and nurseries within the region. However, while this was advantageous in practical terms it also presented some ethical issues with regard to being known by some of the professionals whom I had to approach.

When engaging in discussion with friends and colleagues about my research interest prior to carrying out the research, initial questions raised by them were primarily focussed around the methods of data collection that would be used and the impact of this on their practice. A typical initial response was “How are you going to collect data for that?” When I explained that I wanted to audio-record a number of parent-teacher consultations this usually elicited a further response along the lines of “But you’ll not be allowed to do that, will you?” Further discussion around this issue revealed that in general people perceived that the negotiation of access at different levels would be a major stumbling block to taking my research forward. It was felt that this would prove difficult in three main ways. The first of these was concerned with gaining access to individual schools - in other words, ‘getting past’ the headteacher. It was believed that within the climate of HMIe inspections, Care Commission inspections and local authority school reviews, many headteachers would be reluctant, defensive even, about allowing any further examination of their practice to take place that was not absolutely necessary. This being surpassed, the second hurdle would be to gain permission from the class teacher to record individual consultations. The general feedback I received from colleagues regarding this was that nobody likes to be scrutinised and the conversations that take place between parents and teachers at parents’ evenings are

private affairs which, under normal circumstances, the headteacher does not even sit in on. A third issue I foresaw was that people agreeing to participate may have felt obliged to do so because I was known to them professionally. After all, it is often easier to say 'no' to a stranger than to a friend or colleague with whom you will probably have to work again.

### **First Level Gatekeeping**

In reality gaining access to potential data collection sites involved negotiations with 'gatekeepers' at three different levels. These early discussions were crucial to the progression of the research as without the permission of the 'gatekeeper' at each of these stages, data collection could not take place. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) point out, when dealing with formal organisations initial access has to be centred on obtaining permission from key personnel without whose approval, subsequent access to the final research setting may not occur. The first person I approached regarding access to the educational establishments was the Director of Education. Initial contact was made by letter providing an explanation of the nature and purpose of the research. In response to this, I was granted general permission to approach individual schools regarding the possibility of data collection.

### **Identification of Settings**

At this point, the identification of specific data collection sites became an immediate priority in order that contact could be made with headteachers to gain permission for the research to be carried out within their individual establishments. Determining a

satisfactory sample size was also a primary consideration. As each consultation was to be transcribed it was necessary to ensure enough data were obtained in order to make analysis viable while at the same time being of a size which was manageable in terms of the time needed for subsequent transcription and analysis.

I did not attempt to engage in statistical sampling when deciding on case selection as I felt it unnecessary for participants to be representative of the wider population. I did however, consider it important that the educational establishments selected were representative of the types of pre-school provision available at local authority level, since I hoped that any insights or knowledge generated from the research could have relevance across the sector. Establishments selected for sampling therefore included nursery classes, nursery schools and early years centres. I decided that sampling six parent-teacher consultations from each category would provide a sufficiently rich sample of data while at the same time be manageable.

To provide the potential to consider findings in relation to the wider context of parental involvement I decided to focus the selection of schools on those in receipt of Parent Support Funding, or in the case of primary 1, classes without attached nursery classes, the associated schools of nurseries in receipt of funding. At the time of data collection, Parent Support Funding was allocated to various educational establishments in areas of deprivation within the local authority and was aimed at working with families whose children were entering education for the first time. For this reason, the funding was allocated to nursery provision where it had been determined that the associated primary school had a relatively high level of free school meal entitlement. Schools in receipt of this funding were expected to engage in activities which would promote parental involvement in relation to their child's learning. It was made clear to schools that they

should specifically develop measures which would encourage parents to become more involved in their children's learning, would help them to support their children more effectively and would foster positive attitudes towards education. How the funding was used was monitored by the local authority and was required to be evidenced by the school at the end of each financial year. If it was felt that the funds had not been used appropriately then the funding could be reclaimed. I believed that focusing data collection on schools in receipt of such funding would increase the likelihood of participants having been exposed to similar levels of home-school liaison prior to the consultations being carried out.

### **Second Level Gatekeeping**

When the number and type of schools to be sampled had been decided upon, the relevant headteachers were contacted. On this occasion initial contact was made by email. This was chosen as a quick method of communication which could be easily accessed, as working in the same local authority that the research was being carried out in meant I had direct access to staff email addresses. This allowed me to provide information to the headteacher in written format which could be reflected upon at an appropriate time rather than running the risk of jeopardising access by catching him/her at an inopportune moment via telephone. It was also convenient in terms of providing headteachers with a fast and direct route through which to respond or to obtain additional information. The content of the email explained the purpose of my research and requested a meeting with the headteacher to provide further details and to outline what would be required of participants. If no response was obtained from this method of communication, it was subsequently followed up with a telephone call.

Eight educational establishments were contacted in the first instance. Of these, six responded to say they would like to meet for further discussion, one declined and one did not respond at all either to the email or subsequent phone call. The headteacher from the school that declined replied initially to say that she would be willing 'in principle' to take part in the research. However, she did not feel it would be appropriate for me to speak directly to her staff and would instead speak to the relevant people and get back to me with their response. She also anticipated at this stage that it was likely that the staff would be unwilling to participate. The subsequent response obtained was that she considered the Primary 1 teacher to be too inexperienced and therefore access could not be granted at this time.

The next step was to meet on a one-to-one basis with the headteachers who had indicated an interest in participating in the research. At this meeting further information was provided regarding what would be required and the data collection methods which would be employed. At each of these meetings the headteacher gave permission in principle for the research to be carried out within his/her establishment and agreed to speak to other staff members who would have direct involvement in the research to determine if they would be willing to meet to discuss my proposals further.

### **Third Level Gatekeeping**

The third and final level of access negotiation directly concerned class teachers. Meetings were set up with individual class teachers and nursery nurses to discuss the nature of the research and the practical and ethical implications of this. At this meeting information leaflets with a written summary of the information discussed at the meeting as well as contact details were provided so that any questions that might occur to them

at a later date could be further discussed. Teachers were given the opportunity to view and use the recording equipment at this time and the consent forms which were to be used were shared and discussed. All staff members who were spoken to agreed to participate in the research.

## **Participants**

A total of 21 parents participated in the study consisting of 18 females and 3 males. The majority of parents were white, British and working class with the exception of two families who came from a professional background. One family was Lithuanian and had recently moved to Scotland. Parents differed in terms of the length of time that they had engaged with the education process and in their own personal experiences of school. Some reported having had very positive experiences of school while for others, their time at school had not been enjoyable.

Eight staff members participated directly in the consultations all of whom were white, British and female. This group consisted of four teachers, two nursery practitioners and two head teachers. However, there were differences in terms of their length of service, type of experience, the pedagogical approaches they adopted and their position within the school structure.

## **Data Collection**

The parents' evenings in the establishments I sampled took place twice a year, in March and November. I planned to collect as much data as possible during the first round of

consultations in March with the contingency of returning in November if further data were required. When deciding on the most appropriate method of data collection several practical considerations came into play. It would be possible to either video or audio-record the meetings in order to obtain an accurate record of the talk taking place in each consultation. However, both these methods had distinct advantages and disadvantages. Although video recording would allow non-verbal communication to be matched to verbal contributions, which could provide a valuable insight and additional element to subsequent interpretation of the data, it could also have a number of undesirable effects. Firstly, many people admit to being self-conscious on camera which could affect how they behaved in the consultation. Secondly, in terms of anonymity, being recorded visually may make people reluctant to give consent as they could be easily recognised. A third and important consideration was that video recording would require an additional person to sit in on the consultations in order to operate the camera, which again could affect participants' actions. Audio-recordings on the other hand, would not provide as rich a source of data as that obtained through video-recording but it would be a less intrusive method of collection. A simple to operate audio-recorder could be used by the teacher providing a more discrete alternative to a video camera.

After much deliberation I decided to carry out data collection using an audio-recorder. Through discussion the teachers involved in the study indicated that audio-recording would be less intrusive and agreed to take responsibility for recording each consultation themselves. A small easily operated digital audio recorder was provided to each setting for this purpose. Teachers were given this a few days in advance of the consultations so they could become familiar with its use. This also gave time for a suitable area to be chosen where the recorder could be discretely placed.

The majority of staff participating in the research felt that in order for the consultation evenings to run in as 'normal' a way as possible, they would prefer that parents were approached about participating on the night of the consultations rather than in advance of the evening. Two headteachers expressed concern that if parents were given information that research was going to be carried out at the consultation meetings then they may choose not to attend at all. Instead, a preferred option was to speak to individual parents on the night where any questions or concerns could be answered face-to-face.

I decided that purposive sampling would provide the best method of obtaining an appropriate data sample while at the same time addressing the practical considerations of the school. At each consultation information in verbal and written form was provided to the parents attending before asking them if they would be willing to participate in the research. On arrival they were given an information leaflet which outlined my research and explained what would be required of them if they wished to participate. The teacher then went over this with them verbally and, if the parents were in agreement, issued the appropriate consent forms. Parents were informed, both in writing and verbally, that they could withdraw consent at anytime. My contact details were provided on the information leaflet so that I could be contacted directly if they had any questions about the process. This process of selection continued until a total of three consultations was recorded by each teacher. Further discussion on obtaining informed consent through this process is provided in the section on ethics.

## **Interviews**

19 semi-structured follow-up interviews were carried out with participants either at home or in the nursery/school according to their preference. Each interviewee was

asked a similar set of questions which were intended to elicit information on such aspects as the structure and format of meetings, the perceived function and usefulness of the consultations, and their perceptions of what they saw their role and the role of the other participants involved in the process as being. Questions were adapted as the interview progressed to take account of the information being provided in a reflexive way.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Several ethical considerations arose when planning this research particularly relating to the process of data collection described above. These included participants' informed consent, the ability to opt out of the research, anonymity, confidentiality and the perceived 'power' of the role of researcher. In order to address these issues the BERA Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004) were followed.

### **Ongoing Voluntary Informed Consent**

Before commencing the research written informed consent was sought from all participants. Consent was entirely voluntary and was obtained through various forms of verbal and written communication including information leaflets, consent forms and face to face discussions. Participants were made fully aware of the aims of the research and an explanation was provided of the process in which they would be involved, their level of participation and how information gathered would be used.

On gaining access to schools I arranged a suitable time to speak in depth with all staff who would be involved in the research. I ensured that class teachers had prior

knowledge of my reasons for coming to speak with them and did not feel put 'on the spot' when I asked for written consent for their participation. This provided an opportunity for teachers to consider their involvement in the research and to think of questions prior to our meeting. After verbally explaining the purpose and structure of the research I was able to obtain written consent from each teacher.

In order to obtain informed consent from parent participants I had initially planned to issue a letter to them prior to the parent-teacher consultations outlining the research process. I had envisaged that it would be possible to send these out from the school at the same time as the consultation appointments were issued, providing a logistical solution to reaching potential parent participants. However, one school raised concern that this could lead to some parents who perhaps would not wish to participate in the research, opting out of attending the consultations altogether. Reflecting on this point, I also wondered if such an approach would give the impression of the school or local authority being directly involved in the research rather than it being independently carried out by me for the purposes of my own study. I therefore rethought the approach I would take to gaining consent and decided to attend schools in person on the consultation dates to share information with parents face-to-face.

It was normal practice that consultation dates were set by each establishment at the beginning of each academic session. Although these occurred around the same time of year, specific dates varied considerably between establishments. Where possible I attended each venue on the day of the consultations to meet with parents in order to explain the nature and purpose of the research and to be available to answer any questions. On occasions where it was not possible to attend in person, for example if there was an overlap in dates and times between establishments, I provided a written

summary of the research aims and procedures which could be issued to parents on arrival. This took the form of a short ‘parent friendly’ leaflet which avoided jargon and professional terminology where possible. The leaflet also stated that parents could request further information or withdraw consent at anytime and my phone number was provided for this purpose. On entering the consultations, teachers verbally outlined the purpose of the research again and asked parents if they would be willing for the consultation to be audio-recorded. If they were in agreement, written consent from participants was then obtained by teachers before the consultation commenced.

The consent form issued to all participants consisted of two parts. The first section asked participants if they consented to the audio-recording and subsequent transcription of the parent-teacher consultation and the second section asked if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Seven participants chose to consent to the audio-recording of the consultation but did not consent to participate in the interview. No participant withdrew consent at anytime.

I endeavoured to ensure that the impact of the research on the normal workloads of participants was minimized. The recordings were made as part of the normal parent-teacher consultation timetables within schools and the request for teachers to participate in a follow-up interview was stressed as being entirely voluntary.

### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

Participants’ anonymity was guaranteed and the names of individuals, schools, and any other identifiable information was changed at the point of transcription to protect identities. Confidentiality required careful consideration as interview quotes and

excerpts of talk would be presented in the final research report as an integral part of the findings. Piper and Simons (2005, p.57) state:

confidentiality is a principle that allows people not only to talk in confidence, but also to refuse to allow publication of any material they think might harm them in any way.

In order to address this issue, participants were informed that they could request to view their own consultation and interview transcripts. They were also advised that the use of such data could be used in the context of the research report. Throughout the consultations and interviews participants were reminded that they could opt out of the research at any time. One teacher asked to receive a copy of the consultation transcripts from her parental consultations as she felt this would be beneficial for her own professional development.

### **Practitioner-Researcher Role**

My role as practitioner-researcher brought into question certain issues of power, particularly in relation to the teachers involved in the study. From the outset of the research it was necessary to make clear to potential participants that the research was not being carried out as part of my job but was instead entirely related to personal study for the purpose of gaining an EdD.

In line with the BERA Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004) it is necessary for researchers involved in action research to consider ‘the extent to which their own reflective research impinges on others’ (p.6). A key consideration around gaining consent was the degree to which my own professional position would impact on the decisions of teachers to participate. Although I did not work directly with the class teachers involved in the study, I was known to a number of them as a Parent Support

Officer within the Local Authority. As my job involved the development of strategies aimed at increasing parental involvement in schools, I was concerned that teachers would feel that it would reflect badly on them if they were unwilling to participate in a piece of research looking specifically at parent-teacher communication. For this reason I strived to ensure wherever possible that I made clear the research was being carried out for my own personal interests and was not in any way connected to my position within the Council. On visiting schools I made sure that I did not wear my normal ID tags and instead obtained a visitor's badge from each establishment. Again, assurances of anonymity and the opportunity for participants to opt out at any time were important. It was hoped that providing the opportunity for participants to verify transcripts and other data collected would help to redress the power balance by reinforcing their role as participants rather than subjects.

Similarly, I did not want parents to feel under any duress to consent to participate. As the research was being carried out as part of a formal parents' evening there was the risk that parents could feel they had to show willingness to participate. The independent nature of the research and the voluntary nature of participation was highlighted verbally and through the literature provided to them.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Familiarisation With the Data**

Analysis of the research data began long before transcription began. As data were collected I used the time spent travelling in my car to listen to recordings over and over again. Listening to each conversation in its entirety allowed me to not only become familiar with the content of the recorded consultations but also to hear and feel the flow

and dynamic of each conversation as discourse progressed. The wider overview obtained from listening to the recordings as a whole piece of talk, complemented and enriched the subsequent process of transcription. While transcription of the parent-teacher consultations involved deconstructing and scrutinising the recordings in a way that provided an extremely detailed yet somewhat fragmented picture, being familiar with what came before and after the specific excerpt I was working on helped to preserve the dialogue as a continuous and ‘intact’ account in my head throughout this process.

The recordings were transcribed initially using detailed annotation which showed intonation, length of pauses, hesitations, etc. However, this proved to be an extremely time consuming and indeed unnecessary process for the purpose of first level analysis. I found it difficult to maintain the flow of the conversation when reading over the transcripts as the detailed annotation became the focus of what was on the page almost obscuring my ability to see what was actually being said. For this reason transcripts were thereafter set out in a simple ‘play-script’ format. This enabled each participant’s verbal contributions to be recorded, pauses noted and instances of overlapping talk to be clearly identified while at the same time allowed the fluency of the dialogue to remain.

The following codes are used within the consultation transcripts:

<b>Code</b>	<b>Representation</b>
M	Mum
D	Dad
C	Child
T	Teacher
N	Nursery Practitioner
[	Point of interruption

## **First Stage Analysis**

My first attempt at data analysis involved working through a set of processes that, whilst systematic, eventually came to be viewed by me as unhelpful and somewhat over methodical. This realisation led to the process of analysis being developed in new directions. The journey I took through the various stages of analysis is outlined below.

Initially, analysis of the transcript data involved the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The former was used to provide a preliminary overview of discourse dynamics occurring during each parent-teacher consultation and consisted of analysis of the data in relation to such categories as frequency of contributions, distribution of talk, word count, participant initiation of topics etc. The data obtained from this analysis provided a preliminary indication of the balance of talk within each consultation which served as a useful backdrop to the formulation of initial ‘sensitising’ questions used during the following more in depth qualitative analysis process.

The subsequent qualitative analysis of data was an iterative process which began by looking broadly at the transcript data and asking a number of sensitising questions to gain a rudimentary feel for what was happening within each consultation. Such questions included ‘what is the discourse about?’, ‘how are the consultations shaped?’, ‘in what way do participants contribute to the consultation?’ This initial interaction with the data resulted in an increased awareness of, and sensitivity to, the words of the participants (Corbin and Holt, 2004) as questions were asked and comparisons made across the data.

## **Coding of Transcripts**

The above process led to the identification of initial themes (Strauss and Corbin 1998) and transcript data was coded accordingly line by line. A diagram showing the first phase of the qualitative analysis process is provided in Fig.1.

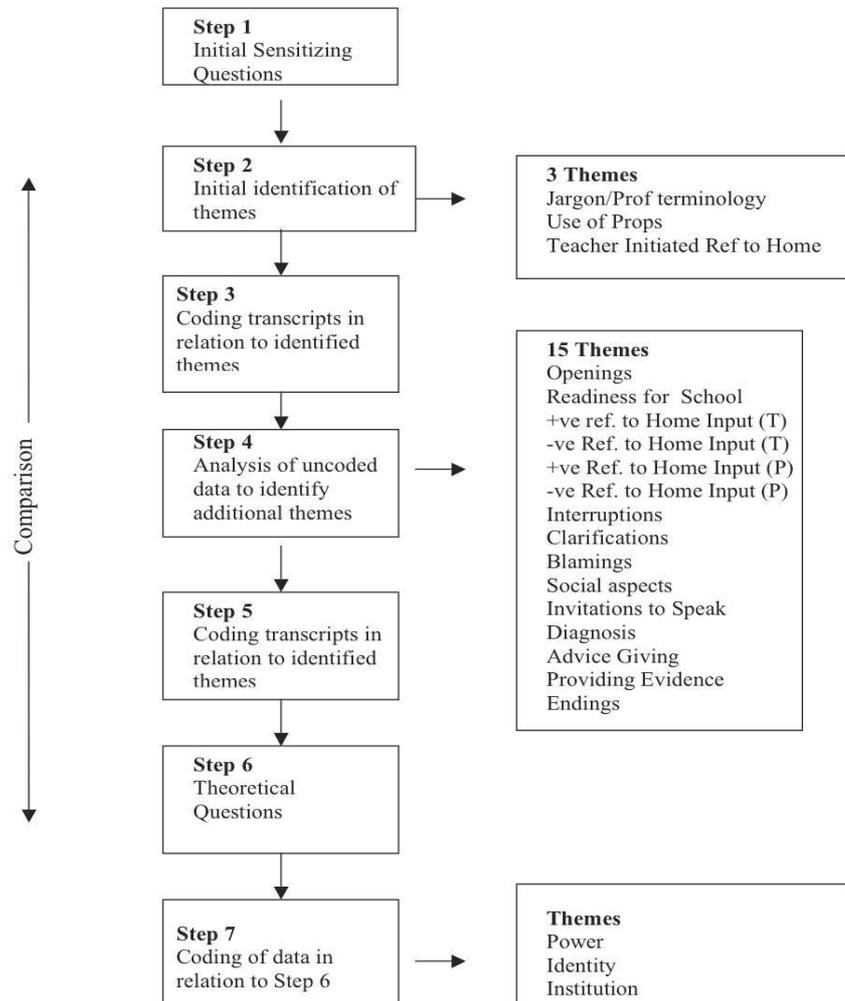
Three main concepts were immediately identified during this ‘open coding’ phase (Corbin and Holt, 2004) namely, the use of jargon and professional terminology, use of props, and teacher initiated references to home. These were used as the basis for further analysis by systematically working through the text scrutinising whether each coded item could be viewed as conceptually the same as the next or whether in fact it could be broken down further. Another crucial process at this stage was to revisit and re-examine the remaining pieces of uncoded text to identify what was happening within these excerpts of talk. This method led to the identification of 15 further themes which are detailed in Step 4 of Fig 1.

The flow chart included as Fig 1 represents the development of the early stages of data analysis. Initially I thought that representing the process of data analysis in diagrammatic form could in itself become an important and enlightening part of the analytic process. I envisaged that mapping out the iterative process between data coding and theme identification would enable me to record and reflect on the steps I had taken in the analysis up to that point, allowing me to look systematically at where I needed to progress to next. Corbin and Holt (2004) assert that if the assumption is made that theory can be constructed out of the data then it is possible that analytic tools such as diagrams or questions can actually facilitate that construction. I hoped that adopting such an approach would help me to maintain a clear focus while steering my way

through the rapidly enveloping sea of data within which I felt I was merely treading water.

In some respects the physical format of the diagram itself made it possible for me to scrutinise analytic stages requiring further development. The clear and concise visual representation meant I could more easily identify areas where themes could be further expanded or condensed, or where the application of additional questioning was desirable. For example, I could clearly see that narrowing down the total 18 coding themes was necessary if I was to focus on examining what purpose their inclusion in the discourse served. By condensing the data into a smaller number of more manageable categories by looking for commonalities within each of the previously identified themes, I hoped to establish ways in which they might fit together conceptually. However, it became apparent to me at this stage that the identified themes were very much concerned with technical elements of the talk and as such did not in themselves shed light on what was being achieved through their use. In addition to this, there were some areas of duplication between Stage 2 and Stage 4 themes. For example, in Stage 2 the use of professional jargon and terminology was identified but there were aspects of overlap between this and diagnosis giving identified in Stage 4.

Fig.1 Qualitative Data Analysis



### Narrowing Down of Themes

Although the process of narrowing down themes is shown in Fig.1 as the final stage within this phase of analysis, thoughts around possible categories and ways of grouping the data together began to emerge from the open coding stage onwards. However, these

were only possibilities at that point and the theoretical questions applied before the final stage of analysis allowed me to synthesise my initial ideas and thoughts with the themes that had been identified from the data, in order to select what I felt were the most representative core concepts from a range of possibilities.

Up until this point focusing on the identification of themes had allowed me to organise my data in a substantive way. However, I felt that the approach I had used did not allow me to examine the actual ‘work’ of the discourse and what was being accomplished through its construction. I began to feel that using the diagram to structure the process of analysis was now actually constraining the way I approached the data, leading to a somewhat rigid method of analysis. However, I carried on with the process at this stage as I believed it was necessary to condense the themes further and to ‘finish what I had started’. I therefore, continued to consolidate the 18 themes identified in steps 2 and 4 into a smaller number of *key* themes which would become the focus of a later, more fine grained, analysis.

While I strived to maintain a degree of impartiality, using the previously identified themes as a framework from which to look ‘openly’ at the data, I acknowledged that that this could not be an entirely objective process. Instead, the final decision on the selection of key themes was inevitably influenced, at least to some extent, by my own experiences, interests and underlying ideologies. I had previously participated in parent-teacher consultations as both a parent and teacher and, as a result, had developed my own views of that process from personal experience. My initial interest in the research topic stemmed from the belief that ‘partnership’ is a crucial element in supporting children’s learning and development, and that parent-teacher communication should sit comfortably within that framework. I suspected however, that with regard to parent-

teacher consultations, this might not be the case in practice. With this in mind, I approached the subsequent data analysis consciously attempting to keep these assumptions close to the surface. I asked the following questions as part of the process of revisiting the data at this time: ‘What functions do the specific elements of the discourse perform and for what purpose?’; ‘In what way is the content and structure of the consultations different to everyday parent-teacher conversation?’; ‘What factors impact on the contributions made by each participant?’; ‘What influences the nature of the discourse during its construction?’

When looking closely at each of the themes identified in step 4 and the way these were used within the consultations, it became apparent that commonalities existed among them. Each of the themes seemed broadly to relate either to the day to day ‘business’ of the school and the policies/procedures around which its practices were centred, the construction of participants’ identity within a particular context or the use of strategies to control the shape and direction of the consultation talk. By working through this process, three overarching themes were identified as encapsulating the most representative key concepts - ‘power’, ‘identity’ and ‘institution’.

While the number of themes was narrowed down from fifteen to three at this stage, the conceptual framework of each remained wide. Although abstract, the detail of each final theme was contained within its constituent parts which themselves were made up of a number of properties and dimensions (Corbin and Holt, 2004), providing a richness to the data. Consideration of this led to the development of the following research sub-questions: ‘How are identities constructed and defended within the talk?’; ‘Which specific strategies of power are used within the consultation discourse and what effect

do these have?'; 'What features of institutional discourse are present and what purpose do they serve within the encounter?'.

Subsequent analysis therefore, began to focus on the investigation of the ways in which identity and power relations between teacher, parents and pupils were produced and accomplished within the context of a routine institutional exchange and explored how this talk varied from other everyday conversations.

### **Surfacing Power**

When listening to the audio-recordings of the parent-teacher consultations one thing which struck me initially was the sense of underlying power tensions that on occasion became apparent between parent and teacher. As outlined above, subsequent analysis of the transcript data had also led to the clear identification of 'power' as a key theme. However, although I believed that issues of power were present within the consultations, when it came to unpacking this concept further, I found it difficult to unravel in the fine grained analysis. I began to wonder if in fact, the data I had was rich enough to explore power relations in any kind of meaningful way. I also found it difficult to separate the analysis of data into the three distinct themes and felt that there were particular overlaps and 'grey areas'. Often it seemed as though I was attempting to fit the data neatly within a particular concept rather than applying a concept to the data. I decided to revisit the transcripts in their entirety in the hope that adopting a fresh approach to analysis would clarify my thinking around this.

After agonising hours of reading over transcripts again and again and through subsequent discussion with a new supervisor, it became clear that it was perhaps not the

data that was the problem but rather the approach I was taking to its analysis. In order to identify and examine the existence of power and the way in which it operated within the construction of the parent-teacher relationship enacted during consultations, it was not the case that I needed to collect 'richer' examples of talk, but instead I needed to ask different questions of the data I had.

The analytic framework developed by Bishop and Glynn (1999) in their study of dominant discourses of educational institutions within New Zealand, provided a useful way of approaching a discourse based analysis of power in relation to the transcript data I had already obtained. It enabled me to approach the analysis of data from a different standpoint, highlighting issues of power I had previously missed, conceptually and practically.

Within this framework five dimensions of power are analysed namely, initiation, benefits, representation, legitimation and accountability. By applying these dimensions to the 'power' data I hoped to gain a new view on the consultation talk. I revisited the data asking questions such as 'who initiates the consultation?', 'who sets the goals?', 'who benefits from the consultation?', 'whose interests, needs and concerns are represented?', 'how is this achieved?'. This approach illuminated the data in a new way, allowing me to recognise different elements at work within the talk which had previously gone unnoticed. As I worked through the data it became more and more apparent that the excerpts of talk previously categorised under the themes of 'institution' and 'identity' were in fact also predominantly concerned with constructions of power.

This new approach allowed me to consider the use of power at a macro level in terms of political and institutional goals and the effect of these on approaches to parent-teacher

communication within schools. For example, the Scottish Schools Parental Involvement Act (2006), local authority parental involvement strategies and individual school policies relating to parental involvement could all impact on the ways in which parent-teacher consultation were planned and delivered. However, new possibilities were also opened up for a more detailed exploration of the construction of parent-teacher talk at a micro level. By examining the 'work done' locally in the conversations it was possible to explore the construction of power and knowledge and how it was challenged. The words used by each participant, the spacing and control of the flow, identification of instances of resistance, coercion and collaboration were considered in terms of who and what was being constructed in the talk and the immediate effect it had. I began to see the relevance of Foucault's conceptualisations of power to my data analysis and could envisage how the application of such concepts could help to me to gain new insight into power at play within the consultations.

### **My Position Within the Research**

In undertaking this research for the EdD it was necessary to scrutinise the relationship that had evolved between my roles as doctoral student, teacher and parent, and to explore any possible conflict that existed among these. Each of these roles brought with them knowledge of specific domains, particular institutional understandings and the construction of different versions of the link between theory and practice, which undoubtedly led to tension in some areas of interpretation (Holliday, 2002) throughout the process.

In order to reflect upon my position within the research, and in an attempt to surface some of the underlying assumptions I brought to the research process, it was necessary

not only to consider my previous experience but also to think critically about the ways in which specific aspects of the surrounding wider discourse relating to theory, political context and cultural understandings may have affected my interaction with, and subsequent interpretation of, the data. As Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000, p.245) point out, in order to be truly reflexive it is necessary to explore and take cognisance of those things which underpin our acts of interpretation:

...the core of reflection (reflexivity) consists of an interest in the way we construct ourselves socially while also constructing objects ('out there') in our research. For without construction, and without a constructing and constructed self, there is no meaning.

However, contemplating the basis of my observations, thoughts, feelings, ideas and language was a process that could not always be undertaken easily. While some underlying beliefs and assumptions were difficult to identify, others could be surfaced more readily. I discovered that it was not simply a case of 'searching within' to uncover the emotions and beliefs which formed the foundations of choices and interpretations I made during the course of research design and implementation. As Steedman (1991) points out, meaning is not something that is simply lying around waiting to be discovered; it is instead something which is actively constructed. I found on occasions that my use of institutional, intellectual and expressive language - the key tool to construction, and the understanding that comes as an integral part of its use - did not always clarify my thinking but often limited what it was possible for me to observe and discover.

While tensions certainly emerged from the different roles I had to adopt, both imposed by others and from within, the position of practitioner-researcher also provided a stance that was advantageous in certain respects. Being in the position of student, teacher and

parent afforded me the privileged position of being able to occupy multiple viewpoints from which to survey and experience the research process, leading to interpretations that other non-practitioner researchers may have been unable to access.

### **My Education Career**

I began my career as a primary teacher and was interested in the format of parent-teacher consultations from the outset. The main reason for this was that I never experienced the ‘parents’ evening’ as an entirely comfortable or natural situation. It was an aspect of the job on which no time had been spent during my initial BEd training and it was rarely discussed when on placement in schools. Instead, as a new teacher I was expected to ‘pick it up’ as I went along with minimal advice which went along the lines of ‘stick to the appointment schedule’ and ‘a member of the management team will be in each area in case there are any difficult situations’. This seemed a somewhat inadequate approach to preparation for an event which I viewed at that time as the main forum for communication between home and school. I wondered how the process felt for parents and what was actually achieved by these meetings.

My interest in parent-teacher communication led me to take on the roles of Parent Support Worker as part of a Community Education team, followed by that of peripatetic Home Link Teacher. The former post was based in an area where tensions existed between the police and community members, resulting from a curfew on residents that had been set in place prior to my arrival. The overspill from this event had led to a lot of ill feeling between parents in the community and school staff who were seen as figures of authority. Part of my role was to work in the community to help build up links between home and school. An indicator of success I had to work to was parental

attendance at parents' evenings. Speaking to parents about barriers to engagement with the school, it became apparent that many of them viewed the consultation process as an event which made them feel uncomfortable, inadequate or ineffective. This was usually explained in terms of it bringing back bad memories of their own school experience or because they felt they were being 'spoken down to'. This again fuelled my interest in what the consultations actually achieved and what happened within the talk to establish or reinforce such feelings.

After three years I returned to teaching, with a focus on Early Years, where I made a conscious effort to reflect on my own practice in communicating with parents, in relation to the experience and valuable insight I had gained from my previous posts. At the time of embarking on this research project I had moved away from classroom teaching and was employed in a strategic role as an Education Support Officer within the local authority in which the data collection took place. This role carried with it specific responsibility for the development of parent support across all education sectors but, due to the nature of funding, had a particular focus on pre-school and primary settings. A key task of the post was to increase parental involvement through the improvement of home-school links. As such, I spoke to parents about their experiences of parental involvement and communication between school and home. This was set against the backdrop of *the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act* (2006) and the introduction of *Curriculum for Excellence*. In this role I was able to speak more widely to practitioners (teachers, headteachers, nursery nurses, education officers, heads of service) about their perceptions and experiences of parent-teacher communication. This helped to provide me with a feel for current practice and perceptions, set within a particular political context, at both a local and national level.

## **From Practitioner to Parent**

As well as being a student and teacher I am first and foremost, a parent. When attending parent-teacher consultations with my eldest child I was able for the first time, to directly experience parents' evenings from 'the other side'. While empathising with the teacher's position and her need to impart specific information, I found myself responding in an unexpected way to the information that was being presented. I wanted to hear about how my child was progressing at school, her attainment and achievements, but importantly wanted to come away feeling that my child's teacher really knew her as a person. It struck me that I was given very little time to contribute my views and to talk about my daughter in general terms, something which had not occurred to me before when experiencing the process as a practitioner. Most significantly though, I came away sensing a distinct change in the nature and 'feel' of the dialogue which took place during the consultation in comparison with the 'day to day' conversations I had engaged in with the teacher previously. I wanted to know what it was about the consultation process that caused this change to occur.

From the position of 'parent', I was also now included in other parents' informal conversations about their experiences of parents' evenings and what their feelings were about the process. I found that for many, their experience of the process was similar to mine. It was seen as a formal and not entirely comfortable situation where their role was mainly to 'show interest' and listen to information. This added to my desire to explore the format, structure and content of parent-teacher consultations.

## **Practitioner-Researcher**

On reflection, the most difficult position for me to balance was that of practitioner-researcher. Many of my requests for information were initially met with suspicion by colleagues who understandably wanted to know why the research was being carried out and what ‘audience’ it was for. As an Education Support Officer dealing specifically with the development of parent support, I was confronted with questions concerning the implications for future funding when requesting access to schools for data collection. I spent a lot of time reassuring people that my research was in no way connected to my job, other than in relation to topic.

Having inside knowledge of the field of study undoubtedly influenced decisions around methodology and data collection. I knew how parents’ evenings ‘worked’ from a school’s perspective and tried to make my methods as unobtrusive as possible while striving to obtain the data I required for analysis. Subsequently, during the analysis phase I was aware that my findings may not only have implications for my own practice but also for that of my colleagues. I tried to be conscious of my pre-existing assumptions of the consultation process when approaching the data and looking for characteristics and patterns within it. It was impossible to obtain complete objectivity and to let information ‘emerge’ from the data in a detached way, as I had naively imagined could have happened at the outset. Instead, I tried to be aware of the ‘baggage’ and preconceptions I brought to the process and attempted to use them to provide insight rather than impose structure. For example, I came to the analysis of data knowing which aspects of parent-teacher consultations had left me feeling awkward or defensive. Although this information often provided a ‘starting point’ from which to approach the data, acknowledging such assumptions meant that I also made a conscious

effort to look beyond these areas of tension in order to examine each individual consultation with fresh eyes.

To conclude, being a teacher, development officer and parent, it was not possible or indeed desirable, to obtain objectivity either at the initial stage of research question development or throughout the research process itself. As a teacher, I was aware of the need to report to parents on children's learning in a concise and professional manner, while taking on board the school's expectations of duration, format and content. I understood the need for effective communication but felt that parents' evenings were not conducive to this. As an Education Support Officer I was committed to increasing opportunities for the 'parental voice' to be heard and to making home-school communication more of a two-way process. I recognised there was a need to make meetings between home and school more meaningful encounters and to explore any barriers to engagement. As a parent, I wished to have the opportunity to contribute more openly to discussions of my child's progress and development, and to be recognised as having a significant role to play in extending her learning. I was party to discussions among parents about parents' evenings and what they thought about them, but as a parent rather than a professional which provided me with an entirely different viewpoint.

Undoubtedly, the focus of my research, the methodology and analysis were influenced by my own personal and professional experiences and the views and beliefs I held. Rather than striving for objectivity, an impossible task, I instead tried to be conscious of the assumptions I brought to the research throughout the process and to reference these during the write-up. As Richardson (2003, p.511) states:

...writing is always partial, local, and situational... our Self is always present, no matter how much we try to suppress it – but only partially present, for in our writing we repress parts of ourselves too.

## Chapter 5: Practising Power

The following chapter presents an analysis of the way in which power was enacted within parent-teacher consultations in early years settings. This chapter looks in detail at the consultation data and examines the construction of the talk that occurred between parents and teachers in order to explore the enactment of power within the consultation discourse. For the purpose of analysis I turn to Foucault's conceptions of disciplinary power to make sense of the consultation discourse using it as an analytic framework through which to examine the micro-level functioning of power relations that are enacted between parents and teachers.

### Phases

A number of different phases were identified as making up the format of the parent-teacher consultations in the different early years settings. For ease of reading, throughout this chapter the nursery classes and primary 1 classes will be referred to as nc/p1 when being discussed collectively.

The number of distinct phases which show the type of talk occurring between teachers and parents differed between the nursery school and nc/p1 consultation settings. The broad format of each consultation is briefly outlined below preceding a more detailed discussion of individual phases in subsequent sections.

The consultation structure found in each setting is as follows:

#### Nursery School Setting

informal opening ⇒ invitation ⇒ feedback and exchange ⇒ winding down ⇒ closings

### P1 and NC setting

formal opening ⇒ agenda setting ⇒ feedback ⇒ closings

The nc/p1 consultations usually opened with a brief formal greeting which was initiated by the teacher. This then moved very quickly into an agenda setting phase where a pre-planned format of the meeting was outlined. Usually teachers set this agenda in accordance with specific document frameworks e.g. curriculum working documents or reporting proformas. However in one setting parents were asked to pre-select which areas they would like to be discussed at the meeting. This phase was typically followed by direct feedback to parents with very little scope for parental contributions to be made. A topic was usually verbally identified by the teacher (e.g. “*so with regards to emotional and social development*”) and then a ‘diagnostic’ style feedback was issued to the parents with evidence being presented and explained in order to support any claims made. The meeting was usually rounded off by a very succinct closing phase which was again teacher initiated.

The nursery school consultations appeared to take a different format in terms of structure and dynamic. The opening phase typically consisted of a more informal greeting, with parents often being referred to by name. The teacher usually followed this initial phase by inviting the parent to contribute his/her thoughts about the child’s progress or by asking what they would like to discuss. Similarly to the nc/p1 consultations, the subsequent phase of the nursery school consultations consisted of an episode of feedback from the teacher. However, this was presented as much more of a two way process with exchanges of information taking place between teacher and parent(s) throughout. The structure of this phase appeared more fluid and parents initiated a greater number of questions and discussion topics than in the other settings.

Instead of moving directly into a closing phase, the nursery school consultations first progressed to a ‘winding down’ phase. Here informal exchanges took place between teacher and parent, often consisting of small talk around non-school based topics. This would then lead on in a ‘natural’ way to the closing of the consultation.

A wide range of strategies was used by teachers during the consultations, relating to the enactment of power. Analysis of the transcripts showed that power was manifested in ways which ranged from the subtle to the obvious. In the sections which follow I will discuss some of these strategies in the context of the different phases outlined above. These will include discussion of openings, agenda setting, the use of objects, feedback and exchange sequences, normalising readiness, normalising judgements, regulation of the child’s voice, ‘ventriloquising’ the child, and conformity and resistance. I will then consider the function of laughter in the consultations drawing on the work of Alasuutari (2009) to frame my interpretation of events.

### **Openings - “I don’t know what we’re gonna say, Carol.”**

The nursery school meetings had a less structured format to the beginning of each consultation than those from the nc/p1 settings. The dialogue which was built up developed a ‘natural’ feel, with parents’ contributions being far greater in number than those of the other two settings. A relatively informal and familiar approach to engaging with parents was taken by staff at the beginning of the consultations and this helped to create a warmth and personal tone from the outset:

*T: Suzanne. Well Suzanne.*

*M: Ma Suzanne.*

*T: Your Suzanne. Oh, she's a lovely wee thing. She really is a capable wee girl.*

*M: What's she like, eh?*

*T: Isn't she?*

*N: Very.*

*T: She's super. Uses all the areas of the nursery. Interested in everything. Extremely expressive when she's telling you anything. Isn't she? She just completely goes "Ah" and she's so animated when she tells you things.*

In the extract below, the teacher presents an invitation to contribute directly to the consultation early in the opening section.

*T: I don't know what we're gonna say Carol.*

*M: Nup.*

*T: You know your boy better than anybody does. Don't you?*

*M: He's just a mischief maker.*

*T: How do you feel he's come on this year?*

*M: Good. He's (inaudible). I think he's more confident at home...and quite happy to, he'll sit and come to PEEP and he'll sit there quite happy you know his work at PEEP. He does all his reading at home.*

*T: [Mhmmm. [He's really intae that. He's intae writing an' numbers and words and stuff.*

However, although it appears that the teacher was handing over control to the parent by asking "*How do you feel he's come on this year?*", this approach could also be viewed as the teacher's way of gauging the parent's thoughts before deciding how to pitch her feedback. Maynard (1991) described how doctors giving parents negative diagnoses started off their consultations by asking the parents what their view of their child's

disability was. He claimed that this was done in the hope that the negative diagnosis could be carried out in alignment with the parents' views. The doctors risked receiving a view that contradicted their own knowing that in the end the medical diagnosis would prevail. In some ways the teachers' approach could be likened to this.

Typically, the nc/pl meetings began with a brief verbal indicator signalling that the consultation had begun such as "right", "well" or "okay", before proceeding directly to the next phase:

*T: Right, well she's doing really well. I'm really happy with the progress that she's made. Em, she's settled in well, apart from the crying in the morning.*

*M: I know, is that still happening?*

*T: It's...well...sometimes when she's crying in the line, usually she comes in and she's absolutely fine. Em, you know it doesn't last for any length of time at all.*

There was no opportunity for the parent to interject between the opening indicator and the delivery of the feedback or agenda outline:

*T: Okay. So, Craig. First of all, we'll start with maths. Em, he's progressing very well in maths. Very impressed with the progress he's made. He can count to ten easily. He could do that before he came in.*

*M: [Mmmm.*

*T: Em, he can order the numbers to ten correctly. He can read them. He can write them. Em, he can tell me what comes before a number and what comes after a number. Em, and he's very, very capable. He, he really enjoys taking part in our mental starters, em, at the beginning of the lesson as well.*

While some similarities can be drawn between parent-teacher and doctor-patient consultations in relation to structure, differences are also apparent with regard to the status and identity of the participants. In the doctor/patient scenario there is usually a

clear cut distinction between the professional with ‘expert’ knowledge and the layperson. However, in parent-teacher consultations the expert role can be adopted both by the teacher as professional expert and the parent who has claim over knowing the child best. In the previous examples from the nursery school setting, the ‘friendly’ openers provided by the teachers help to set up the parents in the role of ‘expert’ alongside the teacher, addressing the notion of partnership and acknowledging the value of parental involvement from the outset.

### **Agenda Setting – “What I’m going to do is...”**

Institutional interactions are often characterised by imbalances in participant status, knowledge and participation. Often a correlation can be seen between the status or role held by each participant and the rights and obligations possessed by each in discursive terms (Drew and Heritage, 1992). This was certainly seen to be the case in the consultations sampled with the distribution of talk being weighted heavily towards the teacher, especially in the nc/p1 settings. Studies of institutional discourse show patterns which highlight asymmetries not only between the viewpoints and perspectives of the professional and lay person, but also between the ability of each to manage the interaction in a way that is desirable and ‘organisationally relevant’ (ibid., p.49). Opportunities to participate can easily be affected by the differential in access to organisational routines and procedures that exist between the professional and lay person. Drew and Heritage (1992) claim that in institutional discourse there is very little scope for the lay person to be in control of the direction that the dialogue takes and that professionals instead take ownership of agenda setting. This was the case in each of the nc/p1 consultations where teachers clearly set the agenda and defined the format of the

meeting while parents took on a more passive role. In the nursery school settings however, the teacher took responsibility for developing the structure of the meeting and led the direction of the talk but did not explicitly set out an agenda to be followed at the outset.

Drew and Heritage (1992) claim that the topic of an interaction is often controlled by the participant holding the more powerful position, usually the professional. This is mainly because the professional is in a position to outline and determine the purpose of an encounter at its outset in accordance with organisational norms. Setting the agenda in such a way at the beginning of an interaction means that certain topics or contributions deemed by him/her to be irrelevant are therefore automatically disallowed. However, the control of topic can also be enacted in quite subtle ways. For example, this can be achieved through the smooth introduction and change of topics throughout the talk and in the way that questions are carefully formulated to pick up on salient points of the previous answer while disregarding contributions deemed irrelevant. In the parent-teacher consultations, several overt and unambiguous techniques were employed by the teacher to ensure that an 'appropriate' agenda was clearly set out from the start of the consultation and adhered to throughout, providing very little scope for the parent to divert from this. This was not just achieved through verbal direction alone but instead physical objects were often used as templates to structure the proceedings.

## **The Use of Objects – “I’m going to use the personal learning plan”**

In all settings sampled, objects were used throughout each consultation. These included written notes, record documents, proformas, photographs and examples of children’s work. The main way in which these items were used was for agenda setting and evidencing claims made by the professional.

In nursery schools, teachers referred to notes and children’s profiles throughout the consultation as an aide memoir and to illustrate comments but they were not used in an explicit way to set the agenda of the meeting. This was in contrast to the nc/pl consultations where the teacher clearly set the agenda by verbally outlining which topics would be discussed, usually using the framework of a particular ‘institutional’ document as a format. These were personal learning plans (PLPs), information proformas drawn up by the school, or working documents (records of progress containing information on key aspects of learning and development within each area of the curriculum). Typically, the teacher would name the document being used, briefly explain its purpose, then outline the format the meeting was going to take using its layout as a basic structure:

*T: Now for the purpose of this meeting I’m going to use the personal learning plan that you looked at as just the basis... and use the working document that we keep in the nurseries, basically just a jotter that we write down all the observations we make of John as he covers a particular feature of learning, em with regard to the 3 to 5 curriculum. Now the 3 to 5 curriculum is broken down into 5 different areas and you’ve got your emotional, personal and social development which is the one we’re going to look at first and that’s the one that we really focus on em getting the childr...child confident for starting school.*

*M: Mhm.*

*T: So with regards to... John...em you ticked that confidence and playing co-operatively with others and what I’ve just done is noted down some examples that I had ‘cause we number the observations as we make them.*

In every consultation where such agenda setting took place there was no overt resistance to this by parents and very little by way of response. Teachers swiftly moved on from the initial ‘synopsis’ phase to the next phase of the consultation without asking parents if they had any questions or providing opportunity for them to interject. Parents were also given very little scope to contribute thereafter.

As illustrated above, within one nursery class setting the parents had been asked to select two specific aspects of learning or curriculum areas that they wanted to discuss ahead of the consultation. This allowed the teacher to formulate a response before meeting with the parents:

*T: We make a point of reading up and making sure we know what the child’s done recently... The parents get to choose two or three areas of the curriculum and we can either work towards them or tell them that the child already achieved that and show it through the working document. Which is quite interesting for the parent because they think, “oh my child’s not even doing that” and we say “well actually... look here’s the evidence to show that”.*

Asking parents to choose the areas they would like to talk about could suggest that an attempt to redress the power balance had been made. However, the teacher’s statement “*the parents get to choose*” appears to indicate that by ‘allowing’ the parents to choose a set number of discussion topics from a limited list, the teacher was still actively controlling the situation. In this way, teachers were able to prepare ahead and so maintain the identity of ‘professional expert’ through their responses. The comment “*well actually, look... here’s the evidence to show that,*” reflects this assertion of the professional knowing best.

When interviewed, teachers acknowledged that the documents they used provided not only a set structure for them to follow but also a means of keeping parents' contributions 'on track':

*T: I have a clear plan about what I'm going to talk about... Sometimes parents go off on a tangent and talk about things that aren't relevant to school or anything.*

In some cases the information used to construct the framework of the consultation had been assembled for the benefit of a 'future' teacher who would be teaching the children when they moved onto the next stage of their education, rather than having been collated for the purpose of the parents' evening itself. This was made explicit to the parents during the introduction phase of the consultation and was accepted by parents without contest:

*T: Em, what I'm going to do is run through em, this is a wee sheet we were doing with him. This goes into the school. Em, I worked with Mrs Brown who asked ...em, I spoke to her and said "What is it you need to know straight away when they walk in from nursery about what they can do?" so that she can get started. They also, all their profiles and reports and other things go down but for the very first day it's nice for her to be able to know like, are they shy or em, will they be okay when they come in, are they em, are they good at getting themselves organised and things like that so we pulled together this wee sheet. Em, and it covers, there's a couple of extra things that. So we pulled together this wee sheet and it covers, there's a couple of extra things in it that wee put in but it covers the five key areas...of the nursery. So I'll just talk through these and then if there's anything else that you want to ask or whatever, we can go*

*M:*

*[Right.*

*T: through it. Em, Personal, Social and Emotional Development, it's really just about what they're like in the nursery, how they settle down, are they good, are they into the routines and things like that. Which Johnnie is and has been from the second he walked in the door. He's never had a bit of bother.*

This highlights a perceived status differential between parents and teachers, where the needs of the Primary 1 teacher are seen as paramount to those of the parents attending the consultation. As seen in the examples above, the parents were given no real time to respond between the opening phase and the beginning of the feedback from the teacher.

### **Feedback and Exchange - "...a sort of... quick glance at what they're able to do"**

Although consultations across all settings included a feedback phase, there were distinct differences between the ways in which this was presented in nursery schools, and nc/p1settings.

In nursery schools, the informal feel illustrated in the 'openings' extracts could be seen to continue throughout the consultations where excerpts of more informal conversation were interspersed with dialogue relating to school-specific topics:

*M: She just loves pencils, books, colours, everything.*

*T: [She's interested in writing. Wait till she gets a pencil fetish. I've got a daughter wi' a pencil and pen fetish. You go to the shops and... and she starts to buy nice pencils.*

*M: She's got a mother that does that.*

*T: I was gonna say I bet that stems from you.*

*M: I've got a pen and pencil fetish. If I had my handbag you'd be able to see I don't have one or two pencils. It's like twelve to fourteen in a bag.*

*N: Could you maybe leave us a couple then. I can never find pens in here. (Giggles)*

*M: I go in and I'll go into a station... and it's like everybody, I mean I hate shopping and I'll go in and buy whatever I have to do. You put me into a stationery or a craft or and I'm looking and it's like "I like that"*

Similarly:

*M: And Carol, she's eighteen. Carol done her eh... work experience thing (p) in*

*T: [That's amazing [Mhmm. Mhmm.*

*M: here. She was eighteen in May. Aye, Terry's twenty one. He was twenty one on the twenty seventh of May. She was the twelfth, he was the twenty seventh but I'm the first of May.*

*T: Uh-huh.*

*M: Gemma's the second.*

*T: (Laughs).*

*M: Then, Carol's the twelfth, Terry's the twenty seventh, John's January and his dad's Boxing Day.*

*T: [Dearie me.*

*M: Em... but like I've got my mother in law and my brother in law, and my nephew and that aw in May tae. We've got quite a lot in May.*

This type of dialogue shows that the teacher possesses a knowledge of, and interest in, the child's home life and indicates implicitly to parents that their contributions are valued. In this way the expectations of parental input in relation to the child's wider experiences are set up. Parents were encouraged to contribute to the discussion and a dialogue was built up with frequent exchanges being made throughout the feedback. The type of 'pastoral care' approach adopted by the teachers in these consultations may at face value appear perfectly benign. However, with further consideration it may instead be regarded as an intensification of power where its effects are amplified through the 'gentle' nature of the approach. As Nealon (2008) states, sometimes a more subtle enactment of power can be the most efficient form:

...[it is] “lighter”, more virtual, and its effects become more efficient as power shifts its privileged points of application... As power increasingly targets not actual bodies themselves but “what they do”... power thereby gains an intensified hold “also on what they are, will be may be” (Nealon, 2008, p.31)

If thought of in terms of the benevolent power illustrated by Foucault (1977a) this ‘friendly’ approach adopted could make it more difficult for parents to display resistance to any potential claims made by the teacher, as they would have colluded in the ‘talking up’ of a positive relationship, where commonalities between themselves and the teacher were identified.

In contrast to this, the nursery class and primary 1 consultations contained very little in the way of non-school based dialogue. Instead, the main body of the talk was centred on curriculum feedback and the openings and closings were kept extremely brief, usually leading straight into the agenda setting or feedback phase with no preamble:

*T: Em, what I’m going to do is, we have these sheets. They are used eventually when they go to school. Em, the schools get these as a sort of indication, a sort of... quick glance at what they’re able to do. Em, and last year we never used them with the three year olds, the sort of ante pre-school but this year we thought, “no, there’s a lot of things that... that they can do”. So... I’m going to, I’m just going to use this to talk about Claire a wee bit so... Em, there’s*

*M: [Mmmm.*

*T: sort of five areas we work through in the nursery. Em, and they just cover different things So, the first one, the main one we look at is their personal, social and emotional development. Just basically are they happy? Are they settled? Do they, you know, can they work in a routine? Em, do they go for snack okay? Do they... are they okay going to the toilet? Are they alright*

*M: [Mhmm.*

*T: playing in the playground and things? So, what we’ve tried to do is pull out important points and I’ll just... talk through them with you. So what I’ve said is she comes in really happy now. She was quite timid at first when she comes in but not anymore. She just bounds in. She waves bye-bye and that’s it.*

*M: [Mhmm.*

In the above extract, when the teacher moved from the agenda setting to the feedback stage she stated, “*So what I’ve said*”. This comment was made in the past tense, indicating that the teacher’s feedback had already been formulated thus keeping the tone objective, formal and leaving little scope for the parent to change the topic at that time. In doing so, the information was subtly presented more as a report rather than a piece of dialogue, as was the case in many of the nursery school consultations.

Feedback provided to parents regarding children’s progress in the Primary 1 and nursery classes was always centred on a set of institutional documents containing either summative or formative assessment information. These documents took the form of children’s profiles, curriculum observation sheets and various proformas developed by individual schools for the purpose of information sharing between staff. Children’s progress was recorded in these documents and next steps in learning identified and shared with parents during the consultation. However, it became apparent that the level of discussion with parents and the direct input they had to this process was very little, if indeed it occurred at all. On average, only 21% of verbal contributions to nursery class consultations were made by parents and in primary 1 classes this was further reduced to 12%. Most of these contributions to the talk were limited to continuers such as “*mhmm*” and “*uh-huh*”. This was in direct contrast to nursery school consultations where parental contributions averaged 46.56%.

During the feedback phases of the consultations in these settings, teachers appeared to position themselves as ‘experts’ on the child, with comments not always being confined to the domain of the classroom. Instead, suggestions of how parents could maximise their child’s educational potential outwith school were provided and expectations of

their role in assisting the school to achieve educational goals or desirable behaviours, were clearly laid out by the teacher.

Power was seen to be subtly enacted in these contexts through teachers' 'normalising judgements' (Foucault, 1977a, p.183), with the child's actions being gauged in relation to those of others rather than importance placed on the intrinsic value of the behaviour or achievement itself. Through this normalising gaze the child was placed within a homogenous group and his/her position within that group judged according to where he/she sat in relation to others. However, while 'a homogeneity' (Foucault, 1977a, p.184) was imposed through the process of normalisation, it could also be seen to individualise 'by making it possible to measure gaps.' (ibid.). Particular 'truths' about the child which were linked to the morality of the institution were used to define what was an appropriate way for him/her to be. Therefore, if the teacher judged certain behaviour to be 'normal' and thus acceptable, then by definition, other types of behaviour or levels of attainment must also have been considered 'abnormal' or undesirable. Thus, such normalising judgement could be seen to place teachers in a position of power through the act of reporting to parents on where their child was positioned in relation to the 'norm'.

Parents were also subject to judgement through normalisation where they were expected to take on teacher's suggestions and to concur with the teachers' presentation of 'truths' regarding the child and their role in relation to this.

Throughout the consultations across settings, supporting institutional documents acted as a framework to structure feedback as well as serving to evidence teachers' claims. Within these, various forms of written observational evidence and assessment information were recorded by teachers, providing detailed information in relation to key

points, as predetermined by the school. The use of such records facilitates the pervasion of power, allowing those in control to classify and calculate averages and norms that subsequently form the basis for knowledge. Such classification, based on expected developmental ‘norms’ which are established and perpetuated within school culture, can be repressive if individual accomplishments which fit within the defined parameters of expected achievement go unacknowledged. In this way, the individual is turned into a ‘case’ being controlled through the somewhat invisible exercise of power that in turn renders them highly visible and subject to scrutiny, allowing differentiation and judgement to take place (Foucault 1977a).

For parents and children there can be immense pressure in conforming to school norms regarding learning and behaviour. The ‘normalising gaze’ can invoke a compulsion to move toward, or remain within, an optimum threshold seen as a minimum by the school. The production of ‘truths’ by teachers in the consultations can be regarded as an act of government being used to ‘discipline and regulate’ (MacNaughton, 2005, p.32) the behaviour of the child and to include parents in the regulation of that behaviour.

### **Normalising Readiness (Teacher Led) – “You don’t ever see him wandering.”**

Throughout the consultations in all settings, the adults involved appeared to discursively position themselves as agents of surveillance with regard to the ‘absent’ child’s behaviour. The regulation of the behaviour in relation to what was seen as ‘the norm’, or at least acceptable within the context of the classroom, was often made visible through the exchanges between parent and teacher. The following extract is typical of the way in which the notion of ‘settled’ was used by the teachers to relate to

what they regard as acceptable behaviour; in this case not being disruptive. This is clearly tied in with benefits for the teacher in terms of ‘control’ within the classroom:

*T: Em, personal, social and emotional development, it’s really just about what they’re like in the nursery, how they settle down, are they good, are they into the routines and things like that? Which Johnnie is, and has been from the second he walked in the door. He’s never had a bit of bother. He’s quite happy whether it’s you or you know, em, his dad or his gran or whoever that brings him in.*

*M: [(Giggles)]*

*T: He comes in no bother, gives you a wave em, then he goes off and plays. And he knows what he’s allowed to do and what he’s not. You never see him wandering with nothing to do when he comes in.*

*M: [Mmmm.]*

And

*T: He’s not...flitting about and...so I think I would say that he’s ready. He’s definitely ready for school.*

*M: [Right.]*

In the above examples, ‘settled’ and ‘ready’ were posed as positive attributes of the child but interestingly, were defined in terms of what the child was not doing e.g. “*you never see him wandering with nothing to do*” and “*he’s not flitting about*”. This type of ‘desirable’ behaviour identified by the teachers has clear benefits for them in terms of classroom control. What becomes important is, “*how they settle down, are they good*” or that a child “*knows what he’s allowed to do and what he’s not*”. If a child was not seen to cause disruption, was compliant and followed the teacher’s agenda, then this was viewed in a positive light. By verbalising their approval of such ‘controlled’ behaviour, teachers could be seen to constitute and normalise ‘readiness’ for school discursively through the feedback to parents.

In the extract below, the teacher again talks about readiness for school in terms of the child being able to organise himself and keep busy. The parent attempts to make brief reference to his social ability when there is a break in the talk but this is not acknowledged by the teacher who instead continues with what she was saying:

*T: He can go and find himself something to do. You don't ever really see him*

*M: [Aye*

*T: wandering looking like he's not got anything to do. Em, so he's : absolutely*

*T fine in that way... I mean that way he's gonna be...totally sorted and when he moves over to school there'll just no be a problem.*

*M: [(giggles) Social wise he'll be fine.*

Even when teachers reported to parents on a specific skill based area of the curriculum, rather than wider social competencies, 'readiness' was still defined in terms of the child's ability to sit down at an activity for an 'acceptable' length of time:

*T:... he is entitled to another year at nursery if you wanted it for him but I think... he's actually ready for school. He definitely is. Even though he's*

*M: [School.*

*T: January. Em, I think if we, if you gave him another year at nursery, yeah he might be okay for a wee while. I think by Christmas he would be bored. Because*

*M: [Bored.*

*T: he's already writing his name and he's already trying to copy other things and that, I think that to me indicates a readiness that he'll go and sit down and write and sit for a long time and do it.*

In this case, the teacher asserted that it would not be in the child's best interest to stay in nursery because he would be 'bored'. This deficit approach, where the potential problem is placed on the child rather than the teacher whose role it would be to provide

challenge and depth of learning, leads to exclusion by positioning the child outside the developmental norm defined by the teacher. The child's competence is viewed negatively as it does not fit within the teacher's (and possibly school's) developmental expectations of a nursery child and as such is constructed as being an undesirable attribute within the context of the nursery class.

In this example the parents are also placed under scrutiny as the statement, *'he is entitled to another year at nursery if you wanted it for him but I think... he's actually ready for school'* places the onus on the parent to make the 'right' decision regarding the child's future attendance at nursery. The parent is potentially subject to moral judgement if she chooses to go against the teacher's professional opinion that the child is ready for school. As the talk develops, the parent interjects showing concurrence with the teacher's comments by repeating some of her words immediately after she has spoken it, suggesting the parent's awareness of the scrutiny which she is under.

**Normalising Judgements (Parent Led) - "That's quite good for no even at primary yet."**

Although parents' responses in the consultations were minimal, there were some examples where they too could be seen to make 'normalising judgements'. Statements in relation to what parents deemed appropriate behaviour or levels of achievement, provided insight into the way in which the child's actions were monitored by them in relation to their own perceived 'norms' and expectations across the settings:

*M: See her picture (looking at example of child's work)...?*

*T: Mhmm.*

*M: I don't know if she's done better pictures at nursery, but she (p), she can actually do (p) better pictures. But maybe it's just what she wanted to do that*

*T: [But then... [Yeah.*

*M: day. And em, was that her writing her name?*

*T: Uh-huh. But I, I know... Gemma is clearly, Gemma can do it from left to*

*M: [Eh...*

*T: right and it is big clear letters.*

*M: But sometimes she does. See when she's doing like her 'e'... she puts her*

*T: [Mhmm.*

*M: 'e' back to front. Em... I've noticed that quite a few times. Em... I try and...*

*T: [Mhmm. [Mhmm. [It is, it is surprising because Gemma tends to do big pictures...*

*M: Mhmm.*

*T: ...and she'll do, you know, but I don't know whether, you see they got told*

*M: [Aye that's what I mean...*

*T: to do a picture of themselves and nobody else...Mmm and sitting there*

*M: [Right.*

*T: trying to... she might have been trying too hard. Em, but definitely in her*

*M: [Mmmm [Maybe that's... [Maybe.*

*T: name she does her lettering properly in nice big letters.*

*M: [Because I've got a... I've got a thing on my fridge that she done in the house, and it was...I was drawing a face, it was when she first started doing faces...I was doing like the circles...and I was...sitting wi' her*

*T: [Mmm.*

*M: and she was doing the eyes and that and then she started doing the hair and things like that and then I started getting her to do the body and when she started doin' the body I says to her "Right who's that?", an' she telt me who it wis supposed to be an' I just put "John" and then "Dad, James... Auntie Shona". She was tellin' me who they were and I've got two pages and it a'... faces that Gemma's done and just out like...matchstick... bodies on them. And*

T: [Mhmm.

M: *they are quite good because I...that was even before she started nursery*

T: [Mhmm.

M: *and I thought that's quite good for (p) no even at nursery yet.*

The above example illustrates a challenge from a parent regarding a piece of work presented as evidence to accompany the teacher's feedback on the child's progress. In this case, the enactment of power can be seen in claims to knowledge of the child's abilities made by both parent and teacher. At the start of the exchange, the parent takes up the opportunity to question the teacher's judgement of the child's ability, which is evidenced by an exemplar drawing, "*I don't know if she's done better pictures at nursery, but she, she can actually do better pictures*". She then goes on to offer a possible explanation of why that particular picture does not illustrate the standard she claims the child is capable of, "*maybe it's just what she wanted to do that day*". The teacher does attempt to respond to the parent's comments at this point but the parent carries on without allowing her to interject. She then continues to comment further on her opinion of the standard of the child's writing. This time the teacher is successful in her interjection and indicates that she knows the child can do better; although the piece of work has been presented by the teacher as evidence to support her verbal feedback, she agrees that this is not the norm for the child. Like the parent, she too offers an explanation of why this may be the case stating that, "*she might have been trying too hard*". The exchange is brought to a close with a statement made by the parent which clearly marks her judgement of the child's efforts in relation to those of others - "*that's quite good for no even at nursery yet*". Here, normalising judgement is illustrated

through the way in which the child is invisibly ranked against a perceived standard and her achievement in relation to this, considered favourable by the parent.

### **Regulation of the Child's Voice – “Just let me talk to Mummy a minute, darling”**

One noticeable feature of the consultations was that children were absent from the majority of settings. This was in line with nursery/school policy where attending the consultation with children was actively discouraged. This meant that the child's 'voice' was restricted to anecdotal comments from parents or teachers during the feedback phase. For example:

*M: He just keeps saying “I want to go home”*

*or*

*M: She, she likes that because we'll sit and she'll say “Will you do me the numbers?”*

However, in one primary 1 setting, children were present throughout the consultation. Again, this was in accordance with the policy of that particular establishment. The contributions made by the children at these meetings were very limited and did not tie in with the school's objective for their attendance, which was to be involved in setting targets for their personal learning plan. Instead, within these consultations the child frequently diverted the topic of conversation, which the teacher then had to bring back on track - “*where were we?*” and “*going back to the sheet...*” etc. Usually this was carried out quite successfully and the consultation continued in the way the teacher wanted to steer it.

However, different and more direct attempts at regulation of the child's behaviour could also be seen during the feedback phase of these consultations, when a clear sense of the child's awareness of the uniqueness of the situation emerged (normally in school the child is accountable to the teacher but in this context the parent was also present) and the opportunity to play one off against the other was taken. In these cases, several instances were identified where contributions to the talk dealt directly with controlling how the child behaved within the meeting. However, while both teachers and parents monitor and attempt to regulate the child's behaviour, the approach used by each differed greatly as they worked to maintain the identity of 'responsible parent' and 'professional teacher' throughout these exchanges.

In the majority of instances, any uninvited verbal contribution by the child, or by the parent to the child, was largely ignored by the teacher who then worked discursively to realign the dialogue with her original agenda. This is illustrated in the example below from a primary 1 class where the teacher chose not to wait for a response from the child when the mum asked "*What do you enjoy doing?*" but instead pre-empted it with "*...I can tell that...you like your numbers...*" Allowing the child to answer at this stage would have opened up the possibility of an unexpected answer which could have led the conversation in an unpredictable direction. Having regained control, the teacher then proceeded to talk about the child's progress in number work, referring to her notes:

*T: Okay, I think that's us. So, we're going to work through this which is Stuart's personal learning plan.*

*C: I never.*

*M: Listen.*

*T: Where Stuart, you can tell us what you want to get better at and what you think you've done really well so far.*

*C: I'll tell...*

*T: So do you know what the first question is? It says "In school I enjoy doing..."*

*M: What do you like doing?*

*T: [And I think I can tell that.*

*M: What do you enjoy doing?*

*T: You like your numbers don't you? You do.*

*M: (Giggles)*

*C: (Giggles)*

*T: He's really, really good at doing his numbers.*

*M: He is.*

*T: Stuart came to us counting way beyond... thirty...*

*M: [Oh, aye he can. He's really good at counting.*

*T: which is....*

*C: [look on the next page. Eh that's hard?*

*T: So our first term is...I don't think you'll find that difficult Stuart. Our first term is basically numeral information up to ten. Stuart had absolutely no issues with that at all. Stuart is ready to move on to the number bonds now. Which is addition and his...*

*M: [Mhmm*

*T: so that's what we've started this week.*

At the outset of the consultation there is a definite shift in the way that the teacher speaks to the parent, 'Okay, I think that's us. So, we're going to work through this which is Stuart's personal learning plan...' The teacher indicates a clear start to the

proceedings by changing from ‘*Okay, I think that’s us*’ to ‘*so, we’re going to...*’. This indicates her control over the direction of the consultation and her position of authority.

However, throughout the consultations directly involving children, there were occasions where the child’s persistent interruptions could not be ignored by the parent or teacher. In such cases, parents’ responses to any behaviour deemed ‘inappropriate’ were straight to the point and were made in isolation to the rest of the talk. For example:

*“Right. Shhh! No you can do them after. You’ve got to listen to what Mrs Smith is saying.”*

*“Pull your dress down”.*

*“Donna! Stop interrupting. I’m trying to speak to Mrs Smith so she can get this done so you can get to your party. So stop interrupting. Okay?”*

The parent’s final statement “*so she can get this done*” suggests that the consultation is a formality that has to be gone through and being quiet is a way to achieve this.

However, when the teacher responded to similar interruptions from the child this was usually done in a more subtle way with an attempt being made to incorporate the interjection into the talk, enabling the flow of what was said to be maintained and allowing the teacher to continue her point:

*T: So we’ve moved on now in class to blending the sounds (p) together to make our words.*

*M: Uh-huh*

*C: I know an ‘a’ word... ‘after’.*

*T: Good job. Well done. You know lots of ‘a’ words I’m sure. The way we sort of work in the morning is when we start off with this and I do a different sound every week but now I’ve moved on from the basic sounds to joining sounds together. Like a couple of weeks ago say, just because I’ve opened the page*

M: *[Uh-huh.*

T: *here... We did the 'it' sound.*

M: *Uh-huh.*

T: *So we know... just let me talk to Mummy a minute darling. Thank you. We*

C: *['i'*

T: *know that this makes the 'i' sound...*

Here the teacher briefly acknowledges what the child has said, indicating the inappropriateness of the interruption in a calm and subtle way before continuing with the professional agenda of feedback to the parent. When her initial attempt to stop the child from interrupting proves unsuccessful, she then changes tone moving to a more direct plea in an attempt to control the situation, “*just let me talk to mummy a minute, darling*”. This is presented in a very gentle and sweet way with the use of the word ‘darling’ standing out as atypical of the usual discourse between teacher and child.

### **Ventriloquising the Child – “Tell Mummy what we do”**

A recurring feature of these consultations was that the teacher often indirectly addressed the parent via the child e.g. “*Tell mummy what we do...*” and “*Tell Mummy what letter we’ve been working on...*” rather than speaking directly to the parent. This resulted in the focus of the dialogue being moved from the teacher to the child, making it less likely that questions relating to the comment made by the teacher would be made back directly to her. As such the child could be seen to fill the passive role of ‘go between’.

This also proved a useful strategy for teachers when delivering ‘negative’ feedback, serving as an immediate way of confirming what was being said and ensuring again that the focus stayed on the child rather than the teacher. For example, “*He can be very silly during Circle Time, can’t you?*” and “*He’s been finding that a bit difficult, haven’t you Connor?*”

Similarly, the teacher also used dialogue involving the child to verify her position as ‘educational expert’ e.g. “*He needs to work on his pencil control but that’s something we’ve been working on in class, isn’t it John?*”. In this way the teacher moved the focus away from herself onto the child. Any potential ‘conflict’ with the parents was diverted by addressing the comment to John rather than to them. By adding “*that’s something we’ve been working on in class, isn’t it John?*” to the initial “*He needs to work on his pencil control,*” ensured a positive slant was maintained as the focus of the statement became the fact that the problem was already being addressed in the classroom, rather than the fact a problem had been identified.

### **Parental Conformity and Resistance – “We tend to go straight to the doughnuts!”**

Often the way in which parents and teachers represented themselves and the relationship they had with their child/pupil allowed them to portray positive moral identities within the consultations. Versions of ‘good parent’, ‘positive role model’, ‘caring professional’ or ‘education expert’ were constituted within the discourse and the language used became the means by which the official faces of home and school were brought together across settings.

An interesting example of this could be seen in a consultation where one parent accepted what the teacher was saying and used it to reinforce her own identity as 'responsible parent' while the other parent strongly resisted the teacher's suggestions. This led to clear tension among all participants as they worked discursively to manage their own identity construction within that context. When this was not resolved the teacher stepped in to manage the situation by quickly drawing the subject to a close:

*T: It's like where we need to do a shopping list. "Right okay. How many apples are we going to need if everybody wants an apple?". Right, what does the number five look like? Right we need to write down five apples. Can you write down five?"*

*M: Mhmm.*

*T: "Draw a picture of an apple. Why do we have to write the word? Let's draw the picture "or let's just write the letter that it starts with." So just being a wee bit more creative and if you're thinking "Oh, ideas", I'm here!*

*M: That's great. I never thought of that before and John, like I'll say to him "Right we have to get this from the shop and we have to get that". How many*

*D: [Mhmm.*

*M: times have I says to you we're in the shop and going round, I've maybe*

*T: [Mmmm.*

*M: forgot something and he'll say "Mum, we need..." and I'll go "Oh, right", you know and....aye.*

*T: (rustling paper) Well that's it and also looking for stuff in the environment*

*D: [You'll be needing to draw five apples.*

*T: is getting labels from different things and foods that you like, taking them with him and "Right, can you find it in the shop?"*

*M: Yeah.*

*T: Getting him to do it in order. "Right what do you notice about the shop? It's in different things. "Right we need to go the grocery section" or "we need to*

*M: [Mhmm.*

*T: go to the frozen” so he’s learning about that as well.*

*M: Yeah.*

*T: And doing the money. Counting the money out.*

*M: Aye, that is a really good idea.*

*D: [We tend to go straight to the doughnuts.*

*T: (Laughs).*

*M: He goes to the fruit!*

*D: Pardon?*

*M: He goes to the fruit. When you go to Morrisons you can’t get him by that until you’ve got everything that he wants.*

*T: Okay.*

*M: His apples and bananas and his grapes and strawberries.*

*T: (pause) So before we finish are there any questions you want to ask or have I... left you pondering and...away enthusiastic with ideas?*

In this instance the teacher begins to offer advice to the parents about how they can help with their child’s literacy development at home in an ‘appropriate’ way. This advice is delivered in a gently persuasive, yet somewhat condescending tone. The child’s mum indicates that she is open to the teacher’s suggestions early on in this exchange by replying, “*That’s great. I never thought of that before...*” However, his dad displays resistance to the teacher’s suggestion that they need to be “*a wee bit more creative...*” and his sarcastic responses delivered as interruptions suggest that he does not value what is being said. His first contribution is ignored by both Mum and the teacher. However, in response to his second interjection, “*we tend to go straight to the doughnuts,*” the mum attempts to regain her position as ‘responsible parent’ by explaining that they always buy fruit first when visiting the shops. The dad resists this

with a blunt, “*Pardon?*” However, the child’s mum continues to explain what she means. At this point a tension between both parents can be felt and the teacher quickly regains control of the situation, drawing the episode swiftly to a close. Her final statement which asks if the parents have ‘*any questions*’ is delivered in a somewhat patronising tone. In this way, the teacher again asserts her position as ‘educational expert’ – “*So before we finish are there any questions you want to ask or have I... left you pondering and...away enthusiastic with ideas?*”

This kind of advice giving was a common feature of the consultations across the settings sampled. Home was often viewed as an extension of school by teachers who attempted to assert some control over what kind of learning is facilitated by parents outwith the school environment. In these cases the control asserted appeared to have a pastoral element to it as advice was provided to parents on how they could best support their child pedagogically. However, while parents were encouraged to participate in family learning, boundaries were clearly drawn when it was felt they were overstepping the mark and straying into the school domain:

*T: There’s...I know you’re using Jolly phonics.*

*M: Mhmm.*

*T: They use that in primary 1.*

*M: Yeah.*

*T: You don’t want him to be too far advanced.*

*M: Well that’s...*

*T: [Because there’s...yeah it’s great that he know it but...he’s going*

*M: [Mhmm.*

*T: to be doing that the first few weeks of primary 1...*

*M: Aye.*

*T: and yet he's going to know it and he's going to be further ahead than the others because they start from scratch because you've got to start with the... yeah so don't push it too much.*

The teacher questions the parents for working with the child in an 'inappropriate' way, "you don't want him to be too advanced". It is clear that instead of 'advanced' being seen as a good thing, it is portrayed in a negative light as being 'abnormal'. The mum attempts to respond to this but is interrupted by the teacher who continues to reinforce her point, indicating that the parent has overstepped the mark by introducing something that should have been left to the Primary 1 teacher. The statement "he's going to be further ahead than the others" provides an indication that this is not desirable as he would be different to the other children. Blame is again placed with the mum through the comment, "so don't push it too much". The teacher's criticism of the child's educational advancement sits at the other extreme from the normalising judgement illustrated previously:

*M: Just that because he had such problems with his speech... You know I,*

*T: [Mhmm.*

*M: that's why I've went and sort eh got these Jolly Phonics books and stuff to kinnae bring him on a wee bit because I didn't want him going to primary...*

*T: [Mhmm. And it has, he's made good progress but ...stop and make it, make it fun.*

*M: Mmmm. I just didn't want him being you know, the dopey one kinnae thing. (giggles)*

*T: He's not the dopey one but you don't want him to start...stopping*

The parent shows resistance to this by justifying her decision in terms of her wanting to give her child the best start at school. The teacher acknowledges that the child has made progress but then continues to judge the parent's input as inappropriate by stating, "*stop and make it, make it fun*". Again the parent displays gentle resistance to the teachers' comments insisting that her intentions were well meaning but an uneasiness can be sensed through her giggle at the end of the statement.

Fathers attended five of the 18 sample consultations. While the dad in the 'supermarket' extract can be seen to use sarcasm as a method of resistance to the teacher's comments, fathers' verbal contributions on the whole were minimal and often restricted to continuers such as 'mhm' or 'yep'. These utterances also function retroactively, being used to acknowledge a statement before passing the floor back to the teacher, allowing her to develop the dialogue in her chosen direction.

The relative silence of fathers during the consultations could be viewed as a form of resistance where they consciously decide 'not to play the game'. Sefi (1988) discusses the way in which mothers display opposition to advice given by health visitors. This can be seen to take a passive form as opposed to overt rejection, which Sefi suggests is regulated to reflect the difference in knowledge and power between the mother and professional. The fathers' lack of engagement in the consultations could reflect a similar discomfort with the situation or a resistance to the power of the teacher in that particular context.

### **Closings/Winding Down – “I think I’ve spoken too long”**

In every consultation, closing phases were initiated by teachers and on the whole, were kept very brief. However, nursery school consultations included a longer winding down phase leading up to the final closing section. This episode of talk typically included chat about non-school related topics such as family life or social activities. By shifting the focus of the talk from school related issues to more general conversation, the teachers subtly indicated to parents that the consultation was drawing to a close. This preamble allowed the subsequent closing to be presented in a somewhat subtle and expected way through a relatively natural feeling ‘wind down’. In these instances, the dialogue seemed to draw to more comfortably to a close than the primary 1 and nursery class consultations, which were usually brought to an abrupt end.

The closing phases of most of the primary 1 and nursery class consultations included an invitation for parents to ask questions, although usually this seemed to function purely as a rhetorical device used to signal the end of the meeting e.g. “*So that’s fine. Okay? That’s us*”. However, occasionally parents would take up the opportunity to ask for additional information and would resist the teacher’s attempts to close the meeting by continuing the episode of talk. For example:

*T: So is there anything else about him, worried about anything or...?*

*M: [Eh.*

*T: Nothing at all?*

*M: No. I think you’ve basically covered everything.*

*T: [No? [Mhmm. That’s good.*

*M: I was going to ask about, obviously you’ve went and mentioned about the*

*T: [Mhmm.*

*M: maths eh, because his : dad's been picking up on that when he has been*

*T: [Yeah.*

*M doing the homework. Saying that he's, he's doing his ma (p) he's quite quick*

*T: [Mhmm.*

*M: on the mark with his maths...kinna thing. Where as I think it's just me he's*

*T: [Mhmm. Yeah.*

*M: playing up with to tell you the truth because he gets a wee bit lazy when it*

*T: [Mhmm.*

*M: comes to reading the books.*

*T: [Uh-huh. [Yeah. Uh-huh.*

*M: I've got to help him out quite a lot and I know. And I know that he knows the*

*T: [Yeah because I'm very pleased with the, the progress...*

*M: words that he's doing but...*

*T: [Yes. That's right. [Uh-huh. Yeah. Uh-huh. He likes to, when we are doing, checking his words on his little word list, he likes to really think about it before he says it. You know, sometimes they get a bit sort of*

*M: [Mmmm. Yeah.*

*T: "Oh I'll just say a word straight away. I've not got time for the word. I'll just say any old thing". But you can see Scott's really, I mean I'll, I'll sound it out and he's like thinking. You know, I can see that he's really thinking about it and then eventually he gets it so that's, that's really good.*

*M: [Mhmm. It's like when we were in hospital we gave the, the staff a thank you card. And Scott wrote it out hiself, wrote "To the*

*T: [Mhmm.*

*M: staff, thanks, Scott" and I had to spell all the letters out for him but he wrote*

*T: [That was lovely. [Yes. Uh-huh. [Uh-huh. Yeah. That's great.*

*M: them all down himself. So I was quite happy with that as well.*

T: *[That's good.*

M: *So...Aye*

T: *Uh-huh.*

M: *He was a wee bit disappointed because he's not got school next week because I've told him. I've said "We've got Easter holidays Scott for two weeks*

T: *[Oh. Easter holidays.*

M: *and he's like that "Oh no," he's saying. "What about school?" he says and*

T: *[Uh-huh. (Giggles)*

M: *I'll miss my maths he said.*

T: *(Giggles)*

M: *"Scott, I'm sure we can do some maths in the house if you can tell me what you've been doing at school", and we were. He's like "No, daddy does my*

T: *[Mhmm. Mhmm.*

M: *maths" (Giggles)*

T: *[Mhmm. Ohh, that's good.*

M: *But other than that. No I'm really chuffed with that.*

T: *[That's great. [That's good. Ah, well*

M: *I'll go back home 'cause I said to him, "I'm going up to see your teacher to see how you've been at school", and he's like that "Okay". I said "Have you*

T: *[Uh-huh.*

M: *been good at school?" He said, "I'm always good at school, Mummy".*

T: *No, absolutely. So, he's telling the truth. Uh-huh. Absolutely.*

M: *[That's good stuff then. Good stuff. (Giggles) So are we going home to tell him, "You need to start being good in the house*

T: *[That's great. (Giggles)*

M: *"now". "Start doing your homework."*

*T: That's right. Uh-huh.*

*M: So...*

*T: Okay?*

*M: I think that's everything that I've...that I need to ask anyways.*

*T: [Mhmm. [Mhmm.*

*M: So...*

*T: [ That's great. Okay?*

*M: Basically covered everything.*

*T: Right. Thanks very much. That's brilliant. Thank you.*

*M: No problem. Thank you.*

In this sequence the teacher attempts to draw the consultation to a close on several occasions by using phrases such as “*that's good*”, “*that's great*” and “*okay?*” to indicate that she has nothing more to say. A sense of politeness is maintained as the consultation draws to a close through the careful way the teacher negotiates breaking off the encounter by ‘passing’ on the opportunity to introduce new information (Cameron, 2001), yet allowing the parent to continue talking even though she has nothing else specific to ask. However, the talk is punctuated by unexpected giggles, particularly from the teacher, which highlights an uneasiness within the encounter at this point, despite adoption of politeness. As the consultation draws to a close, the parent indicates to the teacher that it is on her terms – “*I think that's everything that I've...that I need to ask anyways*” and “*basically covered everything*”. The teacher takes the opportunity to confirm the meeting has concluded by offering the short and repetitive phrases “*Right. Thanks very much. That's brilliant. Thank you.*” This is finally accepted by the parent.

Another example of a parent displaying resistance to the teacher's attempts to close the meeting can be seen in the following extract:

*T: You know. Is there anything we can help you with or anything you wanted to discuss or...*

*M: I don't think so really, I think you've kind of answered it I was just wondering whether he was playing with other children or if he just comes in and... plays on*

*T: [No, no. No, no. Once we maybe get our IT sorted we might be able to run DVDs of the actual video that we take on the television screen and hopefully, hopefully the photos give you a wee flavour just now of what's happening, you know but maybe if we, our IT*

*M: his own. [Right.*

*T: skills improve, Karen...*

*M: (laughs)*

*D: (laughs)*

*T: Then maybe we'll (laughs), then we'll put some DVD up you know, cause it's nice to be a fly on the wall because they're never the same when you come in to see them. I don't know if, have you been in to the nursery?*

*D: No, well I came...*

*T: [Well if you want to have a wee look round.*

*D: Well I was in, was it last week, or the week before?*

*M: Last week I think, Robbie took you to see the slugs.*

*N: Snails (laughs)*

*D: Snails, aye. Em So...*

*T: Em... So have a wee look round if you want again.*

*D: Okay.*

*T: It's nice when... you'll hear all the things that you know...well he doesn't talk about just now but the occasional bits that do come out and you're able to match it*

*D: [(laughs)*

*T: to what you see, you know, so... Well thank you very much for coming along...okay?*

*M: Right. Thank you.*

In this case, the teacher attempts to draw the meeting to a close subtly by suggesting that the parents have a look round the nursery. However, the dad responds by saying, “*Well I was in last week, or the week before?*” In this instance the teacher does not take up the opportunity to introduce new content and persists with the closing by saying “*Em... so have a wee look round if you want again*”. This time the dad accepts the statement and the less ambiguous “*Well thank you for coming along... okay?*” is accepted.

While the above extracts provide examples of teachers attempting to draw consultations to a close in a subtle way, the majority of primary 1 and nursery class consultations were closed in a very clear and concise manner, which would render resistance from the parent difficult:

*T: But on that note I'm afraid I'm going to have to stop there because I've*

*M: [That's fine.*

*T: got...I think I've spoken too long.*

*D: [Oh, right. Nae bother.*

Similarly, in the following extract the teacher can be seen to provide the parents with advice on their child's fussy eating. However when she has finished her input she chooses to ignore the parents' final comments regarding the child's behaviour at home and abruptly ends the dialogue:

*T...But yeah that, that's one thing to do because we, we say "Well there's nothing else. If you don't eat your snack that's it." I mean it's not a big issue in the nursery because he's had his breakfast and he knows he's going to have his em... he's had his lunch and he knows he's going to have his tea after but*

*D: [Aye*

*T: if he knows that's it then he will...*

*M: [it's always there if the encouragement's there then it... will eventually...*

*T: And there probably will be tears and it looks like it's the end of the world and he's dying but...*

*D: Oh, he's got that down to a T.*

*T: Uh-huh.*

*M: We just ignore him with other things, eh?*

*T: (Giggles)*

*D: He's got a big brother as well obviously eh...*

*T: [Right, well I'm going to stop there.*

Another approach used by teachers to end a consultation involves the construction of an unambiguous verbal closure interspersed with polite comments. In the following example, a physical gesture of handing an information document to the parent is also presented simultaneously to indicate a clear end to the proceedings:

*T: Okay. Right. That's fine. Right, well that's her then so if you want to just take this...*

*M: Okay.*

*T: so that so you can look at it more closely.*

*M: [Yeah. Yeah, [That's great.*

*T: It's been a pleasure. Okay? Right, thanks very much for coming. Thank you.*

*M:*  
*Thanks very much. Bye*

*[Right.*

*T: Bye.*

One feature shared by both nursery schools and nursery classes was the tendency to close consultations with a reminder to parents of their ‘open door’ policy:

*“Okay and we’re open door. Any time you need to see us”.*

*“Well if you’re ever unhappy with anything, or you’ve got any questions you know that you can always... phone us or speak to Tracy or myself or anybody.”*

This invitation to speak to staff on another occasion was not issued to parents in the primary 1 consultation closings.

As illustrated above, the verbal strategies used by teachers to keep control of time ranged from the subtle to the obvious. What was consistent, was the skill teachers displayed in succinctly drawing the consultations to a close even when parents attempted to resist this.

## **Laughter**

A particularly striking feature of the transcribed consultations was the frequency of laughter episodes that occurred within these interactions. These included laughter, giggles, or what Alasuutari (2009, p.108) referred to as, speaking in a ‘smiley’ voice. This was the largest type of response provided by dads during the consultations however, teachers and mums also provided similar responses at particular points in the

talk. What purpose this interactional device served and what it says about the nature of parent-teacher communication in the consultation process is considered below.

Studies looking at the role of laughter in other examples of institutional interactions have shown that its use is often connected with a power imbalance, and can be employed by less powerful participants in response to tensions or as a means of resistance (Buttny, 2001, Griffiths, 1998). However, parent-teacher interactions differ in structure and purpose from patient-client encounters in other settings. As in the majority of consultations sampled for this study, they usually involve talking about an absent person, the child, and bring together participants who contribute different perspectives on the child's experience. Even when the child was present in these consultations it has been established that their contributions were minimal. Alasuutari (2009) claims that examination of how laughter is used can be enlightening with regard to the way in which 'partnership' is actually played out within unique collaborative process such as the parent-teacher consultation, highlighting the acceptance, resistance or construction of views by participants.

There was certainly asymmetry in the balance of the talk between parents and teachers in the consultations and the teachers were seen to initiate most of the discursive interaction within these exchanges. As a result of this, it was usually teachers who introduced topics of discussion or presented observations of the child to the parents rather than the other way around. In some episodes of talk laughter appeared to be employed by parents as a strategy to avoid acceptance of suggestions or opinions put forward by the teacher:

*T: ... he's almost got the right grip but it's too far up the pencil and it's making no...yeah an it's just spidery writing, but... it'll come. It'll come. And make it fun. Don't have him sat down at the table saying 'No, no. No, no. You've got to get that right' as I was saying earlier on. Okay? Because what you'll find is he*

M: *[(laughs)*

D: *[(laughs)*

T: *will start to see it as a chore.*

M: *Mmmm.*

While laughter often indicates resistance, it is also identified by Alasuutari (2009) as a means of empowerment when used in a particular way within episodes of talk. This occurs when a quiet laugh follows a participant's account when no explicit invitation to laugh has been made in the talk. Alasuutari claims this strategy is used by respondents to mark the practitioner's account as 'laughable' (ibid., p.114) without them having to verbalise a contradictory point of view. The use of laughter in this way usually accompanies a judgement which has been made by a participant and highlights the asymmetric relationship between both parties. This technique was evident in some parental responses when a judgement statement had been made by the teacher:

T: *A..aye, cos when he goes to do it in school he might be a bit bored if he's done it this year wi' you. Try and maybe even, even story books. Getting him*

M: *[Mmmm.*

T: *to read...what I used to call 'real' books. You know just the simple ones?*

M: *(giggles – short and quiet)*

Within the consultation data the use of laughter was often seen to highlight sensitive issues and tensions arising within the interactions (Alasuutari, 2009). Giggling or the use of a 'smiley voice' was evident when differences of opinion occurred or when a

delicate topic was introduced into the talk. In these cases, it often served to diminish tensions associated with this by indicating that things were not being construed as serious. This usually assisted in producing alignment between the participants but had the potential to produce the opposite effect by not allowing what was said to be acknowledged through a verbal exchange. In the extract below the nursery practitioner begins to discuss an area of the curriculum which she feels the child needs to develop further. Here the episodes of laughter produced by the parents cut through possible points of tension by indicating that they do not feel it is a particularly important issue:

*M: But he always says like, we've asked him every day "Will you go and do a painting?" and then it was just yesterday, or the day before cause it's Mark's birthday, we said "go an' do a painting for Daddy" and he said "I can't do the paintings" and I thought is it because... it's too... he likes being outside as well and I thought is he outside most of the time or is he just not interested?*

*D: [(laugh)*

*N: He's just so into the role play, he's in the house area, he's sociable with the other children, I think he's just too busy to do...*

*D: [(laugh) [He has a set of friends (smiley voice)*

*D:*

*M: [(Laugh)*

*T: [It'll come in time (laugh). It'll come in time.*

In this case, the teacher ended the episode by mirroring the parents' laughter which suggested her acceptance of their response to her comments and so the tension was diffused.

Laughter was also used to soften the choice of certain words or descriptions, indicating awareness of the delicacy of what is being said in the following extract the teacher is explaining to a parent that her child has lost the privilege of 'golden time' in the class:

*T: So, and he has to show me exemplary behaviour to change this back so the*

*M: [ (giggles) [Mhmm.*

*T: golden time...No I don't think... Stuart hasn't lost...He has actually, sorry. He's lost (giggles) nine minutes this week. That's if you get a red card you get three minutes off your golden time.*

Similarly in this extract laughter is used to lessen the impact of a negative description of the child in nursery:

*T: He's good at self-directed tasks but he needs to learn to follow an adult agenda more. He can be quite... (giggles) determined.*

Episodes of shared laughter between parent and teachers tended to occur when the child's individual characteristics, development or behaviour was being discussed. In most of the consultations, these discussions portrayed a positive picture of the child with the practitioners and parents mainly listening or making brief comment on what was said. Alasuutari (2009) identifies the use of laughter in these situations as a confirming response which shows agreement with descriptions presented of the child. In this respect, laughter can be seen to validate participant contributions:

*N: He, he really enjoys his group time I have to say.*

*M: [Right.*

*N: He comes in and he'll ask for a song. His favourite's Twinkle, Twinkle little star*

*M: ( Laugh)*

*D: (Laugh)*

*N: (Laugh) It's the one he always asks for and he does all the actions to the song...and he sits, he listens to the story so well. He can answer questions about the story so he's obviously taking it in too.*

Episodes of shared laughter were also seen to arise when anecdotes relating to the child's competencies produced amusement. When this happens Alasuutari suggests that it bring participants 'closer' by producing 'an aspect of intimacy in the interaction' (Alasuutari, 2009, p.112). The extract below shows how an anecdotal observation brings about a shared episode of laughter showing the alignment of participants at that time :

*T: So it was all that. And it, it was really good to watch. And this is my favourite...(rustle) and I'm going to show you this because em, I've got it in his other book,...is we did last October em, we were doing a story Room and the Broom...and I showed them the story using a broomstick and was acting out as I went on. And, basically, at the end I left the materials from the story lying in the story corner and Kevin went over and got on the broom and flew round the nursery and asked me where I wanted to go and I got on and he took me round and then Jordan saw this and he thought, "Oh, right, I want a go".*

*D: [(giggle)*

*M: [(giggle)*

*T: So Jordan came over and asked very nicely em if Kevin could take him somewhere and they went off out to the toilets and came back (giggles). Em, they're fab so Kevin's on the front and there's wee Jordan on the back and they had great fun.*

*M: (giggles)*

What the above episodes of talk show is that teachers need to have communicative competence if they are to monitor the dynamics of the interactions that take place between themselves and parents effectively. Responses such as laughter or giggling are as important as verbal responses in identifying points of agreement or divergence within the talk.

To conclude, as has been illustrated throughout this chapter, several features of the exercise of power were associated with relational aspects of the consultation. The ways

in which individual 'voices' were heard and received, identities constructed and maintained, and viewpoints accepted or rejected indicate ways in which power is enacted through the talk and what purpose it serves.

While there was considerable commonality between the consultations which took place in nursery schools and those conducted in nursery and primary 1 classes, there were also some marked differences. In general, the structure of the nursery school consultations was more flexible with greater opportunities for parents to contribute to the opening and feedback phases. Initial discussions with parents were relatively informal and more frequent reference was made to the family context. The nursery and primary 1 class consultations however, had a very rigid structure which was usually set out clearly in the agenda setting phase. The discourse consisted mainly of school-based dialogue and much less scope for parental interjection was provided.

Parents and teachers across settings made use of various power strategies to coerce and resist, to establish and defend positions, and to shape the direction that the consultation talk was taking. Wider institutional discourses were seen to impact on the micro level functioning of power within the consultations and the framework within which the talk was built was seen to primarily fulfil the needs of the school.

## Chapter 6: Expectations and Perceptions

The interviews I carried out after the parent-teacher consultations allowed me to explore participant accounts of the event and examine their expectations and perceptions of the role they played within it. A discussion of the findings is provided below.

### **Framing the Child – “... look for the positives”**

Parents viewed parents’ evenings as a key opportunity to meet with their child’s class teacher on a one-to-one basis to find out how they were getting on at nursery or school. The teacher’s main role within this process was defined by parents as providing information about their child’s progress and it was expected that teachers would include an accurate verbal assessment of how the child had fared throughout the year. Interestingly, not only the type of information but also the way in which it was delivered, appeared to hold great importance and parents expressed specifically that they saw one of the teacher’s responsibilities as being to frame any feedback in a positive way:

*“I want her to tell me how he’s doing...and to tell me he’s doin’ well. She should look for the positives.”*

*“It’s good to hear that they’ve been getting on fine and to see how they’ve come on from when they started.”*

*“I want to know what he’s good at. Every wee one must be good at something... the teacher should tell you about that. I want to come away feelin’ good about things, you know?”*

However, although parents expected teachers to provide them with information regarding their child's progress, they acknowledged that this did not always comprise new knowledge. Instead, in some cases the information given simply affirmed what parents already knew. When this occurred, the usefulness of the consultations was thrown into question as the following extract shows:

*M: I think it's a good thing cos ye have tae know whit's goin' on wi' the kids and stuff.*

*D: Ah, but whit the teachers tell ye, ye get to ken everyday whit the kids are doin' so its basically...you're goin' ower whit they're already tellin' ye, whit the kids are telling ye. I wouldnae say it's a waste o' time... but it's no...I wouldne say it's important.*

*M: It is important if the kids are struggling!'*

*D: But if the kids are strugglin' through the year the teachers tell ye anyway.*

The 'trust' parents had that teachers would inform them prior to parents' night if there was something they needed to share was common but interestingly, parents anticipated that teachers would only get in touch if there was a problem to be discussed rather than an achievement to be shared. So although parents expected parents' evening feedback to be positive, they did not seem to expect positive verbal feedback at other points of the year outwith the context of the parent-teacher consultation:

*"If something goes wrong they'll let you know about it. They'll ask you to come in for a meeting."*

*"The teachers would definitely have a word before parents' night if there was a problem. I think they keep the other stuff for on the night."*

Teachers were in agreement with parents that one of their primary roles was to provide information but the expected focus of this seemed to be different for teachers and parents. While teachers did reflect on academic progress and achievement as parents anticipated, they also felt their role was to convey information about how the child was 'settling in'. This related mostly to the child's behaviour, knowledge of class procedures and teacher expectations. They also indicated that this is what they thought parents would want to know. Discussion of 'settling in' came across strongly in the consultation data and the interview responses showed that its inclusion in the consultation discourse was indeed part of a pre-planned agenda, shaped by what teachers believed parental expectations to be:

*"Parents want to know how their child is settling in. Have they formed friendships, are they happy in the nursery, can they follow the routines?"*

*"...sure parents want to know how they're progressing with their work but they also want to know about the nitty gritty too... like is he behaving, does he listen in class?"*

This exemplifies surveillance where observation of the child sits firmly within the realms of what teachers regard as being developmentally appropriate behaviour in relation to classroom etiquette. The suggestion is that the child's institutional competence is of as much interest to parents as their level of educational attainment. The 'nitty gritty', as the teacher puts it, is significant.

Parents also expected teachers to provide them with a clear personal picture of how their child presented at school in terms of personal characteristics and personality traits. They wanted to hear examples of things they had done and to gain a sense that the teacher knew their child as an individual and not just as another student. One mother

said that it was the personal anecdotal stories she wanted to hear about most at parents' evening because she felt she was missing out on her son's time at pre-school:

*'Nursery's a big part of my son's day that I can't be part of. I like to hear all the little things he's been up to'.*

This feeling of wanting to gain a 'snap shot' of how their child was functioning in a different environment as an individual and to feel connected to them by this was something which parents highlighted across the interviews. One parent said that she had even begun to attend the school's PEEP group, not because she wanted to learn more about how she could help her daughter at home, which is the primary purpose of the group, but so that she could obtain more information about her time in nursery:

*"I hear a lot more stories because you're sitting chatting informally for an hour and stuff... and I do get to hear a lot more stories which I love."*

This can be interpreted in terms of the Foucauldian concept of individualisation where established 'truths' are used to separate individuals. The individualisation described in these contexts can be seen to have productive effects. Firstly it makes the parents feel happy that their child is being recognised as an individual and is not just seen as another member of a larger group. Parents seem to value hearing about the things that separate their child from the others in a positive way. Secondly, it enhances the teacher's professional standing by highlighting to the parent that he/she has a unique 'insider' knowledge of the child. However, teachers' main purpose for providing this type of information was not only to present a clearer picture of the child to the parent but also as anecdotal evidence to back up their assessments and 'diagnoses', again consolidating their professional position.

Parents saw their role in the consultation as mainly being to listen and absorb what the teacher had to say. They stated they were there primarily to receive information in order to find out more about their child within the school context. The majority of teachers concurred with this:

*“Their role is just to come and get the information from me and if there’s anything they’re worried about they can tell and I’ll try to give advice about what they can do, but they do just generally come to listen.”*

Other teachers took this a step further by indicating that they saw the parents’ role not only as being to listen to information and advice but also to accept what was being said and to develop this at home:

*“I suppose their role is to take on board what I say... so that they try to...so that there’s more consistency between what goes on between the way things are at home and here.”*

In this way the information and advice given by some teachers was not only intended to provide the parents with knowledge of the child in the school context but it was also an attempt to regulate behaviour at home, outwith the teacher’s immediate gaze.

### **Establishing Expertise – “...that can help to explain a lot!”**

In the above interview extracts, teachers can be seen to position themselves as experts in relation to parents. Their comments indicate that they perceive their position within the consultations as holding greater status than parental participants whose role they identify as being to listen to teachers and take account of what they say. This was also mirrored in parents’ accounts of the teacher’s role. Parents acknowledged the teacher’s expertise and were interested to find out what his/her point of view was on how their child was doing even when they already had an idea of this themselves, either through

their own observations or from information received from the child. Nonetheless, parents felt it was important to be told how their child was getting on from the teacher's perspective and the parent-teacher consultation allowed them to receive that official confirmation and expert opinion.

Parents further endorsed the teachers' position as experts by expressing that they were willing to receive advice from them on how to help their child at home, although as was discussed in the previous chapter, this was not always something which went unchallenged during the actual consultations themselves. Teachers however, did not view the provision of information as being entirely their responsibility and in certain circumstances they expected parents to also share their knowledge of the child with them. When such episodes occurred it was usually linked to contextual information from home that could be seen as useful to the teacher in helping to solve a particular problem or concern he/she might have about the child. In relation to this aspect, it was recognised that parents could provide a broader picture which could shed light on issues that the teacher had identified:

*"They're there to share their bit about the child, to try to understand a bit about the learning that we're doing and try to understand how children are different when they're in different situations."*

*"Their role is to explain how things are at home. To find out how they can help at home and to provide background information on the child."*

*"If parents give you something back, you learn more about the child and the dynamics of the family. That can help to explain a lot."*

Examining some of the comments from both parents and teachers it can be seen that the role of the parent was very much viewed by teachers as being to act as an 'agent' of the school, which ties in with what is enacted in the actual consultations themselves.

Parents were not just expected to listen to what the teachers had to say or to provide information to them, they were also expected to find out how they could continue to progress their child's development or behaviour at home in line with what was viewed as appropriate by the 'expert' teacher:

*“My boy's strugglin' a bit with number and things at the moment. We were given advice on how to help him at home. We have to try and shift that round.”*

*“Our curriculum evenings show parents the types of teaching methods we use – they get to see it first hand. So if I suggest that they give their child a little bit extra support, they kinda know what kind of things we mean.”*

However, teachers actively worked hard at maintaining their 'expert' status and consciously attempted to portray that image to parents during consultations. One way they tried to achieve this was illustrated in the preparations they made for these meetings. Teachers wrote notes, gathered observations and pulled together pieces of work in order to build up an 'accurate' picture of the child which they could present to the parent. They were aware that parents wanted to receive a detailed personal account and in turn they wanted to display their knowledge of the child to parents in a professional and expert way. One teacher said that parents' evenings really focused her on building an accurate picture of each child in the class in a way that probably would not have occurred otherwise:

*“You need to have the assessments...you need to have this done for parents' evening. It made me think a lot about where my class are and where individual children are whereas maybe I wouldn't have done that in so much detail had I not had the parents' evening.”*

All teachers stated that they used written materials in some form or another to prepare for the parent-teacher consultations and highlighted that how these were used was very important - it was all about obtaining the right balance. They were concerned that if too much reference was made to materials then it could look to parents as though they did

not know the child well enough to talk about them independently. However, if teachers did not use notes at all then there was the danger that they would not be able to provide enough detail to parents to make the feedback seem personal to the individual child.

There was some disagreement among teachers as to the best approach:

*“Although it’s really a verbal sharing of information, I usually refer to my notes a lot to make sure I’ve got the detail. I’m not on the nursery floor all the time so sometimes I don’t know the child as well as some of the other staff. I think it’s ok though. Parents can see you’ve put an effort in.”*

*“There’s nothing worse for a parent than having a profile read to them. I have a list of points I look at before the parents come in and then I try to hold that in my head. It can be off-putting for parents otherwise.”*

In many pre-school settings where teachers and nursery practitioners worked together in teams, the preparation for parents’ evening involved all staff and not just the teacher who was participating in the consultation. Usually staff would meet to jointly discuss each child’s progress and to identify any areas for concern that they felt needed to be shared with parents. This joint ‘assessment’ would then be presented to parents at the consultation meeting by the child’s designated key worker.

This approach can be viewed as an example of totalisation where the feedback for parents is constructed collectively, incorporating the expectations and values of the entire staff group. While this can have a positive effect by providing support, a forum for sharing, and recognition of views (Gore, 1995), it can also serve to inhibit individual expression by favouring the collective voice. The teachers interviewed however, seemed to concur with the former effect, seeing it primarily as a way to ‘share the load’. Through this process it was felt that the onus was not placed on one person and a more rounded picture of the child to be presented to parents could be established.

As well as positioning themselves as experts, teachers recognised that parents also held a level of expertise relating to knowledge of their children:

*“Nobody knows a child as well as their parents know them. I think some of them are pre-conditioned into thinking they’re there just there to listen. ‘How is he at nursery?’ is sometimes the first thing they ask. ‘Well, how is he at home?’”*

Nursery teachers expressed that ‘first time’ parents were always the most anxious because they had never been through the process before and so did not know what to expect. One teacher claimed that she could tell which parents had older children because they did not really attempt to contribute and instead waited for the teacher to lead the discussion as though that was the accepted format of consultation meetings:

*“Their expectations where children are older is that parents evenings are for an information thing... where information is given to them. I want them to ask questions and talk about what concerns them.”*

This view that parents primarily come to listen not only fits in with the perception of their roles that were discussed in the first section of Part 2, but is also reflected in the fact that they did not prepare in any way for the consultations. None of the parents I spoke to took in notes or asked their children about what they were doing prior to the meeting unless it had been requested by the school, as was the case in one instance. Some schools however, tried to prepare parents themselves through other forms of communication such as newsletters, notice board information or slide shows run on plasma screens in the school entrance halls showing what children had been doing in nursery or class. This was very much seen to serve the expectations of the school:

*“It’s about the drip, drip feeding of information before parents evening so they know what it’s all about.”*

*“It can be daunting for parents. We try to help them with how to help their children. We have booklets they can look at that will give them ideas of the kind of things to do.”*

The teachers' comments exemplify the enactment of classification where parents are seen as a group defined by a certain deficit of knowledge and inadequacy when it comes to dealing with educational matters. The above statements imply that parents have to be pre-conditioned and 'primed' before the consultations in order to be able understand things from the schools' perspective.

### **Leading the Proceedings – “obviously you have to control what’s being talked about”**

Most of the teachers interviewed felt that leading the consultations was something they felt they had to take responsibility for, making sure they ran smoothly in terms of duration, structure and content. Their definition of leadership varied but for most it was usually referred to as taking control of the situation by clearly setting discussion topics and the pace of the dialogue.

*“The consultations have their purpose... obviously you have to control what’s being talked about.”*

*“My role’s really to guide and lead. I start off the discussion and then I’ll hand it over... I’ll include the parents when its appropriate.”*

However, one nursery teacher explained how she made a conscious effort to actively encourage parents to contribute to the discussions from the start of the consultation. She identified her role as a facilitator rather than a leader and aimed to make the discussions

with parents as reciprocal as possible, starting each meeting by asking the parents how they thought their child was progressing.

### **Time Control – “Sometimes parents just go on and on”**

Another teacher who had just participated in her first parent-teacher consultation said that although she knew there were practical constraints which had to be adhered to, she was not going to let them dominate the course of the meeting. While she did lead the consultation, she tried to ensure that it fulfilled her needs, and the needs of the parents, rather than those of the school. Although her consultation meetings ran greatly over time her description of events during the interview indicated that she was in fact as much in control of the situation as the other teachers who did stick to time but just saw the priorities differently:

*“The appointments were meant to be 10 minutes...I think I averaged 20 but never mind. And I wasn't well liked that day because I've got lot of siblings who were going to Mrs brown after me so I wasn't well liked but...still... the parents left happy so... 10 minutes isn't enough time especially for an infant class when it's the first time for some parents to see how they're settling into school. Even when Mrs Brown was sort of hovering at my door I still continued. I said 'I'm not going to rush!'”*

Her determination to convey the information she felt she needed to regardless of time constraints had a knock-on effect for her colleagues. Interestingly, when she began to run over time another teacher attempted to speed up the proceedings and gain back some control by making her presence known.

Other teachers reported that several ‘back up’ strategies existed to ensure that consultations continued to run to time. As well as using timers or the ringing of the

school bell at 10 minute intervals, some teachers said that they would look at their watch or stand up to indicate a close to the dialogue if parents attempted to carry on the consultation beyond the allocated time:

*“ I’m quite good at looking at a watch when they come in and checking my watch again.”*

In all settings a member of the senior management team was always present and would try to ensure the smooth running of the consultation schedule by moving between areas, stepping into consultations at the end if necessary to remind participants of the time. In primary schools this role was also delegated to senior pupils whose job on the night was to come into the class to alert parents and teachers to the time:

*“ We have P7 children who come in to say ‘that’s time up’”.*

One P1 teacher explained:

*“It’s very strict, very, very strict that they stick to 10 minutes. Otherwise, you’d have a big backlog with people missing their times and things”.*

Another stated:

*“Sometimes parents just go on and on...you’d be there all night”.*

Keeping to time was something that the parents were also very much aware of. One parent commented that she deliberately did not ask any questions because she felt there was no time for that within a 10 minute appointment. She wanted to hear everything she could about her child and did not want to curtail the information being provided by interrupting proceedings to ask the teacher something. The time constraints placed on

the consultations certainly seemed to have an effect not only on the contributions being made but also on parents' level of comfort within the situation:

*“It was in the back of my head thinking “I’ve only got 10 minutes”. It would have been nice to have been more relaxed.”*

### **Communication Control – “Some parents go off on a tangent”**

The 10 minute consultation time slot appeared to be very valuable to parents, even to those who saw the teacher on a daily basis. It was considered as being a unique opportunity where the teacher's full attention could be given to parents. Although there were opportunities, especially in nursery, to meet with parents less formally there were often other children and parents around. The parent-teacher consultation provided what was seen as protected one-to-one time. This meant that parents often kept questions or pieces of information which they felt were important until the consultation meeting:

*“It was nice to be able to go in and sit and talk about her progress... when you're coming and going at the beginning and end of the session it's a very busy time... there's lots of people. It was so nice just to sit down and concentrate on her.”*

*“There was one parent that said... this is a very difficult little boy...and she said, ‘oh yes, he was on Ritalin when he was two but I took him off it” And I had never known anything! And all the times I've gone out and spoken to her at the end of the day and said “oh we're having a bit of an issue’ ...Not anything!”*

Teachers in the interviews stressed that parents were able to communicate with them informally on a daily basis and knew that the nurseries and schools operated an open door policy. They all stated that they felt communication with parents was good and were confident that they were seen as being approachable:

*“There’s good communication in the nursery between parents and staff. They know they can speak to us anytime. We’ve got an open door policy.”*

However, teacher and parental perceptions of this did not entirely match. While parents did agree that staff were approachable, they did not always feel it was appropriate to approach them unless the information or concern they had was of considerable importance. There was also some uncertainty regarding what the exact process for this would be:

*“I believe you can make like an official appointment and stuff if there was something hugely serious but I’ve never had to do it yet.”*

*“You can make an appointment wi’ them. I read that in the wee booklet that we got out... I’m sure there is an opportunity to make an appointment with them...eh...but I’ve never needed to dae that.”*

Making an appointment was something that teachers said they would suggest if parents wanted to discuss issues during the consultation and they felt there was not enough time to do this. This suggestion would also be made if parents raised topics that were not seen to fit in with what the teacher considered the purpose of the meeting to be:

*“Some parents go off on a tangent and it’s more like a sort of counselling service for them... and we have to say well no, we’re actually here to talk about the child not sort of what your issues are. If it does address how the child’s going to be in nursery then I’ll arrange to make another appointment with them.”*

Not all teachers found it easy to lead the consultations and it was perceived as a skill which took considerable effort to perform well. Keeping to time and ensuring the talk was focused on ‘appropriate’ subjects had to be counterbalanced by trying to make parents feel at ease. One probationer teacher spoke about her anxiety prior to her first

consultation but explained that knowing the parent through informal communication which had been built up over the year had helped to make her feel more relaxed about the event:

*“As a student I used to think it would be the most terrifying part of my first year of teaching. It didn’t bother me at all...I’ve had so much to do with parents. Do you know I’ve already spoken at curriculum evenings and as I say, I see parents every day after school... I knew the parents by name. I’d had something to do with them all at some point so I wasn’t really nervous at all.”*

Another nursery practitioner reported previously having a bad experience which impacted negatively on her perception of parent-teacher consultations. She explained that she felt extremely nervous about parents’ evenings and in particular felt scared in case she said the wrong thing or was unable to answer certain questions. For her, the familiarity she had built up with parents on a daily basis had little effect when it came to participating in the consultation meeting itself and instead she felt her lack of confidence inhibiting. As she explained, the change from the more informal interactions which engaged in with parents on a daily basis to the more formal structure of the parent-teacher consultation, altered the feel of the meeting for her in a significant way:

*“I... I find it a bit...cos it’s more formal... I’m always scared of saying the wrong thing. I prefer talking to them on a daily basis. I’m just scared they’re going to ask me something about their child and I don’t know it...Parents change too because it is more formal. It is supposed to be just a chat but because you’ve had to make an appointment...it changes it. You get all worried in case there’s going to be something that crops up that you weren’t expecting. I’m just not confident with parents. I had a really bad experience when I first started with a parent and it really knocked me back so if there’s any, I’m, I’m...I’ll get there. I’m just not confident.”*

In two of the nursery schools sampled the key workers who participated in the consultations were registered nursery practitioners rather than teachers. While they

were expected to meet with parents and to contribute to the discussion, they were not ‘allowed’ to lead the meeting. Instead, they were teamed up with the headteacher from the establishment and both members of staff presented to parents together. One of the headteachers explained that she felt this was necessary to enable practitioners to see what her ‘benchmarks’ were and to demonstrate to them the ‘right way to deal with parents’. The other headteacher commented that it allowed her to lead the consultation in a way that she felt was appropriate, providing information on the child’s progress which could then be supplemented by anecdotal evidence from the key worker who had ‘more of an idea’ about what the child was like in the playroom.

While this role was seen as being supportive by the practitioner who lacked confidence, it was viewed by the other practitioner as being domineering and undermining her professional standing:

*“It makes you feel like you’re no’ up to the job. You make observations and do the assessments but you’ve to let the teacher explain it to them. It disnae look very good...”*

In this context the headteacher’s interventions had a repressive rather than enabling effect. Having personal and school values and practices imposed upon practitioners by other more senior members of the staff team can impact on an individual’s sense of autonomy and, as the comments show, affect perceptions of professional status if not handled sensitively.

### **Participation Control – “I don’t think that should be allowed”**

During the interviews the structure of the consultations was discussed with teachers, many of whom talked about what they felt was appropriate in terms of participation.

Approaches to this varied from very open views on who should attend, to the strong opinion that schools staff should be able determine who is present at the consultation meetings.

One nursery school had sent out an invitation to attend parents' evening which stated it was possible for parents to bring a friend if it would make them feel more comfortable.

The teacher explained:

*“Sometimes if parents have had a bad experience of school themselves, it can be quite daunting to come to a meeting. Having a friend there can be a support and is someone else to remember what is being said.”*

However, teachers from the nursery classes and P1 classes sampled said it that it was the norm to expect only parents or the parents and child, to attend. Two of the teachers from a P1 setting expressed views on what they felt was appropriate which were in direct contrast to that of the nursery school teacher:

*“ I had somebody brought their friend... that's quite bizarre!”*

*“There's a trio that come. It's the mum, her sister who's like the child's auntie, and a neighbour. I don't think that should be allowed.... there's no need for that. It can be quite intimidating.”*

This again reflects the teachers' desire to stay in control of the consultation and to avoid unforeseen situations.

### **Involving the Child – “I’m not sure it’s a good idea”**

In one set of consultations from a primary 1 setting, children were requested to be present. Parents’ views regarding the usefulness of this strategy differed. Some parents thought that having children there was a positive step as it allowed them to hear first hand what was being said and to see the teacher and parents sharing information about their behaviour and progress in class. It was a way of letting them know that certain expectations were shared between teacher and parents:

*“It’s good that the kids are there. They can see you’re hearing what is said and how they’re doing.”*

*“I think it’s good for kids to see teachers talking to parents. It makes it seem important.”*

By being included in the consultation meeting children are able to hear that they are being discussed and that their behaviour and performance in school are closely monitored by teachers and parents. This kind of surveillance is used consciously by parents and teachers as a tool to self-regulate and modify children’s behaviour in the classroom.

However, while some parents considered it useful for children to attend the meeting, other parents found that it restricted what they were able to say. If there was an issue they wanted to discuss with the teacher that they felt the child might be sensitive to, they did not always feel that they were able to address it in front of the child:

*“It can be difficult if there are issues you want to discuss without the child being there. You need to watch how you phrase things”*

*“Some things you don’t want to bring up cos you don’t want to knock their confidence. My wee one struggles a bit wi’ the homework...the reading. I*

*always try to encourage her and say 'that's great, you're doin' great', so I don't want to say to the teacher 'actually she's no doin' very well wi' her readin'', when she can hear it.'*

*"I'm not sure it's a good idea. It's hard for them to sit for that length of time. There's some things you don't want to talk about when they're there."*

The teacher involved in these consultations had mixed views on this process which had been adopted as school policy. She explained that the official purpose of the child being there was so that he/she could be involved in target setting. However, the teacher felt that it appeared rude to be writing when the parents were sitting there so she abandoned the practice half way through the evening and instead asked the children how they felt they were getting on. Incorporating the child into the process was something she did not find particularly easy:

*"I think it's a good idea further up the school but they get fed up listening to us talk. It's hard trying to keep them involved and at the same time say what you need to, to the parents."*

As both the teacher and parents had to regulate what they said in order to take account of the child's presence at the meeting, it was not possible to achieve a level of open and transparent communication.

To conclude, during interviews parents and teachers presented clear ideas concerning their roles, responsibilities and expectations of the consultation process, and while there was consensus in some areas, their views were not always mirrored. The different perceptions held by each led to ambiguity regarding what constituted appropriate topics of discussion for the consultation meetings or what was deemed as relevant information. Therefore, although parent-teacher consultations were regarded as key

sites of communication between home and school by parents and teachers, the collaboration necessary for partnership working was not always achieved.

## **Chapter 7: Disciplining Parents?**

Analysis of the data presented in the previous two chapters highlighted a number of similarities and differences between the nursery schools, nursery classes and primary 1 classes, in terms of the enactment of power established within discourse. The practice of power within the consultations produced rules that organised and guided behaviour. Foucault's genealogical analyses involving examination of the 'microphysics of power' (Foucault, 1977a, p29) in discursive practices were of particular relevance to understanding the functioning of power within parent-teacher consultations. In this chapter I will reflect on the findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6, pulling these together in relation to the Foucauldian themes outlined in the Methodology chapter.

### **Surveillance**

Surveillance was a common feature of the consultations in each of the settings. It was used as a technique of 'disciplinary power' which constructed the children, and to a lesser degree their parents and teachers, as objects of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1982, p.212). All children are the objects of scrutiny in schools and parent-teacher consultations make this scrutiny visible. Children were observed, analysed, supervised and their performances reported to parents with reference to a particular regime of 'truth' that disciplined and regulated behaviour.

Foucault regarded truth as an act of government where officially accepted beliefs were intertwined in a regime that controlled what was deemed to be normal and desirable ways of being. In this way truths produced 'a system of morality (its ethical substance) with the authority of the "official sanctioned" to say what [was] and [was not] a good,

true way to be' (Gore, 2005, p.32). Within the parent-teacher consultation children were scrutinised through teachers' observations and accounts, and suggestions were made to parents regarding ways in which they could assist in the modification of the child's behaviour or performance.

Similarly, parents were put under the spotlight through their attendance, and indeed non-attendance at these events, and their 'performance' was judged by teachers according to a standard of institutionalised beliefs and goals. Comments made by teachers during the consultations and their interview responses showed that parents were treated very much as a homogenised group, seen as requiring advice on understanding children's development and how best to support this. Conversely, they were also expected to act as agents of surveillance for the school, filling in gaps of knowledge, where deemed appropriate, and ensuring the school's system of beliefs and values were transferred to home.

Foucault (1977a) offered an analysis of the way in which techniques of surveillance operate within local sites of power/knowledge, giving specific examples of schools and prisons. Surveillance was apparent in the interactions that took place between consultation participants and through the accounts offered in their reports of the absent child.

The success of this disciplinary power lies within the use of three techniques of surveillance: hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and the examination. These techniques of power were evident in interactions that took place during parent-teacher consultations and are discussed further below.

## **Hierarchical Observation**

Foucault's hierarchical observation, both 'indiscreet' and 'discreet' (Foucault, 1977a, p.177), was evident in each of the consultations. This type of surveillance appeared to operate across settings in a number of different ways. The most obvious example of this was the observation of children by teachers. Children's behaviour was monitored continually within the classroom and playroom in relation to social and educational outcomes and this was then reported back to parents during the consultation feedback. In nursery settings this observation was performed and recorded in a very open way and written observations were collated for parents and other professionals to see. Throughout the consultations nursery teachers referred to written playroom observations to evidence claims and to provide a verbatim account of the child's actions to parents. Similarly, the anecdotal stories which accompanied claims made by teachers displayed a knowledge of the child obtained through careful observation. This provided parents with a picture of the child operating within a different context, recounted through the eyes of the onlooker. In the Primary 1 class consultations where children were not in attendance, hierarchical observation operated in a more subtle way. Instead of written observations being used to narrate minute detail of the child's actions, examples of children's work were used to illustrate points made by the teacher. Some first hand observational accounts were provided verbally however, and thus ongoing surveillance still functioned effectively and discreetly. This differed from the primary 1 consultations which were attended by children, where surveillance of the child, carried out by the teacher and parents was highly visible. The teacher and parents continually monitored and attempted to regulate the child's behaviour through verbal interjection. Children overtly attempted to resist control and parents and teachers had to work hard

to regulate the children's behaviour. The practice of resistance is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Parents' attempts at gaining control were overt and often resulted in cutting through the teacher's talk. Although forthright, these attempts were often unsuccessful and the child carried on with the 'undesirable' behaviour that had been observed. The teacher, on the other hand, took a more discreet approach and tried to regulate the child's behaviour through distraction by including him/her more directly in the conversation. The latter approach achieved marginally more success but both methods highlighted the enactment of hierarchical observation.

Teachers were also under observation from parents and colleagues throughout the consultations. Headteachers sat in on specific consultations to ensure that information was delivered in what they deemed to be an appropriate way and also to ensure that teachers' interaction with parents met their accepted standards or 'benchmarks'. In this way teachers were supervised through reference to particular truths about professional conduct and their contributions to the consultations were closely monitored by means of hierarchical observation.

Hierarchical observation was also apparent in relation to the practical structure of the consultations. Teachers' use of time was monitored and regulated through various strategies such as the ringing of a bell to indicate that time was up, by another child being requested by school management to tell teachers when they were running over time or, as was the case in one set of consultations, by a teacher 'hovering' at the door to indicate her awareness that the teacher carrying out the consultation was running over time. Each of these techniques, aimed at regulating teachers' time management,

was suggestive of a constant surveillance taking place behind the scenes which was then made visible at the point of control.

### **Normalisation**

Normalisation occurred in parent-teacher consultations across the early years settings and appeared to be a regular component in the construction of feedback to parents. Through the disciplinary 'apparatus' (Foucault, 1977a, p.170) of observation, attempts were made by teachers to organise parental knowledge and practice in a way that fitted in with the teacher's framework of what was desirable or appropriate within the nursery or school context. Teachers attempted to bring the parental gaze on the child into focus through their own conceptualisations of developmental 'norms'. This was apparent in the ways in which they provided accounts of children's behaviour and achievements to parents, comparing these to judgements of what the child should and should not be able to do at his/her particular stage of development. In this way a picture of 'good' and 'bad', 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate', 'desirable' and 'undesirable' was built up for parents throughout the consultation discourse.

Parents were also positioned as subjects who were judged and homogenised by teachers. Teachers passed comment on the way parents 'educated' their children outwith the nursery or classroom environment and constantly tied their judgements back to developmental expectations of the school. Often parents' attempts at providing educational support at home were frowned upon if it could lead to the child being placed ahead of work provided by the teacher in class. This type of activity was therefore often viewed in a negative light rather than being identified as a strength, since such intervention was in danger of moving the child outwith the 'norm'.

However, in direct contrast to this, the individualising effect of normalisation led not only to the identification of strengths but also to areas for improvement and in these cases parents were expected to work with (and on) their children to turn things around.

Parents placed themselves under scrutiny throughout the consultations, making normalising judgements in relation to their own position. An example of this was seen in the 'supermarket' extract where the mother attempted to align herself with the teacher's views through her depiction of the educational and moral content of the family trip to the supermarket, even though it was in contrast to her husband's account of the same event. This type of self-scrutiny was usually enacted in a more subtle way in the nursery school consultations, which had a more informal feel to them, than in the nursery class and primary 1 classes where the consultations were structured around the standards and expectations of the school in a fairly obvious way.

### **The Examination**

As was suggested in the introduction to Foucault's themes in Chapter 4, Foucault claimed that the examination brings observation and normalisation together and in doing so, turns people into objects of knowledge and power (Foucault, 1977a). Through the sharing of assessment information in the consultations across settings, children and their parents were made highly visible, enabling power to be held over them in a sustained way. Children were individualised through the information provided in the meetings and categorisation, classification and measurement of their progress was evident in teachers' feedback to parents. Through the collation of different types of observation and assessment information, including anecdotal evidence, individual children were made into a 'case' and judged against the level of knowledge and

behaviour they displayed. When gaps in learning or development were identified through this process, teachers often attempted to offer solutions which would assist the child in being 'corrected' or 'normalised' (Foucault, 1977a, p.191) accordingly. This often involved expectations that the parents would provide input at home to ensure consistency between the home and school environment.

Across the settings, teachers' presentation of assessments of children's learning to parents involved discussing strengths and areas for improvement and framing achievement specifically in relation to curriculum outcomes and success criteria contained in their working documents. In the nursery class where parents were asked prior to the consultation to indicate two curriculum areas they would like to discuss with the teacher, a 'case' was presented to parents involving close examination of observations and assessments that had taken place in relation to their chosen areas. Thus an individualised picture of the child was held open to scrutiny within which his/her own 'aptitudes or abilities' were analysed 'under the gaze of a permanent corps of knowledge' (Foucault, 1977a, p.192).

As discussed in Chapter 6, one of the Primary 1 teachers clearly indicated that the parent-teacher consultations acted as a stimulus for her to gather together assessment information. The purpose of this was to build up an 'accurate' picture of each child and to place them in relation to others within a specific framework of learning so that this could be reported to parents. However, teachers also viewed themselves as being under surveillance during the consultation process and comments that they wished to show they had 'made an effort' by collating assessment information for parents, displayed an awareness that they too felt placed in a position of judgement. This feeling of being under examination was also expressed by the nursery practitioner who articulated

concern that she would be asked something by parents that she did not know the answer to.

Although children were only present during one set of consultations, they too seemed aware of a level of scrutiny imposed through assessment of their progress. One child in particular kept interrupting the talk to identify words beginning with particular sounds. These interruptions were made in response to the teachers' discussion of the sound blending children were practising in class. The child took the opportunity to display his knowledge of the topic to his teacher and parents, suggesting awareness of the consultation being a specific situation where examination of his progress was taking place.

In this example, the child was clearly caught in the intricate network of power relations that are an integral part of the consultation process. He was offered no particular position to take up and had no knowledge of 'the rules of strategy' (Foucault 1977a, p.308) necessary for successful engagement. Nevertheless, in response to his experience of subjection to examination and normalising judgement, the child attempted to include himself in the process by having his voice heard. This had the effect of interrupting the course of the dialogue, creating tension and leading to an immediate increase in the endeavours of the teacher and parent to regulate his behaviour.

## **Resistance**

As outlined in Chapter 4, Foucault asserts that resistance is an integral part of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1976). My analysis illuminated an intricate network of power relations at work within the consultations. I knew therefore, that resistance must

also be present, since within Foucault's conception of power, multiple points of resistance are necessary for power to exist (ibid.). Consequently, I returned to the data to look again for the presence of resistance at the points of the application of power. The most obvious example I found was the 'supermarket extract' where the father responded with sarcasm to the teacher's suggestions of how to turn a supermarket visit into an 'educational' experience, while the mother colluded with the teacher's ideas. In this example, the father's resistance, although forthright, was nevertheless exercised in such a casual way that it allowed his objection to be voiced but to no significant effect. This exercise of resistance did create a dissonance in the interaction but was delivered in a way that allowed a continuation of the process to occur. In this way the teacher and parent were able to carry on with 'business as usual' with no real change to the status quo.

Other examples of resistance in the consultation discourse were more difficult to detect due to their subtle delivery. Since resistance is an integral part of power, proliferating and saturating networks of power (Nealon, 2008) it was not a question of revisiting the data to 'uncover' resistance but rather it was about tuning in to what was already there, examining the data with a different focus. In endeavouring to accomplish this, I turned to Foucault's literature with the hope that it would shed light on where the exercise of resistance could be observed; I hoped that there would be something within his 'box of tools' (Foucault, 1977b, p.205) to help me in my quest. However, Foucault's conceptualisation of resistance was not particularly useful in terms of determining the practices that might constitute resistance to power, nor in illuminating the different effects these had. In fact, the issue of resistance is not discussed very often in Foucault's texts at all. However, Nealon (2008, p.108) provided a useful starting point stating that:

as power becomes increasingly more invested in the minute details of our lives, so too have our modes of resistance become increasingly subtle and intense.

With this in mind I started to look at the points in the talk where I had instinctively sensed a tension; the parts of the audio-recordings that I felt slightly uncomfortable listening to on first hearing but was not entirely sure why. This was indeed, where I was able, through modifying my own gaze, to ‘tune into’ examples of resistance which were subtle in terms of their ‘silent’ functioning, yet intense in terms of their proliferation.

Within the consultation discourses, particularly within the nursery class and primary 1 consultations, elements of resistance to the teachers’ enactment of power were displayed by parents in different ways and to different effect. These were mainly demonstrated through the use of laughter, irony, sarcasm, silences, refusal to directly acknowledge comments or suggestions, or by offering an alternative point of view. Foucault did not offer any discussion of the use of laughter as a form of resistance but the part it played in the enactment of power relations within the consultation discourse was significant. It was frequently used as a strategy by parents to indicate they did not accept certain issues raised by teachers as important, or to note disagreement without having to verbalise their resistance to what was being said.

The outcome of attempts at resistance varied between consultations. In some cases the teacher would simply ignore the parent’s response while on other occasions the teacher would be forced to defend her position. Usually though, the exercise of resistance had very little effect on the existing power dynamics. This is in contrast to the explanation of Foucault’s conceptualisation of resistance offered by Gallagher and Wilson (1984, p.168):

...to resist is not simply a negation but a creative process; to create and recreate, to change the situation, actually to be an active member of that process.

While parents were indeed an active part of the consultation process and the construction of resistance within it, their attempts were usually not successful in altering the immediate situation.

To conclude, analysis of the consultation data from a Foucauldian perspective has been both helpful and revealing. It has highlighted the ways in which surveillance, normalising judgements and the 'examination' of all involved in the reporting process to parents constitute an exercise of power. Participants within the consultations, and the absent children, were positioned as subjects who were homogenised and judged accordingly. Conversely, observations and assessment information led to the individualisation of children which allowed classifications and comparisons to be made in relation to a particular set of 'truths' about what it is to be a child, a parent and a teacher. Throughout the consultations, parents and teachers were seen to assert and defend their positions and within this process examples of resistance were evident.

Teachers managed the complex set of power relations exercised in the consultations in a particularly efficient way. This is even more remarkable when consideration is given to the fact that most teachers have had very little, or no, training in how to carry out a parent-teacher consultation effectively. However, even in the absence of training, the strategies employed by teachers were remarkably similar and worked in the same way to control interactions with parents.

The operationalisation of hierarchical observation was particularly effective. Those subjected to its gaze displayed awareness that their actions were being scrutinised and

therefore, its enactment was easy to identify in the consultation talk. Teachers were conscious of observation from school management in relation to the timing and structure of the consultation. The way in which they attempted to build up and sustain a picture of expertise in the meetings suggested awareness of also being under the parental gaze. Similarly, the majority of parents attempted to construct their identity as 'good parents' in response to discreet and indiscreet observation from the teacher. In all consultations the hierarchical observation of children by teachers and parents was made visible through discussions of how children 'performed' in nursery or school and through direct attempts at regulation in the meetings which were attended by children.

Normalising judgement was made by teachers in relation to children and in a more discreet way, to parents. Precisely what criteria children were measured against was not always shared in detail with parents, who were mostly kept in the dark about what exactly constituted the 'norm'. Instead judgements were made in relation to institutionalised 'truths' that parents had no real access to. Linked to this, the examination of children within consultations was highly apparent through the discussion of assessment information. This was a particularly effective technique of power, combining observation and normalising judgement to create an individualised picture of the child through which he/she was judged. Teachers displayed professional knowledge to parents through the presentation of assessment information and parents were expected to take on board suggestions resulting from their diagnoses.

I encountered most difficulty applying Foucault's conceptualisation of resistance to the analysis of the consultation talk. I had naively expected attempts at resistance to be forthright and obvious, anticipating that they would be easily identifiable. However, my puzzlement over the use of laughter in the consultations led me to reconceptualise my

own thoughts around the function of humour within interaction. While Foucault did not offer anything in his analyses directly relating to humour or laughter, I began to realise that it could be recognised within the consultation data as a more subtle and understated practice of resistance. Although not always immediately obvious, resistance saturated the relations of power which constituted the interactions between parent and teachers. However, while attempts at exercising resistance were in proliferation, these usually had very little success in affecting change.

The effective management of the consultations by teachers created a set of consequences which were desirable to schools rather than to parents. They enabled institutional goals to remain intact and allowed teachers to maintain their professional 'expert' status. While certain practical constraints in relation to time and organisation did require skilled control in order for the consultations to be successful, other ways in which power was exercised impacted on the contributions made by parents in negative ways.

The adoption of a Foucauldian perspective was not only illuminating in terms of what was seen to take place in the actual parent-teacher consultations themselves but it also provided me with a new insight to my own professional practice. My deliberations of the enactment of power within the consultation settings led me to reflect critically on my own practice and opened up new avenues for challenging existing modes of practice. This is something I will discuss further in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 8: Endings and Beginnings**

### **Personal Reflections**

Completing the EdD has been a demanding yet rewarding experience through which I have learned a great deal about myself. In the methodology chapter I used the metaphor of ‘treading water’ within an ‘enveloping sea of data’ to explain how I felt during the overwhelming process of data analysis. However, as I neared the end of my doctoral journey and time constraints pressed in, it certainly began to feel more like I was ‘struggling against the tide’. Before embarking on the research phase of the EdD I clearly recall a Professor saying to me, “Now’s the time when everything that can go wrong, will go wrong. It’s important you choose the right research topic because it’s your passion for your chosen subject matter that will see you through” – he was right. At times when I found myself struggling to cope with the pressures of juggling work, family commitments, health issues and trying to be all things to all people at the same time, it was belief that my research could make a difference in terms of developing my personal understanding and professional practice that kept me afloat.

My initial reasons for being drawn to the EdD were largely self-indulgent. It was not something I was expected to complete as part of my professional development or which I felt I should embark upon as a logical next step. While I saw it as an academic challenge, the real appeal was that it afforded me the opportunity to carry out a piece of research that would contribute to my professional knowledge relating to an area of professional practice with which I had always been intrigued. The taught element of the course introduced me to new ways of thinking and challenged my pre-existing assumptions relating to a range of ontological and epistemological issues that I had carried with me from a very positivist science based background. The research

component on the other hand, provided a completely different set of challenges relating to my self-perception, social awareness and analytic ability. If I am completely honest, I also took on the EdD in an attempt to achieve a level of personal and professional validation. I have never been interested in promotion beyond my current position as I wanted my teaching career to remain in the classroom. Time after time, I have encountered what seem to be quizzical looks from non-teachers as a reaction to my response to the question “what do you teach?” It appears there is a publicly assumed hierarchy in teaching status which is dependent upon the level you teach. This starts at secondary level, moves down a rung to primary teaching and further still to teaching in early years. By replying that I currently teach in a pre-school setting the usual response I receive is “So are you are you a ‘real’ teacher then?” I do not usually encounter this reaction from other teachers but do however, frequently find myself defending my position by justifying why after all this time I’ve not considered applying for a depute headteacher or headteacher position. While the EdD process has helped me to prove to myself that I am capable of rising to the challenge, whether I receive professional recognition amongst colleagues for my efforts remains to be seen.

Throughout this process I have had to take on various different roles – mother, daughter, wife, friend, teacher, student and researcher – and balancing these different elements has not been an easy task. While at times I felt strongly that the development of my role as researcher was detrimental to my ability to enact the other roles effectively, at other times I could also perceive that it had added a new dimension to these. I had to learn to prioritise more efficiently and to make the most of opportunities for quality time with family and friends. Effective time management became a new found skill and it was not unknown for me to be found coding transcripts at the side of a swimming pool at 6am while my daughter completed her training programme, or

listening discretely to interviews through my iPod as my son perfected a new karate move. The boundaries between the different roles certainly became blurred. Most prominently though, the reading in which I engaged provided a different lens through which to view the world and widened the resources I had available to interpret the social encounters which I observed around me as well as those in which I actively participated. I began to question previously accepted 'norms' of behaviour and practice in both my professional and social life and found that I was constantly trying to look behind what was being said or to interpret actions and subsequent responses. My husband once said to me, "Can't you just listen to a conversation without picking it to bits?" People watching has definitely become a favourite pastime. Annoying though it can be to no longer accept things at face value in the way I used to, I'm certain that there is no going back!

While I expected to view things differently after going through the doctoral process in terms of my external outlook, the change that occurred in my own self-perception came as a big surprise. From previous experience, I knew that I had the ability to work under pressure. I could meet deadlines, be flexible in approach, and balance my work, study, and home life with reasonable success. However, in order to overcome a series of successive setbacks I had to quickly develop an increased level of resilience. This has certainly been a positive change in my character and is something on which I will undoubtedly be able to draw when faced with inevitable future challenges. Another change has been in my self-perception of my role as researcher. While I had previously been involved in small scale research projects as part of other courses, I had always felt as if I was simply 'playing' the part. However, being totally submerged in the research process to the extent I have in terms of duration and depth, I now view my 'researcher' role differently and can recognise the valuable skills I have developed, both analytic

and personal. I have become more reflexive and recognise the importance of trying to understand the different perspectives inherent in my everyday interactions with others.

Other doctoral students I have spoken with have indicated that they particularly enjoyed the time immersed in reading, seeing it as an indulgence that afforded them some protected ‘quiet’ time to contemplate and digest the theory in relation to their own research practice. However, for me, the data collection phase was certainly the most enjoyable aspect of the process. I was out in the field doing the ‘hands-on stuff’, putting into practice what I had planned on paper. What’s more, I was able to meet a variety of people from different backgrounds, with different experiences and stories to tell. Being able to listen in to the normally private consultations that take place between parents and teachers placed me in a very privileged position allowing me not only to compare the practices of different professionals in a range of settings, but also importantly to reflect more critically on my own.

### **Professional Reflections**

The impact that embarking on the EdD has had on my professional development has also been significant. While I always reflected on my classroom practice and questioned the implementation of specific approaches and initiatives I used when working with parents, the research I have carried out has provided me with a deeper insight into interactional processes at play. The parent-teacher consultation was always something which did not sit comfortably with me as a way of communicating effectively with parents, yet was an aspect of practice which I felt very strongly provided a potentially valuable opportunity for collaboration between home and school. Up until now the courses available to me as part of my continuing professional development have been

mostly concerned with learning and teaching and have rarely considered work with parents. The most recent course I had access to within the realm of effective communication with parents was entitled “Conflict Resolution”. However, as the title clearly signals, this was an approach to be adopted only when the normal lines of communication had gone badly wrong. What I hoped to gain from the EdD process was a new perspective on parent-teacher consultations and the development of ideas which could improve my own practice thus avoiding the need for such drastic strategies.

Before beginning the EdD, being directly immersed in the parent-teacher consultation process meant that it was difficult to decipher what stopped these encounters being more productive in terms of partnership development. I was an integral part of what was happening and while it could be argued that being in this position provided me with a unique viewpoint, in reality within each 10 minute consultation I found myself being swept along by the flow of each discussion, having to focus closely on attending to the ‘business’ at hand. Although I played an active part in the construction of meaning that was built up through the talk in each consultation, there was no time so stop and think about the structure of the dialogue or what effect it had on the dynamics of the interaction. By carrying out this research I was able to observe what was happening within consultations carried out by other professionals in different settings, which was something I had never before been able to do. I was able for the first time to look in from the outside and had the justification to do this. Crucially, the theoretical knowledge which I had developed as part of the taught element of the EdD took me beyond a simple observation of the proceedings and instead I was able to analyse the data I had gathered in order to gain a valuable insight into the parent-teacher consultation process in a way I previously could not have achieved.

The time I spent during the data analysis phase, spending hours examining section after section of transcribed talk, certainly provided me with a different perspective from which to consider my own professional interactions with parents. I was able to recognise elements of my own practice that were illustrated both explicitly and implicitly within the transcribed consultations and could consider the implications of these in a more in depth way. During subsequent consultations I became aware of the effect certain actions may have on the two-way flow of information and attempted to adjust my input accordingly. Having new information to inform my practice allowed me to become more sensitive and tuned in to what was happening within the interactions I had with parents on a daily basis and provided me with an awareness of how I could better facilitate their involvement. One outcome of this is that parents are now encouraged to come into the nursery playroom at the start of each session to play with their children and to talk to staff. We also now hold regular open afternoons where parents drop in to discuss children's progress in a relatively informal way and contribute to their child's profile by adding information from home.

When I began my research I anticipated that my role as practitioner-researcher would be a difficult one to negotiate in terms of the effect it could have on my relationships with colleagues. However, I actually found that its impact was much less than I had anticipated. The greatest level of scepticism was met from the headteachers from whom I had to gain consent to carry out the research. They often wondered exactly what my motivation was for carrying out the research, however providing an explanation that it was purely borne out of personal interest seemed to be the only reassurance that was required. As the data collection took place outwith my own workplace, there were no implications for my immediate colleagues and so my relationships with them remained largely unaffected. However, by the time I was immersed in the analysis phase of the

research, I had changed jobs and was back in the classroom. Colleagues began to show a real interest in the research I was undertaking and so discussions often took place regarding the study and what I was discovering during the analysis phase. I found that having to discuss what I was doing and talking about my findings to other professionals really helped to clarify my thinking and in this respect, I viewed them as highly valuable exchanges. However, I gradually noticed that a change occurred over time in terms of the information that was being shared with me in contexts that directly related to my research topic. For example, a team meeting is held after every parents' evening to discuss and evaluate the event and to feedback any information that has been passed on from parents. I usually lead this meeting and collate all the responses. However, recently some comments were made which appeared to illustrate a new reluctance or 'wariness' among some members of staff to contribute their views to evaluation of the conferences in as open a way as they used to. When I discussed this observation with them it emerged that I had unknowingly become positioned as an 'expert' with regard to the parental consultation process, in relative terms at least, and as such, some members of staff had become less confident in contributing their own views in case a judgement was made about the validity of their contributions. Such comments are now usually laughed off within the team but it has made me question whether it is only my own self-perception which has changed or whether other people's perceptions of my professional role have also altered as a result of completing the EdD.

One key aspect of my professional 'self' which I can identify has definitely changed is the way in which I approach and engage with educational policy. The EdD has helped me to approach the reading of policy with a new analytic eye. I no longer simply question policy in terms of the way in which it can be effectively implemented within my professional practice but instead scrutinise where and how it fits in with wider

institutional and societal discourses and the role it plays in the perpetuation or development of particular ideas within these. For example, within *Building the Curriculum 5* (The Scottish Government, 2011) parents are acknowledged as key partners in their children's learning and it is stated that staff should help parents to understand what their children are learning and how they can support this. Previously, I would have taken this view on board, reflecting on my own practice to ensure it fitted with the goals set out in the document, content in the knowledge that the importance of parental partnership was being given a prominent place within the policy text. However, after undertaking this piece of research for my EdD, I now regard this as a rather one-sided, deficit approach which perpetuates the teacher's role as 'expert' without any real value being placed on the contributions that parents can make. As a result, I have reviewed my practice to ensure that the policy is implemented in a way that attempts to move beyond the conceptualisation of partnership presented in the document. Accordingly, within the centre in which I work, parents are not simply kept informed and up to date about their children's learning or asked to contribute in order to fill in 'gaps' in profiling. Instead, they now have a more central role in contributing to the implementation of Building the Curriculum 5 through direct involvement in developing their child's educational profile in collaboration with staff as an integral, rather than supplementary, part of the process.

### **Methodological Reflections**

In Chapter 4 I describe the journey I took in formulating my thinking around the adoption of appropriate methodologies and the application of these to interpreting the data I had obtained. Initially, despite knowing that what I was observing in the

consultation data was the enactment of power, I consciously veered away from Foucault in an attempt to find an 'easier path'. During the initial stages of the EdD I had found his writing very inaccessible and felt that I would be 'in over my head' if I attempted to use a Foucauldian perspective to frame my research. However, the more I worked with the data and attempted to understand what was happening within the interactions between parents and teachers, the more I knew that it made sense to accept, rather than resist, his ideas. Like Fox (2009) I do not purport to have an in depth knowledge of all of Foucault's work. Instead I 'cherry-picked from his body of work, finding and utilising those areas which served my purposes' (ibid., p.186) Having a body of data which I knew inside out, provided me with a new context with which to revisit the Foucauldian literature I had previously read. I found that his ideas and concepts took on a different significance for me from the perspective of researcher rather than student and I began to identify their usefulness as analytic tools rather than their impenetrability as abstract notions.

While ultimately, I drew heavily on Foucault during the analysis of data in order to understand the power struggles at play within the interactions I had recorded, I had not fully considered the ways in which power was enacted within the actual methods of data collection I employed. Although I began the data collection process with an awareness that my professional position could possibly influence participants' interview contributions in terms of them producing what they thought I wanted to hear or what they thought they should say, it was not until I was fully engaged in the use of a Foucauldian perspective in examining the consultation data that I realised it could also provide a useful way to look at the methods I had employed. As Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) state:

It is not primarily – or at least not only – power ‘out there’ that should be addressed...but also power in close connection with knowledge ‘in here’, in the research context. (ibid., p. 201)

With this in mind, I reflect on the instruments for data collection I chose to use and discuss what I would change in future research.

Using semi-structured interviews as part of the data collection was a very insightful process. In addition to the detailed documentation of the discourse provided by the audio-recorded consultations, participants’ interview accounts allowed me to explore different perceptions of the same event. However, looking back at the process I think I now more fully appreciate that the exchanges which take place between interviewer and interviewee are intertwined with complex power structures which Somekh and Lewin (2005, p. 42) state form the ‘context of the exchange’. It is therefore necessary for the relative social position of the participants and the social situation to be considered carefully when evaluating the implementation of any method. Referring to Bordieus (1993), Somekh and Lewin go on to say that:

It is through an ever vigilant self-reflexivity in the very process of interviewing itself that the researcher guards against the multiple complex influences of all social pressures and traps. (Somekh and Lewin, 2005, p.43)

Initial requests to participate in the interviews were made via the school and the majority of follow-up meetings were held within the school environment. I personally took on the role of interviewer and as such, was positioned in relation to interviewees as either a researcher and complete stranger, or a colleague enacting a different role. Although I had tried to ensure that the establishments selected for the study were from similar socio-economic areas, there were undoubtedly differences in participants’

social, cultural and political backgrounds and thus the experiences that each participant brought to the interview would also differ. Undoubtedly, all these factors would have influenced to some degree the power relations that were integral to the interview process.

In addition to this, it is necessary for the format of the semi-structured interview itself to be taken into account. While I had constructed a set of core questions to ask participants in order to elicit the type of information I was interested in, I nevertheless tried to ensure there was an open-endedness and flexibility within these which would allow the unexpected to be captured and elaborated upon. I felt that this provided an appropriate balance between obtaining the information I needed and allowing scope for participants to input their own ideas and perspectives. However, on reflection, it is possible that my use of structured questions may have instead had a more negative impact on responses provided by reinforcing my position as a 'researcher' going into the meeting with a set agenda and clear ideas as to what information was and was not considered valid:

Such impositional strategies can reinforce the power of the interviewer over interviewee and create suspicion that the other is 'hiding something' that must be found out. (Somekh and Lewin, 2005, p.42)

Ideally I would have liked to have carried out an interview with every consultation participant in order to match up people's perceptions of the consultation process with the transcribed recordings, but unfortunately it was not possible to obtain this level of consent. Reflecting on this, I spent a lot of time contemplating the reasons for participants opting not to take part in this element of the research process. I wondered if it came down to practical issues such as time constraints or childcare, or whether it related to other aspects such as anonymity (I would be able to put a face to the voice on

the recording) or simple apathy (what motivation did they have to participate?). One practitioner who declined to participate in the interview did volunteer a reason when I collected the consent form. She intimated that she had declined because she didn't feel confident enough to be in an 'interview situation'. While I didn't want her to feel even more pressured by asking her what she exactly meant by that comment, it made me aware that there can be a perception that the researcher possesses a knowledge and status which places him/her within a position of power within the interview context. This could potentially be used to manipulate the interview (Somekh and Lewin, 2005) which was something I did not want to happen. For this reason during the interviews I tried to ensure that the language I used was easily accessible and jargon free and that I listened and responded sensitively to contributions in a way that reflected the 'tone' and dynamics of the situation.

It could be argued that the use of focus groups instead of interviews may have provided more scope for participants to take the discussion in a different direction and to make it feel 'their own'. It may have helped to encourage participation by allowing participants to become part of a larger group rather than having to participate as an individual interviewee and in this respect may have helped them to feel less under the spotlight. In addition to this, being able to listen to others people's thoughts and opinions has the potential to spark off different thinking or can alternatively serve to consolidate existing views. Having the extra dimension of being able to observe how individual group members react to other people's views and in doing so, reason and justify their own, could potentially lead to the production of fuller and richer data than that which could be obtained during one-to-one interviews. However, as my intention was to obtain information on participants' individual thoughts, perceptions and experiences rather

than gaining a general consensus, in this respect, I felt that ultimately, semi-structured interviews provided a 'better fit'.

Confidentiality had also been a key consideration in choosing semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection and was something which was guaranteed as part of the informed consent. While I could personally ensure that confidentiality was upheld in the way I handled information within the research write up, participants in a focus group would be party to each other's responses and therefore could hold information which may not normally have been shared in other contexts. In addition to providing an appropriate format for the collection of the data I required, I can say on reflection that significant reason for choosing semi-structured interviews was that I felt 'comfortable' with their use, both in practically and ethically.

The audio-recordings provided a rich and very detailed source of data from which I was able to extract a wealth of information. As discussed in Chapter 4 I had discounted the use of video recording due to its potential level of intrusion. However, when analysing the transcribed data I often found myself wondering during the awkward silences or moments of tension, what was happening in the interaction outwith the verbal utterances that I was party to. In these instances, it would have been useful to observe the non-verbal responses to gain a more in-depth insight into what was actually happening in the interaction at that time. However, the presence of a camera and the awareness of being 'watched' may have caused participants to alter their body language and so could have proved counterproductive. Being in a position to obtain a larger number of consultation recordings may have allowed wider generalisations to be made beyond the scope of this study. However, I am happy that what I have succeeded in

presenting is a detailed picture of parent-teacher consultation talk at work and a surfacing of the power relations that lie within this process.

To summarise, engaging in the research process from a Foucauldian perspective has helped me to recognise the possibilities of interpretation that would have been limited by a more positivist approach. I had moved out of my comfort zone in methodological terms and a whole new way of looking at the world had been opened up to me. I began to question my previous beliefs and assumptions about the social world in which I lived and worked and started to re-evaluate the role I played within this from a different viewpoint. The reflexivity I have developed as a researcher is something which has, and will continue to, enhance my professional practice as well as my personal outlook.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Policy and Practice**

I believe that the research presented in this thesis provides a unique contribution to the understanding of parent-teacher consultations in the early years. By looking at nursery and primary 1 settings, a new perspective is added to the existing research on parent-teacher consultations which focuses mainly on the secondary sector. The construction of the consultation discourse is analysed at a local level allowing the enactment of micropractices of power to be examined. The impact of these on participant contributions is presented alongside personal perspectives of the process from those involved, providing a new view of these encounters set within the wider context of home-school partnership.

The aim of the study was to identify how ‘partnership’ is constructed and practised by participants during parent-teacher consultations in early years settings, however the

analysis of transcript data discussed in Chapter 5 highlights the way in which power is enacted within this process and suggests that there are implications of this for the development of collaboration between parents and teachers. If the potential for meaningful collaboration that exists within consultations between home and school is to be fully realised then there is a need not only for the format of the consultations themselves to be changed, but also for the approach adopted to wider parental involvement to be radically altered.

The format of the formal 10 minute parent-teacher consultation is not conducive to any kind of mutual information sharing or goal setting containing depth or meaningful shared purpose. A lot of time during the consultations is spent by teachers providing anecdotal evidence not only do defend their 'expert' position, but also to provide the parents with some kind of context within which to construct an understanding of the issues being discussed from an institutional perspective. Teachers lead the meetings with tight agendas and strict time control which certainly assists them in getting through the 'business at hand'. However, it allows very little scope for parents to input directly to the direction the meeting will take or to engage in discussion on 'non-agenda' topics in a truly collaborative way. This means that the reciprocity which such an encounter could offer, and which is valuable to developing a holistic picture and understanding of the child, is often lost.

While the majority of parents and teachers place importance on parents' evenings as a form of valuable communication, it is impossible for these appointments to be very productive in terms of developing more effective partnership when consideration is given to the time constraints placed on them. It would be easy to advocate that parent-teacher meetings require to be longer in duration, but as a teacher I am more than aware

of the issues involved in trying to find the extra time for this given existing workloads and other curricular and extra-curricular commitments. However, what perhaps should be considered is whether the wider parental involvement practices that schools currently engage in need to be revisited in order to build a stronger base for more effective communication and trust to be built up between parents and teachers prior to parents' evening encounters. One approach to this discussed by Tomlinson (1991), MacBeth (1989 and 1995) and Vincent (1996) is the development of 'class associations' where teachers and parents hold group meetings to discuss generic information relating to a particular class or year group. This could prove more beneficial in building trust and information sharing than curriculum evenings and workshop events which tend to focus on showing parents the 'right way to do it'. The power of parents may also be strengthened by collective participation and they may be encouraged to question and challenge teachers' and schools' authority more.

Moving away from the formality of most school encounters which consist of pre-arranged meetings, appointment times and pre-determined topics of discussion would help to encourage a more open and free flowing form of communication to take place between home and school. With respect to this, a number of schools already hold drop-in sessions on a regular basis where there is the potential for parents and teachers to come together to discuss issues or share information. If implemented effectively, this can be a valuable practice through which parents can develop an understanding of how the class operates and can begin to build trust with the teacher. For primary teachers, who do not have the same opportunities as nursery teachers for daily contact with parents, it provides an additional opportunity to get to know their children's families prior to parents' evening. The informality of drop-in sessions can help to break down barriers and can build confidence on both sides with regard to interaction. There is no

set agenda and in fact, as the onus is on parents to 'drop in', it would be reasonable to assume that the ball is very much in their court regarding the selection of discussion topics.

One of the schools in this study did offer a drop-in session in the form of a 'parent-teacher surgery'. However, this was not really regarded as an opportunity for mutual information sharing or for building up a more comprehensive picture of the child in an open and transparent way. In fact, it was the case that only generic topics were 'allowed' to be discussed. It was stressed to parents through newsletters and the school handbook that it was not appropriate to discuss an individual child's progress with the teacher at a drop-in session as this was what the school considered parents' evenings were for. Instead, the purpose was to discuss more general concerns. These could include issues such as clarification of homework, or sharing information about home that may be 'useful' to the teacher. Therefore, in this format the narrowing down of permissible discussion topics can very much be viewed as addressing the school's agenda rather than the parents' and so an opportunity to establish a genuine exchange of information and to build open communication is missed. Such an approach may serve to tick the boxes of policy implementation by being seen to offer strategies to encourage wider parental participation, but if the desired aim is to develop partnership between parents and teachers then it is necessary that the legitimacy of parental concerns, ideas and interests are acknowledged and addressed.

Lasky (2000, p.843) viewed interactions between parents and teachers as:

emotional practices that are inseparable from teachers' moral purposes, shaped by influences of culture and relationship, and inextricably interconnected elements of status and power.

For parents to take up a more active role in the consultation process and to contribute more directly to it, a shift in existing perceptions of role and status between parents and teachers is necessary. Interactions between parents and teachers can be emotional encounters and this can be compounded if the participants feel the need to assert or defend their identity. While teachers are often positioned, and indeed position themselves, as 'experts', parents are not usually granted the same status. Analysis of the transcript data showed that even when parents and teachers did appear to be listening and attempting to negotiate issues, there were often still underlying tensions. Ultimately, the teacher's professional knowledge and 'expertise' was usually seen to win out over the parent's view. While teachers may certainly hold professional expertise, parents too hold expertise regarding their children and this needs to be better acknowledged. Parent-teacher partnerships can at best be regarded as superficial if they are only concerned with building knowledge of the child in the nursery or school context.

If things are to move forward, then it is important that parents and teachers regard each other as possessing possibly different, yet equally valid and valuable knowledge which can be pulled together to better effect. Less time should be spent defending entrenched positions and more time spent really listening to what each other has to say. The role of parents is not just to act out schools' wishes and instead, teachers should recognise that parental involvement is valuable in its own right.

In order for wider knowledge of the child to be accessed by teachers it is necessary for parents and teachers to build a relationship through ongoing informal dialogue which focuses on the family background. The Funds of Knowledge approach (Moll et al, 1992; González et al, 2005), discussed previously in Chapter 2, acknowledges the

importance of the learning that occurs outwith school and recognises the wealth of social and cultural capital which children tap into through their everyday experiences at home and in the community. Parents are integral to these experiences, therefore in order to build a more holistic picture of the child, it is important that parents are afforded a more central role in the assessment process.

As alluded to earlier, parents have different responsibilities and interests. As Beresford and Hardie (1996) state:

by their nature parents and schools have a different orientation – one towards their individual child and the other towards the whole establishment. (ibid., p.150)

As a result of this, it is unlikely that schools will be able to provide parents with exactly what they need or desire in terms of involvement as they don't have the same perspective as parents. Therefore, part of the process of developing more effective parental involvement must be to review existing procedures in conjunction with parents in order to ensure relevance and clarity of purpose.

A recurring theme from the interview data concerned 'open door etiquette'. All the establishments sampled in the research operated an 'open door' policy in relation to communication with parents. However, many parents felt that they should only contact the school if the issues they had were really 'important'. What exactly constituted 'important' differed between participants but what was clear was that parents were likely to be guided by what they perceived the school's definition of 'important' was, rather than by what they regarded as important. For example, parents might approach the school if there were issues at home that could be affecting a child's behaviour in class or perhaps if there were concerns about bullying but would be less likely to

approach teachers to ‘touch base’ with how their child was progressing or to share information about their child’s wider achievements. Within the nursery setting on the other hand, parents and teachers met on a daily basis and therefore had the ongoing opportunity to speak about issues or concerns. However, parents did not always take up this opportunity saying that they felt there was a lack of privacy when they dropped off or collected their children or that teachers were very busy. They believed that the teacher would speak to them if there was an ‘issue’ and, like the primary parents, felt that making an appointment outwith parents’ evening should be reserved for major issues only.

Parents’ ideas about what is an appropriate topic of communication or what constitutes a significant level of importance is very much shaped by the type of relationship they have with the teacher and school and in turn is influenced by a myriad of social and institutional discourses and beliefs that are permeated through the discourses between home and school. The nature of the home-school relationship is portrayed through the tone and type of information communicated by the school and this needs to be considered carefully at individual school and local authority level. Schools therefore, must ensure that handbooks and policies also encompass what parents see as important and are welcoming in approach.

Teachers in this study displayed an awareness of the importance of partnership working with parents and were happy to discuss the strategies they had in place for its development. They viewed parent-teacher consultations as productive encounters and recognised that they were significant events in the academic calendar. However, their usefulness was very much gauged in relation to the opportunity they presented to provide parents with the information teachers felt they needed parents to know. While

time spent imparting information is undoubtedly an important element of the consultation, it should only be one aspect of the meeting and its purpose needs to be carefully considered.

To move forward, there has to be greater reciprocity in the communication between parents and teachers, and teachers need to be able to move away from leading and controlling the interactions in a dominant way (usually to fit in with practical constraints) towards facilitating the construction of dialogue that is responsive, productive, and takes account of the valuable contributions that parents can make. This will place a new demand on professional skills (Alasuutri, 2013) and requires the focus of teachers in all sectors of education if its development is to be meaningful and successful (Ost, 1988).

While teachers in this study undertook parent-teacher consultations without any specific training, their management of the consultations was nonetheless impressive in terms of defining the structure of the talk and keeping to time. However, in order to facilitate more effective communication with parents it is necessary for teachers to understand conversational processes in a more detailed way. Through training teachers could be helped to develop an awareness of how the use of specific discursive strategies can either enable or control and to recognise the potential impact of these on participant responses. It is also necessary for teachers to develop an awareness of the position they take up within the talk as educational ‘experts’ and to realise that as well as being reassuring, the construction of this identity can also be exclusive.

If change in approaches to communicating with parents is to become an integral part of professional practice it is essential that this is addressed more fully within initial teacher training and continued professional development. Currently a level of discussion does

exist regarding the rationale and general role of the teacher in ‘practising’ partnership between home and school and this can involve information sharing on particular processes and strategies that are seen to assist in this engagement. However, there needs to be more done to foster the vital skills necessary for collaborative working with parents if teachers’ professional roles and responsibilities in this area are to be fulfilled. Schools must consider how and where family engagement fits in with individual children’s development rather than viewing its role as carrying out the functions and values of the school, as currently seems to be the case. If interactions between home and school are simply repeated unquestionably over time then they can begin to take on ‘relational patterns’ (Adams and Christenson, 2000, p.482) through which a common, yet possibly inaccurate, knowledge emerges (Power and Bartholemew, 1987). There is then a danger that this stereotypic behaviour can become a template for all future interactions between home and school. As Adams and Christenson (2000, p.494) state, ‘educators don’t need to do more, they need to do it better’.

The need for change in practice has to be reflected in policy. There must be a consistent and clear approach presented within policy at government and local authority level which moves away from a homogenous view of parents as ‘contributors’ and towards a view of parents as valuable ‘partners’ in the education process, who bring with them a wealth of knowledge, skills and expertise. Within this framework, schools should be afforded the scope to meet the needs of their own children and parents at a local level in ways which are appropriate and relevant to them. However, practitioners should also reflect carefully on the conceptualisation of children, parents, teachers and the partnership process within the language of policy texts and need to consider how such representations filter down to practice at local level.

The 'one size fits all' approach to increasing parental involvement that has been presented in most education policy to date is unlikely to have any real impact. Instead it is necessary to ascertain what the individual communication requirements of parents and communities are and to consider how these can be best met. While the basic principles underlying effective communication between home and school may be constant across the parent body, the ways in which they can be realised may differ greatly. The policy framework in which parents and teachers engage has a profound effect on their relations. Within the current political climate parents have the potential to influence school policy in a way that has never before been possible. Hopefully, the model of positive parent-teacher relationships which is presented within recent policy at Government level will filter down to local level and influence the development of parent-teacher communication and the parent-teacher consultation process itself.

To conclude, the EdD process has helped me to become more reflexive in my professional practice and has had a direct impact on the way in which I engage with parents. I am now more aware of the discursive strategies I use in communication with parents and colleagues and how they influence the direction and structure of the dialogue. I am able to identify power relations at work within the discourse of parent-teacher consultations and have modified my practice to take account of this in order to facilitate a more open and effective form of communication. However, for me, the most surprising outcome of the EdD has been the way in which my self perception has changed. I have developed and improved a range of skills and recognise that I now question and reason where once I would simply have accepted. I am more confident in my ability to reflect critically on my own practice and to make change informed by this.

This research has provided insight into the conceptualisation and practice of 'partnership' within the context of parent-teacher consultations in early years settings. Analysis showed how micropractices of power are exercised and resisted within the consultation discourse and highlighted the impact that this can have on participant contributions to discussions. However, I regard the conclusions drawn from this analysis as being only the start of an ongoing process in relation to developing my own professional practice. I have been provided with a starting point to build on and progress relations with parents and look forward to the challenge of improving the format and structure of the parent-teacher consultation in a more productive way. Although my EdD is now complete, the hard work is just beginning.

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# Appendix 1

## Semi-Structured Interview Schedules

### Parent Interview Schedule

How long has your child been at nursery for?

Thinking back to the parents' evening that took place recently. Can you tell me about the process? (What happened, how was it organised?)

Do you find that parents' evenings are useful to you?

What do you see your role in the consultation as being?

What do you see the teacher's role as being?

Do you prepare in any way for the consultation?

Do you feel you had adequate opportunity to share information?

Is there anything you would change about the parent-teacher consultation process?

Are there other opportunities for parents and teachers to share information?

Do you find these more or less useful than the actual parents' evening?

Overall do you think that parent-teacher consultations are an effective form of communication between home and school?

### Teacher Interview Schedule

Can you tell me how long you've worked in the nursery/school for?

Thinking back to the parents' evening that took place recently. Can you tell me about the process? (What happened, how was it organised?)

Do you find that parents' evenings are useful to you?

What do you see your role in the consultation as being?

What do you see the parents' role as being?

Do you prepare or ask parents to prepare in any way for the consultation?

Do you feel you had adequate opportunity to share information?

Is there anything you would change about the parent-teacher consultation process?

Are there other opportunities for parents and teachers to share information?

Do you find these more or less useful than the actual parents' evening?

Overall do you think that parent-teacher consultations are an effective form of communication between home and school?

